

Conversations That Matter

Engaging Communities to Expand Employment Opportunities for Youth With Disabilities

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Most adults have vivid memories of a favorite after-school or summer job held during high school. Indeed, finding and holding a part-time job is a fairly typical adolescent experience, with almost 90% of youth without disabilities working at some point during high school (Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006). These early work experiences can provide youth with opportunities to explore potential career interests, gain valuable work-related skills and attitudes, establish relationships in the community, strengthen their résumés, and earn extra income (which often is the most enticing part for students). For high school students with disabilities, accessing such early work experiences also has been strongly linked with improved employment outcomes in adulthood (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000).

High school is a time when the experiences of students with significant disabilities increasingly become anchored to the community, and promoting career-development experiences becomes an essential element of transition programming (Carter, Ditchman, et al., in press). Yet, substantial numbers of youth miss out on these valu-

able experiences. Findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2, for example, indicate that only 36% of youth with intellectual disabilities, 15% of youth with autism, and 22% of youth with multiple disabilities held a paid job at any time during the previous year (Wagner, Cadwallader, & Marder, 2003). Leaving high school without these early work experiences can set a future course of unemployment, underemployment, and lowered expectations that can last throughout adulthood. Such discouraging outcomes underscore the need for innovative but practical approaches that lead to more meaningful high school transition experiences for all youth (Rusch & Braddock, 2004).

Although preparing youth with significant disabilities for future careers is a central focus of transition education, the task can be overwhelming for high school teachers and staff to tackle alone (Kohler & Field, 2003). Educators describe a number of common barriers to promoting youth employment, including the perceived inexperience of the student, the unwillingness of local employers to hire youth with disabilities, limited awareness by teachers and families of the array of work-related

opportunities and resources that might exist in their communities, weak linkages between schools and community employers, and difficulty finding transportation and on-the-job supports (Johnson, 2004; Trainor, Carter, Owens, & Swedeen, 2008). Clearly, a pressing need exists to engage the broader community more meaningfully and effectively to substantively improve outcomes for youth with significant disabilities.

Communities are rich reservoirs of expertise, relationships, supports, opportunities, ideas, and other assets that can be used to expand the employment experiences of youth with disabilities. The chamber of commerce, business networks, and employers—more than anyone else—know about the current and future hiring needs and opportunities in their community, but schools often are not able to effectively engage these groups as partners. Civic and service organizations have valuable information regarding the needs in their communities, but rarely have an avenue to communicate with schools. Human service agencies have considerable expertise and access related to funding, services, and programs, but youth with disabilities rarely access



these resources until after exiting the school system. To add to this disconnect, the business community often is completely unaware that such resources and supports for potential employees exist, and does not know how to access them. Furthermore, although parents and youth often have many ideas and dreams for meaningful work experiences, schools struggle to help each student realize his or her potential, and community members often are unaware of students' capabilities and aspirations. When it comes to transitioning youth with disabilities to life in the community, the diverse and

tion-age youth with significant disabilities. Recognizing the importance of the receptiveness and support of the local community, the project team worked with seven diverse communities to explore *community conversations* as a launching point for efforts to expand local employment for youth with significant disabilities. These conversations were designed to (a) foster dialogue centered on ways that schools, businesses, agencies, organizations, families, youth, and others could work together to broaden the job opportunities in their local community; and (b) identify new partners willing to collab-

fostering collaborative dialogue around important questions, offering a practical and creative way to expand people's capacity for thinking together. A "conversation" can be hosted and facilitated by anyone or any group, including a school district, service club (e.g., Kiwanis, Rotary), youth organization (e.g., 4-H, scouting), faith community, or school-supported group (e.g., Parent/Teacher Organization, Transition Advisory Council). Conversations are designed to facilitate (a) a series of small group conversations among an array of community members to exchange ideas, brainstorm solutions, and foster relationship-building; and (b) whole group discussion to share themes, strategies, and visions that emerge throughout the evening.

