

ENSURING ALL STUDENTS SUCCEED

***COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS
PROJECT***



**AT-A-GLANCE ORGANIZER'S
GUIDE FOR COMMUNITY
CONVERSATIONS**

ADAPTED FROM THE PUBLIC AGENDA'S ORGANIZER'S GUIDE FOR COMMUNITY CONVERSATION ABOUT EDUCATION



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COMMUNITY ADVOCACY AND PARTNERSHIP ENGAGEMENT (CAPE) COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS PROJECT

ENGAGING COMMUNITIES TO TRANSFORM PUBLIC SCHOOLS

NEA's Community Conversations model that brings stakeholders together to address pressing issues facing students, educators, and public education. As part of an overall community outreach and engagement program, it can be a valuable tool for helping Affiliates nurture the family-school-community collaboration necessary for ensuring every student's right to a great public school.

THE PROCESS

The CAPE Community Conversation model typically involves a 4-step process:

- 1) **ENGAGE THE COMMUNITY.** The local Association works to establish an Organizing Coalition Committee, comprised of a wide variety of community stakeholders including: parents, businesses, grassroots political organizations, faith-based groups, and ethnic minority organizations. The Coalition then initiates and moderates a Community Conversation focused on how to ensure the success of all children in an identified school, feeder pattern, or district.
- 2) **IDENTIFY THE CRITICAL ISSUES.** The Coalition Committee — including selected Community Conversation participants — meets to analyze the Community Conversation data and to identify the community's top priorities as elicited during the Conversation.
- 3) **AGREE ON PRIORITIES and CREATE AN ACTION PLAN.** The Coalition Committee hosts a second Community Conversation, focused this time on coming to a common understanding of the community's priority areas for improving student outcomes. The group then develops an action plan that addresses the changes they seek.
- 4) **MOBILIZE THE COMMUNITY.** Guided by the plan of action, all work together towards the identified solution. NEA staff is available, by request of the Coalition Committee, to help build capacity through skill-building sessions, trainings, or focused actions tailored for the community.

If you are interested in holding a Community Conversation or need more information, please contact NEA CAPE staff: Merwyn Scott, Director (Mscott@nea.org) or Stacey Grissom (sgrissom@nea.org).

What is a Community Conversation?

A Community Conversation is an event where schools, community members, and organizations come together to address pressing issues facing students, educators, and public education. discuss obstacles that students face that can hinder their academic achievement. The basic goals of the Community Conversation are to:

- Give participants a chance to voice their opinions
- Talk about the areas where they agree
- Discuss how the community can come together to improve educational opportunities for all young people in the community
- Formulate partnerships that can lead to collaborative actions favorable to positive educational outcomes

CAPE believes Community Conversations work most effectively when organized by a Sponsoring Coalition of a diverse group of stakeholders from the community. This group should reflect the make-up and diversity of the school community.

Creating the Sponsoring Coalition and Planning Team

A Sponsoring Coalition comprised of parents, teachers, and students, administrators, education support professionals, representatives of diverse stakeholder organizations and individuals in the community should be established to provide leadership and to ensure a broad reach into the community, and to communicate that the Conversation will be open to multiple interests and viewpoints. The Sponsoring Coalition's primary purposes are to:

- Publicly sponsor the Community Conversation
- Provide a nonpartisan sponsoring umbrella
- Bring together leaders who possess a broad range of skills, knowledge, and networks
- Establish Planning for the Community Conversation

It takes some extra planning up front to bring a good mix of community members on board, but it is worth the time to make this a true community effort. It's also a good idea to consider some "unlikely" partners: people and organizations of different experiences, backgrounds, and maybe political leanings. Also, if the Conversation takes off and concrete follow-up action plans ensue, it is important to think about who will be able to implement the plans that emerge from the conversation and to involve them from the beginning.

The Sponsoring Coalition should establish a set of Sub-Committees to assist in the actual work of organizing the Community Conversation. This team should include people with

access to and credibility with various important segments of the local community, including those who are typically uninvolved in or excluded from local decision-making practices.

The responsibilities of these sub-committees can include:

- Making major strategic decisions such as event location, media policy, etc.;
- Spearheading communications efforts such as developing talking points, promotional materials and media guidelines;
- Creating workgroups to manage the various components, drawing from its ranks and recruiting additional people as needed to get the job done.

