Strengthening Transition Partnerships Through Community Conversation Events

Michele A Schutz iD, Vanderbilt University,
Erik W Carter iD, Vanderbilt University,
Shimul A Gajjar, Vanderbilt University,
and Erin A Maves, Vanderbilt University

Haines County Schools is a rural school district with dedicated, passionate staff. Despite their best efforts, graduates with disabilities still experienced uncertain outcomes. Some students successfully enrolled in college programs, obtained jobs that interested them, or lived independently. Others dropped out of college, failed to find good jobs, and seemed to do little more than stay at home with their parents. It became clear that a lack of consistent transition programming across the district left students without adequate preparation for adulthood. Special educators felt alone in this work. Even after various attempts to brainstorm new solutions at staff meetings and professional development sessions, many of the strategies generated by staff just seemed stale and tired. Moreover, some of the veteran teachers expressed reluctance to implement new practices in their classroom because they were unsure of how they could make them fit in their own community. For example, teachers wondered, "How can we take our students out in the community for more work-based learning if we feel local businesses aren't willing to have us?" The district was in need of some fresh perspectives and innovative solutions to improve student outcomes. Although they wanted to partner more with their local community, they were unfamiliar with many of the local opportunities and supports available.

Youth with disabilities are quick to share about their dreams for life after high school—getting a good job, going to college, moving away from home, forging new friendships, starting a family, participating in their community, making their own choices, enjoying new freedoms, and much more. Middle and high school is a crucial period for students to develop the skills, knowledge, experiences, and connections that will prepare them for these varied pursuits. Through well-planned coursework, engaging school programs, extracurricular involvement, positive peer relationships, guidance from adults, community activities, and formal services, students are equipped to attain their personal goals for life after high school. When schools design and deliver a strong transition education, they help advance a primary purpose of special education—to "prepare [students with disabilities] for further education, employment, and independent living" (Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004).

To accomplish this purpose, transition education must be a highly collaborative endeavor. Providing the breadth and depth of preparation students need to be successful after graduation requires that a coordinated set of activities be implemented by a range of partners. In schools, special educators must work in tandem with general educators, career and technical educators, guidance counselors, related services providers, and others to deliver high-quality assessment, planning, and instruction. At the same time, they must involve employers, postsecondary institutions, disability agencies, community services, families, and others to ensure students have opportunities and supports beyond the school and after graduation. In short, best practices in transition have always emphasized the necessity of strong collaboration (Kohler & Field, 2003), and schools that do this well may see better outcomes for their students (Flowers et al., 2018).

Yet, schools often struggle to meaningfully engage the people and programs within their local community that could be drawn upon to support transitions for students with disabilities (e.g., Carter, Awsumb, et al., 2020; Hirano et al., 2018). Educators lament their lack of time and limited awareness of potential partners. Adult agencies cite the size of their caseloads or the absence of invitations from schools. Families may not feel valued or are uncertain about how best to contribute. And community partners are often overlooked as sources of natural support and insights into local opportunities. Most of all, many schools are uncertain of how best to convene their community in effective, efficient, and enjoyable ways.

What might it look like for schools to involve new partners in supporting the transition education of students with disabilities? As technical assistance providers, we have been supporting school districts across Tennessee to reflect on and strengthen transition services and supports for youth with disabilities. One novel component of this work has been the implementation of transition-focused "community conversation" events hosted by these districts and attended by a cross-section of local citizens. In this article, we draw upon our experiences assisting districts to convene their community using this practical and powerful approach. In the sections that follow, we describe the community conversation approach, highlight its benefits for practitioners and school districts, and outline eight steps for hosting your own community conversation event. All of the materials needed to host a community conversation can be downloaded free of charge at www.transitiontn.org/community-conversations.

What Is a Community Conversation?

Adapted from the World Café model (Brown & Issacs, 2005), a community conversation is an asset-based approach for identifying and engaging a diverse group of local stakeholders in structured dialogue that addresses the transition needs of students with disabilities (Carter & Bumble, 2018). A local planning team identifies and invites a cross-section of diverse community members to attend a community conversation event. This includes individuals typically involved in discussions about disability (e.g., educators, disability agencies, families). Yet, it must also include those without disability expertise but who have pertinent knowledge about and connections within the community (e.g.,

> " The school district hears fresh perspectives it had not yet considered, discovers innovative ways to address persistent transition challenges, and explores connections with local partners with whom it was previously unfamiliar.