One of the most important principles of a World Café is to identify "questions that matter" (Brown, 2002). In this project, the question focused on expanding employment opportunities for youth: *What can our community do to increase summer employment opportunities for youth with disabilities?* The conversations that follow identify new possibilities by tapping into the creativity and assets of a community. The remainder of this article outlines the

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numerous assets of most communities simply are not used.

The present research project focused on developing effective but practical strategies that schools and communities can use to expand employment opportunities and outcomes for transi-

orate with participating high schools in addressing youth employment.

These 2-hour evening "conversations" used the World Café model (Brown & Isaacs, 2005; see www.theworldcafe.com). The World Café model is an easy-to-use approach for

practical steps and considerations associated with implementing a community conversation, and describes the promise this strategy holds for improving the transition experiences of youth with disabilities.

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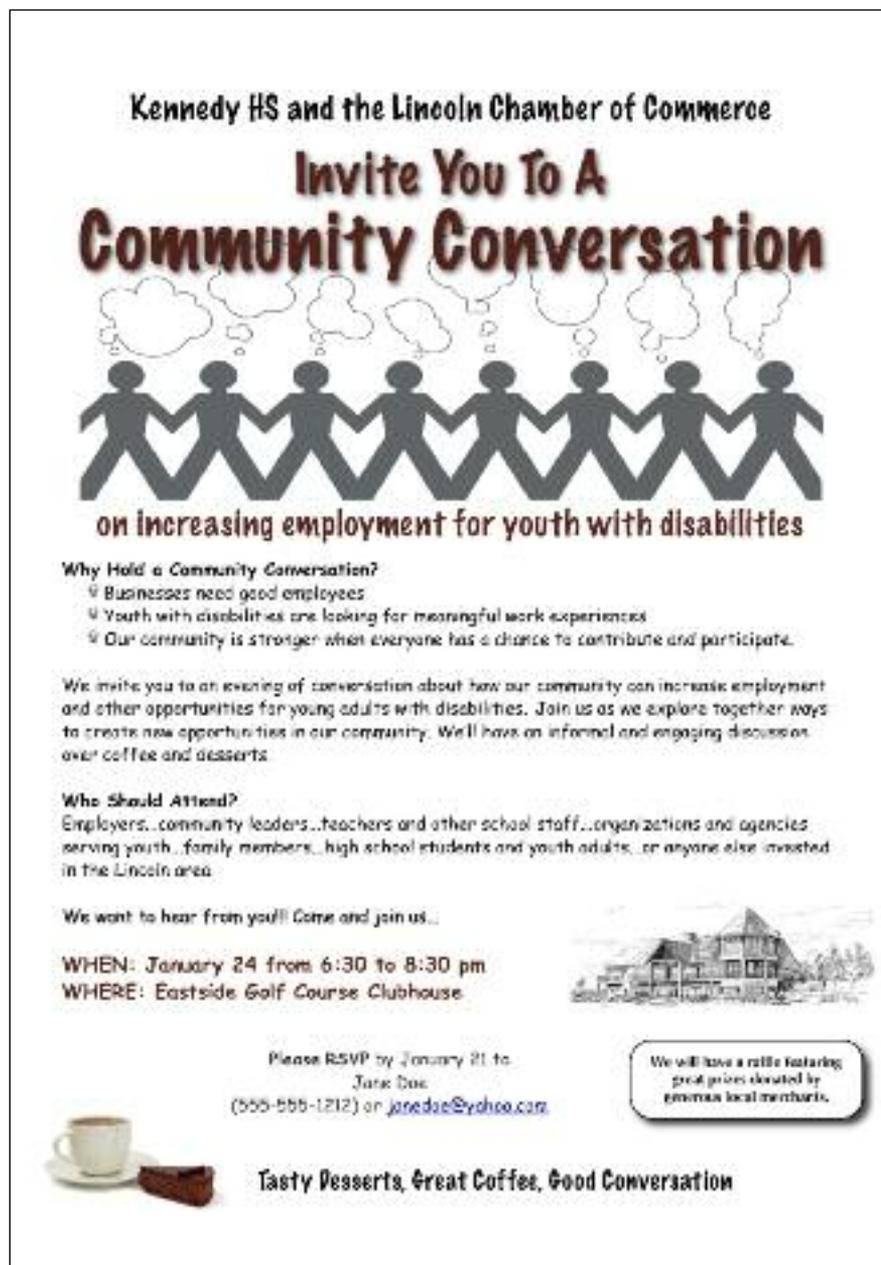
Hosting a Community Conversation