The tasks that Sub-Committees might focus on could include:

- Participant/Audience Recruitment – with attention paid to recruitment of parents, teachers, education support professionals and students
- Logistics
- Moderator/Recorder Recruitment¹
- Event Promotion and Media Outreach
- Following Up on the Conversation

Eight to ten weeks into the planning of the Conversation, the Sponsoring Coalition should set a date and location for the event, and define and coordinate the various Sub-Committees.

The moderator and recorder role is crucial to the success of the Community Conversation. Great care should be taken to recruiting and supporting as these they are key to the Small Group Discussion Breakout Sessions.

Typically, a moderator possesses the following skills, knowledge and background:

- Group facilitation skills/experience in working with diverse groups and with the general public;
- Ability to create an environment in which it is safe and comfortable for people to express their views;
- Ability to help participants articulate the reasoning, experiences and values supporting their positions;
- Ability to challenge people to consider alternative viewpoints;
- Comfort with the ability to manage group conflict;
- Nonpartisan credibility.

¹ CAPE has resources that help volunteers serve as moderators/recorders.

The recorder has a crucial role and should be carefully selected. Like the moderator, he/she must also be nonpartisan as well as be trusted to record all ideas, not just those that they agree with or feel necessary. The recorder should be able to quickly summarize the main points in the discussion. Also important: the ability to write legibly and large enough for all participants to see.

Ideally, the moderator/recorder teams overall should reflect the demographics of the community.

INFORMING THE COMMUNITY: EVENT PROMOTION AND OUTREACH

The Event Promotion and Media Outreach Sub-Committee should develop some basic communication tools that will be used to effectively communicate with the community. At least two fundamental tools are suggested:

- A basic flyer that explains the purpose of the Community Conversation and gives basic information such as when and where the Conversation will take place
- A letter to stakeholders that contains all information about the event that will generate the interest of potential sponsors and/or participants

WHO SHOULD PARTICIPATE IN THE COMMUNITY CONVERSATION?

Participants should reflect the diversity of the community. The participant group should include a wide cross section of the community. Each participant has an important role to play in the success of the Community Conversation's initiative, i.e. ESSA, equity, racial justice in education.

To recruit participants, consider conducting outreach to:

- Parent/guardians of students
- Students
- Educators, school administrators, education support professionals and counselors
- Local community college faculty and administrators
- Four-year college administrator and/or guidance counselors
- Local employers
- Community leaders including but not limited to government officials, community based organizational leaders, religious leaders, and representatives from local community foundations

PICTURING A COMMUNITY CONVERSATION

Each Community Conversation should be a significant community event. Typically, each will have somewhere between 60 and 120 participants. The session begins with a meal, followed by welcoming remarks by the Conversation's sponsors. Organizers then divide participants into groups of about 12 to 14 people for small group discussions.

Each small group should be as diverse and representative of the community as possible. The small group discussion is designed to take about two hours; the entire forum will take about four hours. The basic structure of an evening community conversation is as follows:

5:45 p.m. - 6:30 p.m.	Registration and Dinner
6:30 p.m. - 6:50 p.m.	Large Group Introduction Welcome, Purpose, and Overview
7:00 p.m. - 8:50 p.m.	Small Group Discussion Groups of 12-14, each with a trained moderator and recorder and prepared discussion starter materials
7:00 p.m.	<u>Part 1:</u> Overview, Introductions, and Ground Rules
7:15 p.m.	Presentation/discussion of Conversation format
8:00 p.m.	Interim Summary on Common Ground, Disagreements, Questions and Concerns
8:10 p.m.	<u>Part 2:</u> How can schools and the community work together make headway on tonight's topic?"
8:40 p.m.	Next Steps
8:50 p.m.	Finish and Reassemble with Large Group
9:00 p.m. - 9:20 p.m.	Closing - Large Group - Someone from each small group shares highlights of their small group discussion - Group discusses plans to follow up on the conversation - Participants fill out survey/evaluation of event

FOLLOW-UP

Participants involved in a well-organized, well-run Community Conversation come away feeling that the experience was exciting, productive, and extremely valuable. Most will want to see the conversation lead to real results. An effective and robust follow-up post-conversation should be organized around two main areas:

- Linking community dialogue to meaningful action by the school, district, and the community.
- Expanding and institutionalizing the dialogue process.