> **The community conversation approach is an innovative strategy for addressing transition issues because it capitalizes upon an individual community's unique culture, priorities, and available resources.**

employers, community leaders, civic groups, faith communities). During the 2-hour event, 30 to 60 attendees (or more) participate in three distinct rounds of small-group conversations. Each round addresses a single question that prompts attendees to identify resources, ideas, and personal connections that could enhance transition programming for the students with disabilities who reside in that community. Between each round of discussion, attendees switch tables and continue the conversation with a new combination of neighbors. The event culminates with a whole-group discussion in which attendees share the most promising and actionable strategies they heard throughout the conversation. During each round of conversation, detailed notes are taken to document every idea generated. As a result, the school district hears fresh perspectives it had not yet considered, discovers innovative ways to address persistent transition challenges, and explores connections with local partners with whom it was previously unfamiliar.

What Are the Benefits of Hosting a Community Conversation?

School districts are in a prime position to host a successful community conversation event. Core tasks—like forming strong planning teams, involving people with disabilities, and creating a comfortable atmosphere for collaboration—are part and parcel of what educators do in their daily work. In the literature, studies describe the successful efforts of both rural and urban communities to host events designed to develop new partnerships and generate unique solutions around preparing youth with disabilities for adulthood, including those with high-incidence and low-incidence disabilities

(e.g., Dutta et al., 2016; Trainor et al., 2012). Moreover, school districts benefit greatly from and enjoy this approach for improving transition programming (Carter, Schutz, et al., 2020). Districts can use the data they collect to identify important training and support needs for their staff and students. The community conversation approach is an innovative strategy for addressing transition issues because it capitalizes upon an individual community's unique culture, priorities, and available resources. Using this approach can generate hundreds of new ideas and spur a variety of impactful changes after the event. Surveys of attendees consistently find that people (a) think the event was a good investment of their time, (b) learned new information about their community, (c) met new people in the community, and (d) identified ideas that could be taken to improve transition outcomes (Carter, Schutz, et al., 2020). In addition, special educators and transition personnel across diverse communities have reported positive experiences hosting community conversations (Parker-Katz et al., 2018).

Steps for a School District to Host a Successful Community Conversation Event

To improve its transition practices, a team at Haines County Schools decided to host a community conversation during which the members could crowdsource ideas from throughout the very community where their students would live, learn, and work after graduation. The team decided to focus the event on increasing student employment during high school and after graduation. The team members felt this was a current priority for their district to make the most immediate improvements in preparing students for the future. They were ready to start planning their community conversation event. Several

important steps were needed to design this new kind of event and recruit people to attend.

Although community conversations are to be individualized to reflect the goals, culture, and resources of a particular district, they should still incorporate the eight components outlined in the following section Bumble et al. (2018). *Figure 1* includes a timeline for planning and implementing the event, as well as follow-up steps. We encourage you to apply these steps in ways that meet the needs of your own district using the extensive collection of supplemental materials available at our website to plan and implement a successful community conversation: www.transitiontn.org/community-conversations.
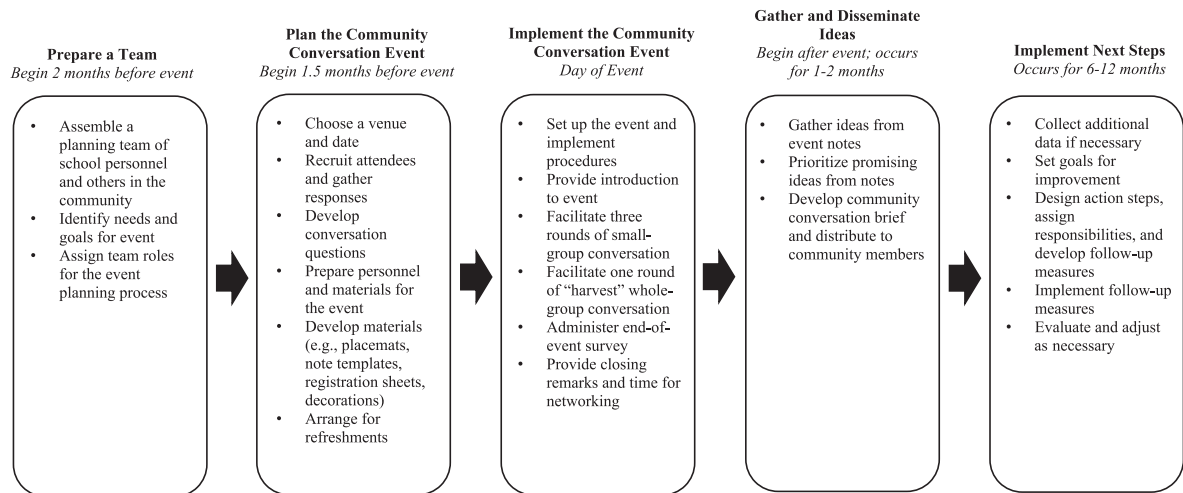
Step 1: Assemble a Planning Team