The success of community conversations as a problem-solving and asset-building strategy requires attracting diverse participants with fresh perspectives and posing a meaningful question that invites creative local solutions. To accomplish these goals, careful attention was paid to (a) creatively extending invitations using broad dissemination strategies, and (b) identifying key community partners as co-sponsors who could create buy-in and encourage participation of community members who might not have obvious connections to transition and special-education issues, might not realize that they already have a stake in the issue, or who think they have nothing valuable to contribute to the conversation.

Making the Invitation Compelling

Visually appealing invitation flyers were developed for each local conversation, and clearly communicated that expanding employment for youth with disabilities was a *community* issue in which everyone has a stake (see Example Flyer in Figure 1). The invitations underscored the potential benefits to both youth with disabilities and the larger community, such as filling the need for a skilled and committed workforce and addressing both the need and desire of students with disabilities to work (see box, “Expanding Employment Opportunities”). The message emphasized that multiple perspectives—and new ones—were necessary to solve an issue affecting the future economic health and vitality of the community. The commitment for par-

Figure 1. Example Flyer



ticipants was limited to the 2 hours invested in the evening’s conversation. The flyer could be sent electronically or posted in public places, such as libraries, community centers, municipal buildings, schools, and other visible locations. Simultaneously, a brief, local press release was developed that included quotes from local businesses about the community’s need for good employees and quoted local teachers about their school’s efforts to prepare students for the world of work. In six of the seven communities, these press releases resulted in feature articles in

local newspapers. In three communities, local news reporters attended the event and participated in the conversations.

Inviting the Broader Community

To identify key partners, publicity about the evening event was circulated 6 weeks in advance. Dates for the conversations were chosen carefully to avoid conflicts with school and other community events. The publicity flyer and all communication jointly listed the local high school and either the chamber of commerce or a local busi-

ness as co-sponsors of the event, potentially increasing credibility among diverse audiences (e.g., city government, employers, volunteer groups), rather than identifying the evening as another school- or disability-related event. Teachers and employers brainstormed lists of potential participants from agencies and organizations in each community. Schools also deliberately extended invitations to people who might not realize their connection to disability or educational issues, but who were active community members. This group included leaders from business groups, individual employers, city leaders, volunteer and civic groups, local policy makers, faith communities, community activists, and many others (see box, "Thinking Beyond the Usual Lineup"). Including a broad array of participants ensures that perspectives beyond the "usual lineup"—the educational and service systems—are included. This often leads to ideas and solutions that incorporate more natural supports.

Spreading the Word

The flyer was primarily distributed by e-mail using an online invitation system (www.evite.com), which asked community members both to RSVP and to pass the invitation on to other potentially interested parties, thus creating a ripple effect. The e-invitation, press release, flyers, and word-of-mouth strategies also minimized cost. The invitations were sent out via local listservs and announcements were included in school, PTA, human service, chamber of commerce, and other local newsletters. Most important, school staff and the businesses and organizations listed as co-sponsors of the event were encouraged to personally invite families, youth, employers, and other connections from their own networks. At two schools, students and teachers hand-delivered flyers to the local businesses they frequented as well as to their neighbors and other organizations to which they were connected, leading to greater community turnout. When people RSVP'd, they were asked to suggest two or three additional people to invite.

Creating a Comfortable Atmosphere

It is important to create an atmosphere that promotes conversation and comfort. Teachers and other community leaders identified accessible, affordable, and hospitable community locations that were well-known to local residents and provided a welcoming environment. Typical agency locations like schools or human service centers were avoided, and local community centers, coffee houses, and banquet rooms were used instead. In one community, the local golf course donated the use of its clubhouse. In another community, no-cost space was available at the local

college student union. One community connected with a local restaurant which saw the conversation as an avenue for marketing its new business. Dessert and coffee were served, and were usually provided by a local restaurant or bakery or (at one locale) were made by high school students. When space and snacks were donated the evening was virtually cost-free. Even with rented space and purchased snacks, no event cost more than \$250.

