Community Conversations: Outcomes Across Three School Districts in Utah

Background

Community conversations are facilitated discussions designed to seek input from various stakeholders to understand issues and challenges in local communities. We conducted community conversations to learn more from transition stakeholders about how communities can support students with intellectual and developmental disabilities transition to valued adult roles.

Method

We facilitated three community conversations in school districts across Utah; two were in rural communities and one was in a suburban community. Schutz and colleagues (2021) adapted the World Café framework for community conversations, and we followed Schutz's community conversation procedures, including (1) assembling a planning team, including staff from the school district and community partners; (2) planning the community conversation event; (3) implementing the community conversation, and (4) gathering and disseminating ideas. We worked with school district employees to identify individuals to participate in the conversations and we emailed and called potential participants to invite them to attend. Participants were randomly assigned and divided into three groups or were combined for one small-group discussion. USU staff assigned a group facilitator and note-taker to each group. We asked three broad questions and gave 15 minutes per question for participants to respond.

Community Conversation Questions

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 these areas while they are still in school?*

3. *How could we partner better with communities, employers, and families to support this transition?*

Results

Forty-four individuals attended the community conversations across the three districts. Participants included students with disabilities, parents and family members, school administration and educators, state disability service employees, employers, organization advocates, local university professors and staff, and other community members. Several overarching themes emerged from the conversations around each question.

Important Student Outcomes

- *Students are meaningfully engaged in the community after transitioning from school to adult living.*

  > It's important that students "don't sit at home" and have "social connections to things that match their interest and don't go away when they exit post-high."

- *Students can identify when they are unsafe and know how to respond appropriately.*

- *Students have a social circle and the skills to make new friendships.*

  > "The more social you are, the better friendships you can make… friends can help guide you and help you remain calm."

- *Students and their families have support to transition from pediatric to adult medicine.*

- *Student outcomes are individualized and important to the student.*

- *Students obtain competitive integrated employment.*

  > Employment is a way for students to "earn a paycheck" and develop a "sense of accomplishment and self-worth."

- *Students gain an understanding of transportation or a support network to help navigate their community.*

- *Students leave post-high connected to services and supports.*

- *Students are independent and have self-advocacy skills.*

  > "As students spend time in their community, they become more confident using these skills."

Preparing Students for Success

- *Students need to learn self-determination and self-advocacy skills during transition years.*

  > *"Students should know what their disability is, understand it, and know how to ask for accommodations."*

- *Develop a realistic plan for students before they exit that provides a sense of self-worth.*

- *Develop resources or processes for capturing student interests, skills, and abilities from an early age.*

- *Students need applied practice using public transportation.*

- *Families need support knowing about and applying for adult services.*

  > *"[DSPD services] needs to be discussed with parents in elementary school."*

- *Families need mentors who have successfully navigated the transition process.*

- *Educate employers and collaborate with the local Chamber of Commerce about how students with disabilities can contribute to businesses.*

  > *"Once the [work-based learning] program got going, we see that students do a great job and that it's beneficial to both the student and employer."*

- *Develop resources for housing for individuals with disabilities in the local community.*

- *Start work-based learning before students leave school.*

- *Provide opportunities for students to be meaningfully included in school and community settings.*

  > *"Students with disabilities need to be integrated with their peers, but also for their peers to spend time with them so that when they grow up, they have exposure and know how to interact with their fellow peers."*

- *Educators of all grades have knowledge of services and supports that may benefit students and families.*

- *Students develop skills in school that generalize to real life.*

How to Develop Partnerships

- *Transition stakeholders need a better idea of community resources, partners, and processes.*

- *Families need support at an earlier age to connect to services and supports.*

  > *Having a "transition timeline that teachers can work through with parents" would be helpful for all educators to help support families.*

- *Educators leverage elements of discovery, such as "lists of 20" to increase work-based learning opportunities.*

- *Develop individualized job experiences for students.*

- *Stakeholders want ongoing conversations about how to make transition successful.*

- *Develop a more effective and consistent way for stakeholders to coordinate supports for students.*

  > *"I don't know how much I need to [follow-up] before I become annoying."*

- *Stakeholders need education on transition-related topics, expectations, and how to support transition efforts in school, home, and community settings.*

Recommendations

These community conversations reinforce the idea that there are dedicated students, parents, transition professionals, and community members who want positive outcomes for transition-aged students. The framework for community conversations outlines that the facilitators of the conversations share results with participants and that there are specific recommendations for the next steps. The following recommendations should be implemented over the next 6-12 months.

1. **Hold quarterly community conversations.** The conversation should be used to collect additional data, set goals for improvement, and design action steps.

2. **Develop a district-specific transition council.** The council should include a district administrator, parent, student, transition coordinator, a representative from the Utah State Office of

Rehabilitation, the Division of Services for People with Disabilities, the local Independent Living Center, and an employer. The council will be used to support the systems that promote transition services and educate community members.

3. **Develop a coordinated information-sharing system for students and parents.** The coordinated systems should supplement traditional resource fairs and provide parents and students with ongoing information about community resources and supports.

4. **Develop and support coordinated interagency team meetings.** The team meetings are structured to review student postsecondary goals and develop a coordinated system of support to help the student achieve those goals at the point of transition.

5. **Create and implement individualized work-based learning experiences for students with disabilities.** Work-based learning experiences are temporary job experiences that should be tied to a student's strengths, interests, and preferences. Students should have opportunities throughout their post-high program to engage in multiple work-based learning experiences.

References

Schutz, M. A., Carter, E. W., Gajjar, S. A., & Maves, E. A. (2021). Strengthening Transition Partnerships Through Community Conversation Events. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, *53*(5), 359–368. https://doi-org.dist.lib.usu.edu/10.1177/0040059920987877

United States Census. (2023). QuickFacts, Cache County, Utah. https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/cachecountyutah/LND110210

Notes

Additional information on the method and results is available upon request: Aubrey.Snyder@usu.edu

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