Prior to the community conversation event, form a core planning team of three to five members who will take responsibility for organizing the event. Enlist individuals from various stakeholder groups who are well connected with the local community, strong communicators, consistently responsive, and passionate about their own roles. You may also include (a) staff who do not work specifically with students with disabilities and (b) individuals from the local community on the planning team. For example, a career technical education teacher may have relationships with local businesses, and a district administrator may be well connected to the mayor's office—each could be helpful in recruiting attendees. Additionally, planning team members will complete logistical tasks, such as calling potential attendees or acquiring food donations. Delegate tasks based on the personal strengths and interests of each individual team member and implement strategies for regular communication to make the planning process more manageable. Enlist the help of students with disabilities wherever appropriate (e.g., disseminating event invitations, assisting at the event).

Step 2: Choose a Venue and Date

Decisions regarding the location, date, and time of the event directly impact

Figure 1 Implementation procedures

Prepare a Team *Begin 2 months before event*	Plan the Community Conversation Event *Begin 1.5 months before event*	Implement the Community Conversation Event *Day of Event*	Gather and Disseminate Ideas *Begin after event; occurs for 1-2 months*	Implement Next Steps *Occurs for 6-12 months*
• Assemble a planning team of school personnel and others in the community • Identify needs and goals for event • Assign team roles for the event planning process	• Choose a venue and date • Recruit attendees and gather responses • Develop conversation questions • Prepare personnel and materials for the event • Develop materials (e.g., placemats, note templates, registration sheets, decorations) • Arrange for refreshments	• Set up the event and implement procedures • Provide introduction to event • Facilitate three rounds of small-group conversation • Facilitate one round of "harvest" whole-group conversation • Administer end-of-event survey • Provide closing remarks and time for networking	• Gather ideas from event notes • Prioritize promising ideas from notes • Develop community conversation brief and distribute to community members	• Collect additional data if necessary • Set goals for improvement • Design action steps, assign responsibilities, and develop follow-up measures • Implement follow-up measures • Evaluate and adjust as necessary

> ## "Recruit individuals outside of the school or disability field who know the community well and have perspectives not yet considered.

attendance. When selecting a venue, consider a location that is easy to find and where attendees will feel the most comfortable. Although a school location (e.g., auditorium, gym, library) can be a point of pride for the community, consider other familiar places, such as a community center, popular restaurant, or other event space. Selecting a more neutral space might encourage families or community members who are hesitant to come into the school to attend. With community connections, you may likely find a space free of charge. Regardless of the location, select a space that is accessible for people with disabilities, lends itself well to small-group conversation, and can accommodate any needed technology (e.g., projector, screen, speakers, microphone). When choosing a date and time for the event, avoid potential conflicts with other events in the local community, such as school athletics, faith-based activities, or community events. As you think about potential attendees, consider their likely availability. Parents may have more availability to attend in the evening, whereas local employers may have more time during the day when business is slow. See *Figure 2* for potential barriers and solutions when planning the event.

Step 3: Recruit Attendees and Gather Responses

When recruiting, seek out a diverse mix of attendees. To ensure that the most knowledgeable and productive mix of people attend, consider those who can provide insights into how students can be equipped with a range of knowledge, skills, experiences, and connections that will prepare them for working, learning, and living independently in adulthood. Include individuals typically involved in formal transition planning (e.g., educators, families, students, counselors, related service personnel, disability agencies, administrators). However, limiting the event to school personnel fails to bring in new perspectives and ideas. Therefore, recruit individuals outside of the school or disability field who know the

community well and have perspectives not yet considered. These could include a local employer without knowledge of disability but with job opportunities, a congregation with the capacity to help with transportation, or a local nonprofit looking to provide support to community members. Furthermore, inviting prominent community members could increase interest in the event and broaden the perspectives you hear. For example, one district we supported invited its state representative, which helped him learn about issues concerning students with disabilities in his district and prompted conversations about how to be a strong advocate when speaking with government agencies. In two other districts where school board members attended the event, their conversations with parents and teachers during the event resulted in much-needed adaptive equipment being purchased for students. Strong community conversations typically include between 30 and 60 attendees. Events with more than 100 attendees may result in a less intimate atmosphere. *Figure 3* suggests potential attendees.