Learning From Community Members

Across these seven community conversation events, attendance ranged •

Expanding Employment Opportunities is Good for Youth, Families, Employers, and Communities

Most conversations about promoting early work experiences focus on substantial benefits for youth with disabilities. Indeed, youth with disabilities who accrue meaningful work and career-development experiences during high school are significantly more likely to be employed after high school (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000; Fabian, 2007). Such work experiences provide a meaningful context for learning functional and social skills, informing future career plans, increasing one's social network, and developing self-determination skills. At the same time, successful high school work experiences can raise the career-related expectations of youth and their parents, as well as provide entry to vocational rehabilitation and other adult services. Connecting youth to summer work experiences also avoids potential conflicts with study time, access to the general curriculum, and extracurricular involvement during the school year.

Although the benefits to businesses and communities of hiring youth with disabilities are similarly persuasive, they rarely are discussed. Despite commonly held perceptions, employees with and without disabilities are virtually indistinguishable with regard to the retention rates, absenteeism, and job performance (DePaul University, 2007). Moreover, hiring youth with disabilities provides an opportunity for businesses to diversify their workforce and better serve a broader segment of the community. Such efforts are not likely to go unnoticed by the community, as the majority of consumers reports an increased likelihood of patronizing companies that hire individuals with disabilities (Siperstein, Romano, Mohler, & Parker, 2006).

Communities are also strengthened when youth with disabilities are engaged and employed in their communities. Communities across the country are recognizing the looming challenges associated with an aging workforce and a diminishing labor pool. The substantial number of youth and young adults with disabilities who are unemployed or underemployed represents a group that can be drawn upon to fill this gap. Youth with disabilities also tend to remain in their communities after leaving high school. Therefore, their communities have a vested interest in ensuring that they are well prepared for adulthood. Fostering youth employment also can demonstrate a community's commitment to being a welcoming and hospitable place for all of its members. Lastly, expanding access to community jobs can have long-term financial benefits; supported employment costs less than sheltered employment and results in greater numbers of individuals contributing to the local economic base (Cimera, 2000).

Thinking Beyond the Usual Lineup: Considering Who Else You Might Invite

In addition to youth, families, and school staff, consider inviting the following individuals and entities.

- 4-H, scouting, and other youth-development organization leaders
- Boys Club and Girls Club staff
- Business and civic volunteer groups (e.g., Rotary, Lions, Kiwanis, Civitan)
- Chambers of commerce
- Citizen advocacy groups
- City/municipal government staff (e.g., mayor, city council)
- College or university faculty and staff
- College students
- Community arts centers
- Community gardens
- Congregational leaders and members
- Employers
- Extension and community-development specialists
- Local cooperatives (e.g., housing, food, employment)
- Local and state policy makers
- Local recreation/parks programs
- Media (newspaper, radio, TV reporters)
- One-Stop Job Center staff
- Parent leadership trainers, participants
- Public library staff
- School board members and district administrators
- Social Security Administration representatives
- Technical and community college staff
- Urban League
- United Way member organizations
- Volunteer coordinators
- YMCA/YWCA
- TimeBank representatives

between 17 and 70 participants and included youth with and without disabilities, parents, school staff and administrators, human service and adult service agency representatives, local and state policy makers, employers, community civic and advocacy groups, leaders of faith communities, and many others. Indeed, almost one third of those who attended had no direct connection to the schools or the transition-age youth. These individuals—such as a mayor, a community-development specialist, a bank president, a state legislator, a chamber of commerce president, and a community TimeBank representative—often had the most interesting and untapped ideas. Although larger events tend to generate more connections, even 20 or 30 people can generate rich discussion and creative solutions. One of the smallest conversations—which had reduced attendance due to a winter snowstorm—still resulted in several jobs for youth and some of the most long-lasting partnerships. In several communities, youth with disabilities took active roles in attending and participating in conversations. Students with more significant disabilities and those with communication challenges, however, might need advance preparation with school staff and could require

active encouragement to share their ideas and suggestions during the event.