Linking Community Dialogue to Meaningful Action

It is suggested that community dialogue be used to promote mutual understanding and communication about a shared problem and to identify general ideas and directions for solutions. Thus, the dialogue builds a solid foundation for action, but detailed action planning is best handled in a follow-up stage. The Community Conversation Sponsoring Coalition should think early on about how to create the conditions for effective follow-up to their forum. At the very least, it is advised to:

- Provide a summary report to all participants.
- Report results to decision makers and, when possible, convey decision maker response(s) back to participants.
- Disseminate the results in other ways, such as online and through media channels.
- Suggest ways that participants who are so inspired can stay involved, such as joining organizations dedicated to some aspect of the topic at hand and helping with future community conversations.

Expanding and Institutionalizing the Dialogue Process

As you reach the end point of the dialogue work, you will want to think about how and when to use dialogue in the future. Consider the following:

- Hold a second Community Conversation to delve further into a specific issue identified by participants as important or to reconsider some facet of the Conversation once a crucial piece of missing information has been obtained that participants said they needed.
- Decide who should attend – the original participants, expand to new participants or combine new with the original group.
- The location should be considered to encourage participation and as an indication that the Conversations are open to everyone.
- Acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses from the previous Conversation and make any modifications or adjustments necessary.

These Community Conversations are vital and need to be tailored to local conditions; they will inform schools and communities and help foster collaboration in our continuing efforts to make sure every student succeeds.

PLANNING TEAM TIMELINE FOR LOCAL SPONSORING COALITION FOR COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS ON CLOSING ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

Ten weeks before Community Conversation

- Solidify sponsors, get Planning Team and workgroups in place
- Define focus of Community Conversation
- Decide on media and observer policy
- Create workgroups for the various planning responsibilities (logistics, participants, moderators/recorders, communications, follow-up)
- Workgroups begin their tasks

Eight weeks before Community Conversation

- Planning Team meets as needed to coordinate and monitor progress

Six weeks before Community Conversation

- Send invitations to participants and observers
- Recruit moderators and recorders as well as back-up moderators and recorders
- Confirm logistics – food, location, equipment

Three to four weeks before Community Conversation

- Additional participant recruiting as needed to ensure a diverse group
- Planning team meets as needed
- Begin initial contact with media to advertise event

Ten days to one week before Community Conversation

- Prep session for key event principals i.e. day-of logistics lead or moderator/recorder
- Follow-up/reminder phone calls to participants
- Additional participant recruiting to fill in weak spots
- Continue follow-up with media
- Finalize equipment, food, logistical needs
- Plenary and closing session plans in place (who will act as host, handle questions about follow-up, etc.)

Day of Community Conversation

- Hold community conversation
- Debrief post-event on-site with moderators and recorders and Sponsoring Coalition members

Within One Week after Community Conversation

- Create a summary report, compile questionnaire results, creating recommendations memo, and present to Planning Team for approval
- Distribute synopsis of outcomes to participants and other community members and media members as appropriate
- Review additional next steps as determined by Sponsoring Coalition, such as discussion of plans for next forum and community training and mobilization

CHECKLIST OF PLANNING TASKS FOR LOCAL SPONSORING COALITION FOR COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS ON CLOSING ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

- Create the Sponsoring Coalition – members should be representative of diverse stakeholder organizations in the community
- Create a coalition Planning Team which could include a logistics workgroup, participants workgroup, moderator/recorder workgroup, communications workgroup, and follow-up workgroup
- Decide on scope of the community to be reached (school district, neighborhood, town, region, etc)
- Choose date for Community Conversation(s) and for prep session with key event principals
- Decide on main topic of Community Conversation
- Create list of equipment and materials needed
- Recruit moderators and recorders from among ranks of Sponsoring Coalition member organizations (plan on at least one moderator/recorder 2-person team for every 14 anticipated participants at the community conversation)
- Conduct prep session with key event principals a maximum of 7-10 days before the Community Conversation – the date for training can be as close to event as 2 days before.
- Develop list of potential participants (and observers) in Community Conversations
- Invite participants (and observers) 4-6 weeks before the Conversation. Ask them to RSVP at least 2 weeks before the date of the event
- Follow up written or e-mailed invitations with telephone calls to all participants, especially those who may be difficult to involve, ensuring participation of a diverse cross-section of stakeholders
- Assign confirmed participants to small discussion groups so each group represents the diversity of the total (no more than 14 participants in each small group)
- You will want to color code or individually name each breakout group and use participants' name tags to identify their group identity when they arrive
- Determine if media coverage is desired – develop communications and media outreach plan

- Utilize “Assessing Your Community Conversation Results”² tool to help measure and document your Community Conversation outcomes.

² *Available from CAPE*