Districts have used a wide range of approaches to recruit attendees, including phone calls, emails, word-of-mouth from well-respected people, printed flyers, social media, and their local or school newspaper. Several districts we supported advertised their event on a local radio channel, and one district even aired a commercial featuring their student-run

Figure 2 **Common barriers and possible solutions**

Barrier	Possible solutions
Administrator reluctance to host event	• Emphasize opportunities for the district to build new connections with local employers, organizations, and government • Identify creative ways to host the event at no or little cost to the school • Invite the press to raise positive awareness for the district
Limited funds for refreshments	• Ask local businesses if they could donate refreshments or funds • Provide an inexpensive nacho bar or potato bar • Ask the school's foods/culinary class to bake cookies or other desserts • Check with local service organizations (e.g., Lions, Kiwanis, Rotary) for funding • Ask parents to bring homemade baked goods
Difficulty identifying a venue for the event	• Look for large meeting areas at local colleges or libraries • Check for a community center room that would accommodate everyone • Call area businesses and ask if they have large training rooms • Ask local organizations about room availability (e.g., American Job Center, YMCA) • Ask a local restaurant or banquet hall if they could provide space
Difficulty deciding on a time	• Rule out obvious conflicts first (e.g., church night, school sports, district events) • Send a survey with potential dates/times to learn of likely attendees' availability • Consider holding an event during the school day over lunch • Try to find a time that works for most, even if it does not work for everyone
Having time to recruit potential attendees	• Form a strong team comprised of school and community members • Use a shared online document (e.g., Google docs) to organize people to invite, and assign team members to make contacts and document their efforts • Have a faculty meeting and ask school staff to personally invite five or more friends or business acquaintances • Take students into the community and speak with businesses door-to-door • Use media blasts (e.g., social media, email, text) or robocalls to announce the event
Ensuring people actually attend	• Use a free RSVP system (e.g., Evite) and collect emails and phone numbers • Send out reminder postcards after people register to attend • Email or text a reminder a few days before the event, expressing thanks for their involvement • Let business members know who else is coming, so they will know others there • Ask attendees to bring a friend, partner, or work colleague with them • Offer students extra-credit to attend and bring their family members • Provide students with special roles at the event (e.g., greeter, server of refreshments, presenter) to entice their parents to attend • Announce that translation will be available for non-English speaking families
Small-group discussion issues	• Train table hosts in advance on how to manage table conversations (see training tools at www.transitiontn.org/community-conversations) • Address table etiquette during the opening welcome comments • List questions on placemats so participants can organize their thoughts and ideas; these can be submitted at the end of the event • Have the organizers circulate around the room, encouraging participation from all table members

business on the local television station. Use recruitment strategies that make the most sense for your community. For example, whereas an urban community was responsive to social media advertisements for their event, a rural community with limited internet connectivity chose to rely on phone calls and distributing flyers door-to-door. Divide responsibilities among team members for reaching out to specific groups that are a part of their personal networks (e.g., families, employers, community agencies) and document efforts using a file storage tool, like Google Docs. Give people a way to confirm that they will attend and follow up with reminders. Consider partnering

Figure 3 **Example stakeholders to invite to the event**

Who Should Come to a Community Conversation?

When hosting a community conversation, think strategically when deciding who to invite and be sure to include a wide representation of the community. Any one of the people on this list might be able to help a student identify a career interest, find a job, obtain transportation, locate housing options, discover a volunteering opportunity, or secure a mentor.

<u>School Community</u>

Special Educators	Parents/Family Members of Current Students
Paraprofessionals/Job Coaches	School Counselors
Vocational/CTE Teachers	General Educators
School/District Administrators	Students (Past and Present)
Related Services Providers	Staff Members to Translate for Non-English Speakers
School Board Members	School Honorary Societies (e.g., National Honor Society)

<u>Community Members</u>

Civic Leaders	Rec Clubs (e.g., YMCA, YWCA, Boys and Girls Club)
Local Political Representatives	Mentor Groups (e.g., Big Brothers/Big Sisters, SCORE)
College Disability Coordinators	Faith Community Members
Volunteer Organizations (e.g., AmeriCorps, Habitat for Humanity)	Service Agencies (e.g., Kiwanis, Lions Club, United Way)
Special Interest Groups (e.g., Garden Club)	Mental Health Groups (e.g., NAMI, Counseling Centers)
	Immigrant and Refugee Services