Timing is Important

Although each conversation lasted only 2 hours, selecting the right time to hold one is critical. After talking with community leaders, it was determined that a Tuesday or Thursday night from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. worked best for most community schedules. Later, however, feedback indicated that greater participation from the business community might be achieved by holding a somewhat shortened conversation from 7:00 a.m. to 8:30 a.m. during a regular chamber of commerce or business network breakfast event.

What a Community Conversation Looks Like

At each community conversation, participants sat at round tables in groups of four to six people. The project team arrived about 1 hour in advance and set each table with:

- Paper tablecloths decorated with handwritten welcome messages and room for doodling and jotting down ideas.
- A paper placemat for each participant to take from table to table to record notes and to help remember the best ideas.





- Markers and pens, for both writing notes and drawing.
- Candy for each table (because chocolate puts everyone at ease!).
- A sign-in sheet to gather names, organizations, and contact information (to use to send out a summary of the evening).
- Table tents that included an overview of the conversation's structure, procedures, etiquette, table host responsibilities, and the two questions that would be discussed for the evening.

Although anyone could act as an informal table host and facilitate conversation among table members, some participants were asked in advance to serve in this way so that no one would feel as if they were put on the spot. As community members arrived, they were encouraged to sit at specific tables so the mix of participants varied at each table.

The evenings were launched with a short welcome presentation (about 15 minutes) to provide an overview of the purpose and format of the community conversation. This presentation included brief information about:

- Why the issue—in this case, youth employment—is important for the broader community (see box, “Exp-

anding Employment Opportunities”).

- Why the issue is critical for the long-term success of youth with disabilities.
- How the community already is making some successful strides in this area.
- Why the community wants to—and can—do even better.
- The structure of the upcoming conversation.

This first portion of the evening sometimes included brief comments from employers with experience employing youth with disabilities, and focused on how hiring these youth had been good for their businesses. This also was the point at which two central questions that would guide the evening's conversations were posed:

- What can our community do to increase summer employment for youth with disabilities?
- What can I do to increase summer employment for youth with disabilities?

One of the most important expectations emphasized was that no barrier should be noted without providing at least one potential solution.

After this overview concluded, individuals at each table began a conversa-

tion to brainstorm answers to the first question. Participants wrote their ideas on their placemats and on the tablecloth, including what currently was happening in their communities, ideas for changes and innovations, suggestions for who in a community might be enlisted to help, and potential outside resources that could be accessed. The researchers circulated among tables to answer questions and to help people stay on topic and focused on solutions. After 15 to 20 minutes, a bell rang and everyone but the table hosts dispersed and found a new table with attendees with whom they had not yet sat. Table hosts quickly overviewed the previous conversation and everyone at the table began discussing the most creative ideas heard at their previous tables, further building upon and expanding those ideas. After another 15- to 20-minute conversation, everyone was asked to move again and also to shift to the second question. Mixing-up attendees multiple times allowed for “cross-pollination,” providing opportunities to meet new people, hear new ideas, and create new connections. At the end of the evening—having sat at three different tables—each participant had opportunities to discuss the issues with at least 12 to 15 other people from their community.

After the final small-group conversation, the whole group was brought

together and a member of the project team facilitated a final 20- to 30-minute discussion focusing on what community members thought were the most important and promising ideas, creating a list of possible resources and connections to make, identifying the most possible and replicable approaches, and developing an outline of next steps. Key ideas were recorded on chart paper in front of the group.

Each evening ended with a raffle for gift certificates or door prizes donated by local businesses. This encouraged people to stay to the end of the event and provided a celebratory close to the conversation. Participants also filled out a brief, anonymous evaluation to share their thoughts about the evening's conversation and about employment opportunities for youth with disabilities in their community.