<u>Disability Organizations</u>

Community Rehabilitation Providers	Pre-ETS Providers
Local Residential Services	Independent Living Centers
Vocational Rehabilitation Staff	Special Recreation (Best Buddies, Equine, Special Olympics)
Job Training Sites (Goodwill, Project SEARCH)	Disability Advocacy (The Arc, Dyslexia Association, Down Syndrome Association)
Family Support Agencies (food bank, respite)	
Legal Counseling (Disability Rights, Legal Aid)	Camps and Summer Programs
Inclusive Higher Education Programs	Adult Day Programs

<u>Business Community</u>

American Job Centers	Union Apprenticeship Programs (IBEW, Plumbers and Pipefitters)
Small Business Association	
Local Stores and Restaurants	Employer Resource Networks
Chamber of Commerce	Area Hospitals, Hotels, and Other Large Employers

with a school-sponsored group (e.g., National Honor Society) or community organization (e.g., Rotary International) to help with recruitment efforts. We include recruitment tools and sample invitations on our website.

Step 4: Develop Thoughtful Conversation Questions

Ensure the questions used to structure the community conversation event are aligned with your district's goals. Transition programming encompasses a wide scope of topics, such as (a) student-focused planning and development for postsecondary employment, education, independent living, or community participation; (b) family engagement; (c) interagency collaboration; and (d)

program structures (Kohler et al., 2016). Some districts we supported used three questions to guide three rounds of conversation:

1. What outcomes are important for students with disabilities in our community as they leave high school?
2. What could we do to prepare students for success in all of these areas while they are still in school?
3. How could we partner better with communities, employers, and families to support this transition?

Another district had a specific goal of improving employment outcomes for all students with and without disabilities. They used these three questions:

1. As a school and community, how are we creating strong pathways to future careers and job placement for our students?
2. What could we be doing better or differently in this area?
3. How can we ensure all students—including those with disabilities—are accessing these opportunities?

Most events use a different question for each round of conversation (i.e., three or four questions) to gather different types of information. Others have repeated one or two questions across multiple rounds to deepen the level of ideas shared on a certain question. Regardless of the questions, events typically last 2 hours.

Step 5: Prepare Personnel and Materials for the Event

Develop a day-of-event checklist to ensure all tasks are completed to prepare for the event. You will need to prepare registration sheets, decorations, paper placemats for attendees to jot down notes, and note-taking sheets for table hosts to record ideas. Arrange for refreshments, such as dessert and coffee, snacks or appetizers, or even a catered meal. Explore creative ways of acquiring free food (e.g., donations from a local restaurant, bringing homemade treats; see *Figure 3*). Finally, prepare an end-of-event survey through which attendees can provide feedback on the event, share additional ideas, or commit to helping move forward on the ideas that were shared. Examples of each of these items are available as downloadable materials on our website.

Identify individuals on the planning team and other school staff who can assume key roles at the community conversation. First, identify someone to serve as an overall facilitator for the conversation. Ensure this individual is a strong communicator who can address why the topic matters and provide an overview of how the discussion will take place. This could be a teacher, administrator, transition coordinator, or even a parent. Second, identify people who can serve as table hosts. They will use note-taking sheets to record legible notes on all ideas discussed at their table while keeping the conversation focused, solutions oriented, and comfortable for all attendees. Provide guidance to table hosts on how to encourage discussion and document the ideas effectively. Third, some events involve additional speakers who can help set the stage for the conversation. For example, one district began their event with a panel of business owners who discussed the benefits of employing high school students with disabilities. Another district event began with a student who

talked about his involvement in the work-based learning program. A third district showed a video montage featuring highlights of their students' work experiences in the community.

To begin the planning process, the team at Haines County Schools assembled a small team of six individuals to help plan their community conversation. After assigning roles, everyone got to work. Four members with numerous personal connections were in charge of inviting people to attend and getting the word out to the community. The other two were particularly creative individuals who took charge of scheduling the event, booking the venue, arranging food, preparing materials, and finding table hosts.

The team decided to have the event on a weekday evening at the local public library. The space was centrally located in town, was free to reserve, provided a neutral setting, and already had the needed technology (e.g., projector, screen, microphone). Starting at 6:30 p.m. enabled parents and employers to attend after the work day. After securing the venue, the team members created invitations via a free graphic design platform. Next, they compiled a master list of individuals, organizations, and local businesses to invite and assigned a team member to each one. They distributed invitations using email, social media, phone calls, and flyers to allow for many different types of community members to learn of the event. They specifically contacted the mayor's office and other community leaders who they felt could increase community interest in the event. The team used Google Forms for attendee registration.

As they waited for responses to roll in, the team members met to finalize the three questions they wanted the community to discuss at the event: (1) What skills, experiences, and knowledge is necessary for students to find a good job in our community? (2) What could we do to better prepare students for employment while they are still in school? (3) How could we partner better with communities, employers, and families to

support this transition to the workplace? Finally, they began preparing materials, creating a day-of-event checklist, and arranging for refreshments. One teacher had students create signs and other decorations personalized with the district's logo. The team secured a donation of pizzas and soft drinks from a local pizzeria and asked parents to bring homemade baked goods. The team asked a teacher with strong speaking skills and good connections to the community to serve as the event facilitator. Other school staff were asked to be table hosts. Prior to the event, each table host viewed a short training video describing their role. The team felt prepared to host the community conversation event!

Step 6: Set Up the Event and Implement Procedures

On the day of the event, set up a registration table for attendees to sign in, arrange tables for small-group conversations of four to eight people, set out note-taking sheets for table hosts to record notes and paper placemats for attendees to write down any additional ideas they do not share aloud, and arrange the food table. As you decorate, consider personal touches that can foster a warm and inviting atmosphere for the event, such as students greeting at the door, creative table decorations, and soft background music. Most districts we supported followed a similar schedule: (1) attendees arrive and get food (15 minutes); (2) the facilitator welcomes everyone and presents a brief overview of the event (20 minutes); (3) three rounds of small-group conversation commence, between which attendees rotate tables (15 minutes each); (4) attendees engage in one round of large-group conversation in which people share out the best ideas they heard while a staff member writes down the ideas (15 minutes); and (5) the facilitator makes closing remarks and provides time for attendees to network (15 minutes). For each round, attendees are asked to rotate to a different table with a new set of people. This timing can be flexible based on your district's preferences, and the facilitator can use a timer or music to keep attendees to time. *Figure 4* illustrates how participants might rotate from table to table.

On the evening of the community conversation, the Haines County Schools team members

Figure 4 Illustration of room arrangement and procedures
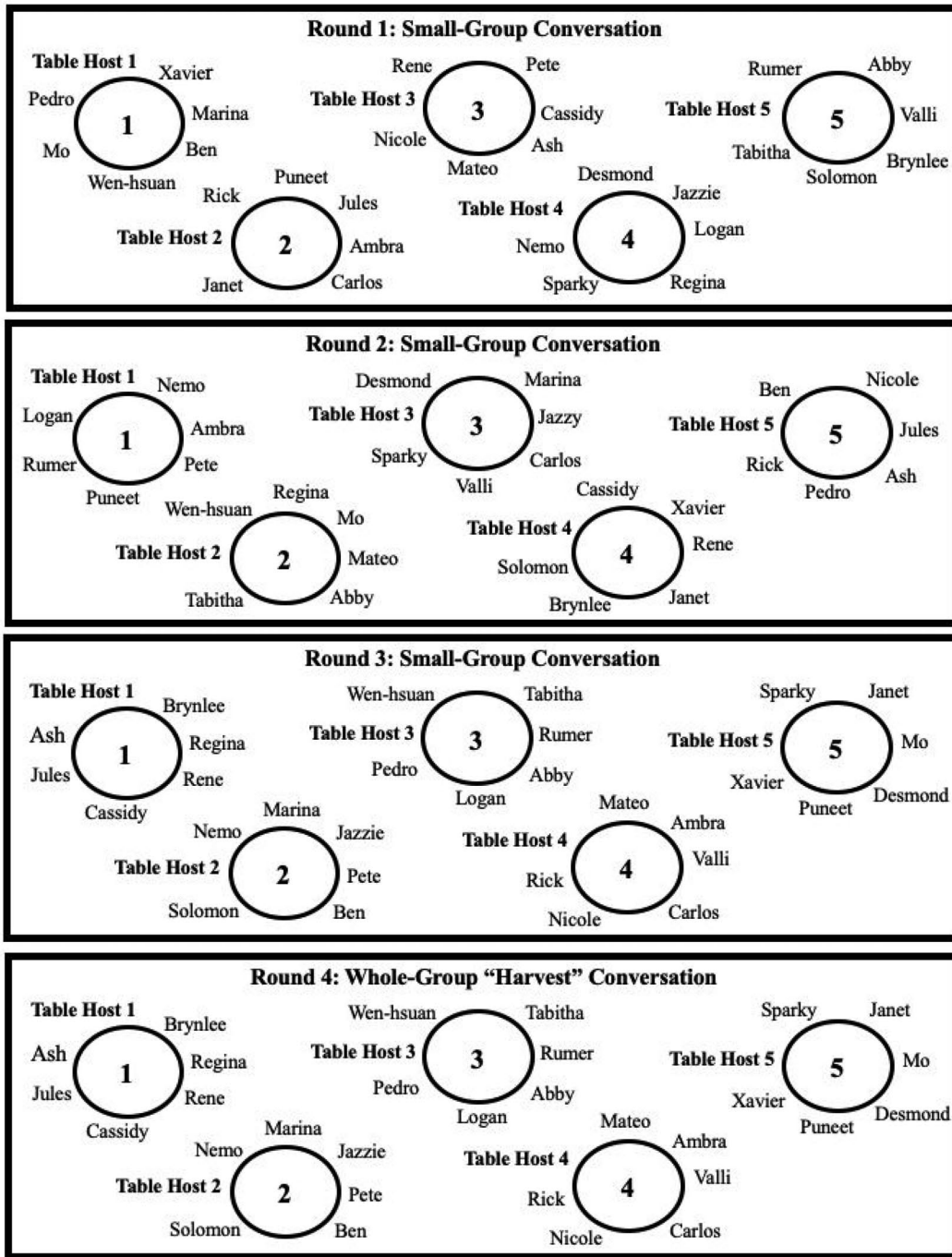
arrived at the venue 1.5 hours ahead of time to set up. They pulled up a short PowerPoint presentation for the facilitator of the event, created a registration area for attendees, and set out refreshments. The food, personalized decorations, light music, and students serving as greeters all created a welcoming atmosphere.

When setting up tables, they ensured accessibility through wide aisles and spaces for wheelchair access. Staff members serving as table hosts reviewed a one-page description of their roles before other attendees arrived. It reminded them to write down all ideas, to avoid using acronyms in their notes, and to

keep the conversation positive and solutions oriented. Once attendees arrived and settled in, the event began with the facilitator's welcome and overview of how the night would work. Next, the facilitator displayed a visual timer on the screen to keep track of time throughout three rounds of small-group discussion. Table

Step 7: Prioritize Promising Ideas and Distribute to Community Members

After the community conversation event, review the information that was gathered and identify next steps to prioritize. Compile all of the information from the event, including the table host notes, attendee placemats, "harvest" round notes, and any anecdotal observations from team members. There are several options for deciding how to move forward. You can compile all of the ideas that attendees shared, look over the list, and identify ideas raised multiple times across tables. For example, ideas for increasing school–employer partnerships for work-based learning were suggested by multiple people at one district's event. An alternative approach is to focus on ideas shared by table hosts during the "harvest" round of whole-group conversation. Another potential strategy would be to include a question about the most promising ideas heard on the end-of-event survey and use attendee responses to identify ideas to put into practice. Select the approach that is most practical when considering the number of ideas that were generated, staff available to help, and the desired timeline for moving forward with ideas.

After reviewing the event materials, it is important to share back your ideas with the community to maintain excitement and momentum for next steps. You could create a community conversation summary report that includes a brief overview of the event and a list of promising ideas people shared. Incorporate pictures from the event or graphical illustrations of the ideas. This report can be disseminated through the mail or by email using the contact information provided by attendees during event registration. See our website for examples.

Step 8: Set Goals and Evaluate Progress

Finally, use the event findings to begin improving transition programming in the district. Set goals for improvement based on ideas found to be promising. For example, after identifying a recommendation to increase school–employer partnerships from event notes, one district crafted a goal to develop new partnerships with businesses. In addition to examining ideas generated at the community conversation event, you may find it helpful to gather additional information to supplement what you heard. Although a community conversation can generate numerous potential ideas for improvement, these recommendations are stronger when confirmed by other sources. For example, districts we supported surveyed school staff (e.g., special educators, general educators, guidance counselors, career technical education teachers) about their views of program needs and surveyed parents about their child's transition experiences.

To organize your improvement efforts and promote accountability, choose one or two focused goals, develop action steps, delineate staff responsibilities for each goal, and develop a timeline for follow-up checks and goal completion. Document information in an action plan and store the plan in an accessible location—such as a shared file storage system—to be referenced by all team members as necessary. During scheduled follow-up meetings, monitor goal progress and identify when adjustments or new steps are needed for sustainability. Finally, select a community member from outside of the school to take responsibility for checking in regularly and attending follow-up meetings to ensure that your team is making progress toward its goals for program improvement.

Concluding Thoughts

School districts looking to generate fresh ideas for improving the transition outcomes of their students with disabilities have much to gain from convening the local community and hearing from new perspectives. The community conversation approach provides a practical, fun, and effective way to gather local citizens. It forges new connections within the community. And it identifies ideas for addressing long-standing challenges to preparing students

to obtain success in college, employment, independent living, and community participation. We encourage you to consider how the events hosted across Tennessee—and described in this article—might be adapted to meet the needs of your school and community to improve the outcomes of your students with disabilities. Finally, we encourage you to utilize templates, samples, and tips on hosting a community conversation from our free transition website (www. transitiontn.org/ community-conversations).

ORCID IDS

Michele A. Schutz https://orcid. org/0000-0001-8300-0599
Erik W. Carter https://orcid. org/0000-0001-7153-2782

Michele A. Schutz, *Doctoral Student,* **Erik W. Carter,** *Professor,* **Shimul A. Gajjar,** *Educational Consultant, and* **Erin A. Maves,** *Educational Consultant, Department of Special Education, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN.*

Address correspondence concerning this article to Michele A. Schutz, MEd, Department of Special Education, Vanderbilt University, OMC 306, Peabody College, Nashville, TN 37203 (email: maperch1816@gmail.com).

REFERENCES

Brown, J., & Isaacs, D. (2005). *The world café: Shaping our futures through conversations that matter*. Barrett-Koehler.

Bumble, J. L., Carter, E. W., McMillan, E., Manikas, A., & Bethune, L. (2018). Community conversations on integrated employment: Examining individualization, influential factors, and impact. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies, 28*(4), 229–443. https://doi .org/10.1177/1044207317739401

Carter, E. W., Awsumb, J. M., Schutz, M. A., & McMillan, E. D. (2020). Preparing youth for the world of work: Educator perspectives on pre-employment transition services. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/2165143420938663

Carter, E. W., & Bumble, J. L. (2018). The promise and possibilities of community conversations: Expanding employment opportunities for people with disabilities. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies, 28*(4), 195–202. https://doi .org/10.1177/1044207317739408

Carter, E. W., Schutz, M. A., Gajjar, S. A., Maves, E. A., Bumble, J. L., & McMillan, E. D. (2020). Using community conversations to inform transition education in rural communities. *The Journal of Special Education*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/ 10.1177/0022466920950331

Dutta, A., Kundu, M. M., Johnson, E., Chan, F., Trainor, A. A., Blake, R., & Christy, R. (2016). Community conversations: Engaging stakeholders to improve employment-related transition services for youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 45*(1), 53–61. https://doi.org/10.3233/JVR-160809

Flowers, C., Test, D., & Povenmire-Kirk, T. C. (2018). A demonstration model of interagency collaboration for students with disabilities: A multilevel approach. *The Journal of Special Education, 51*(4), 211–221. https://doi.org/10.1177 %2F0022466917720764

Hirano, K. A., Rowe, D. A., Lindstrom, L., & Chan, P. (2018). Systemic barriers to family involvement in transition planning for youth with disabilities: A qualitative metasynthesis. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 27*(11), 3440–3456. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-018-1189-y

Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 20 U.S.C. §§ 1400 *et seq.* (2004).

Kohler, P. D., & Field, S. (2003). Transition-focused education: Foundation for the future. *The Journal of Special Education, 37*(3), 174–183. https://doi.org/10.1177/002246690 30370030701

Kohler, P. D., Gothberg, J. E., Fowler, C., & Coyle, J. (2016). *Taxonomy for transition programming 2.0: A model for planning, organizing, and evaluating transition education, services, and programs*. Western Michigan University.

Parker-Katz, M., Cushing, L., & Athamanah, L. (2018). Fostering transition leadership to promote partnerships with families and communities. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies, 28*(4), 244–254. https://doi.org/ 10.1177/1044207317739407

Trainor, A. A., Carter, E. W., Swedeen, B., & Pickett, K. (2012). Community conversations: An approach for expanding and connecting opportunities for employment for adolescents with disabilities. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals, 35*(1), 49–59. https://doi.org/ 10.1177/088572881141916