The team collected the placemats, tablecloths, and chart paper at the end of the event. These items often included ideas and resources that might not have been voiced during the final whole-group discussion. This information and the ideas generated from the conversation were used to develop a brief report providing an overview of the evening; a list of participants by affiliation; and key ideas, resources, recommendations, and next steps generated during the conversations (visit <http://www.projectssummer.info> for example summary reports). Each report included both the local barriers to youth employment and the recommendations generated for addressing each barrier. A few weeks after each conversation, the report (along with a note of thanks for attending the event) was sent via e-mail to all participants who had provided their e-mail addresses on the sign-in sheets, and to other key community members who were unable to attend.

The Benefits of Community Conversations

Every community is different. A community conversation allows participants to generate local solutions addressing the challenges and opportunities specific to their communities. At the same time, several consistent

themes emerged across communities. These themes included the following:

- Employers and other community members might not be aware that youth with disabilities can and want to work.
- Employers could have concerns about hiring youth with disabilities and do not necessarily know where to turn for support or guidance.
- Youth might not know how to effectively seek and apply for jobs in their community.
- Students, families, and school staff are not aware of all potential employment opportunities in the community beyond the traditional avenues (e.g., retail, restaurants).
- High schools need more community partners to help connect youth to employment.
- Reliable and accessible transportation is a challenge to youth employment.

Generating Local Solutions

Although similar issues often came up across communities, strategies and solutions often varied to fit each community's specific strengths and challenges. To address the issue of educating employers about hiring youth with disabilities, for example, one chamber of commerce decided to feature local success stories in its newsletter about employers whose businesses had benefited from hiring youth with disabilities. In another community, the same challenge was addressed by establishing a citywide committee to promote hiring students with disabilities. This group's activities included generating radio interviews and newspaper feature stories. In a third community, youth with disabilities who attended the conversation committed to developing a booklet for businesses and the local school board describing the value and financial benefits of hiring youth with disabilities.

Each community also generated an array of strategies to address transportation barriers. During one conversation, several families agreed to arrange ridesharing so that students

could get to and from jobs. In another community, the school district realized the importance of early work experiences for youth and committed to providing summer transportation. At another conversation, school staff learned more from a local community advocacy agency about an existing reduced-rate taxi service for people with disabilities. Staff connected youth and their families with this service before employment began to give students opportunities to learn how to use the service before they needed to rely on it to get to work.

Sometimes a single strategy generated at a conversation addressed several challenges simultaneously. To address the combined issues of youth possibly not having the skills to find jobs and school staff being unaware of all potential employers, one high school compiled a list of youth interested in summer employment. The list included short, anonymous bios of each student describing their skill sets and availability, as well as the name of a school staff member who could answer questions and provide any needed supports. The local chamber of commerce agreed to circulate the list among its 350 business members. Of 10 students profiled on the list, 3 obtained summer jobs using this strategy. None of these businesses had in the past hired a student with disabilities or worked with the local high school on youth employment issues.

Fostering New Partnerships and Community-Based Solutions

Every conversation attracted community members who had never before thought about the issue of employment for youth with disabilities, such as mayors, YMCA staff, directors of non-profit organizations, and business owners. Every conversation also brought together people who had never collaborated—or even met—before. It was a time-efficient way to make connections to people that teachers and other school staff had heard about but might not have had the time or opportunity to contact. It also was a quick way to generate a list of resources and contacts that several people in the room

could follow up on, rather than placing all the responsibility onto school staff. In some instances, the conversations acted as a jump-start in developing a more sustainable community initiative to employ youth with disabilities. In these situations, the final discussion of the evening allowed people to volunteer to be part of a group that would continue to meet. In some communities, certain people saw follow-up organization and action on employment for youth with disabilities as a part of their existing job. For these communities, sustainability seemed more likely because one or more professionals—a community organizer, a mayor, a chamber of commerce staff person, or a community development specialist—viewed following up on ideas generated at the conversations a part of their job. Regardless of whether a follow-up group was formally initiated, a list of next steps and local resources was generated by the end of each conversation.

Perceptions of the Evening

Anonymous feedback gathered from the more than 200 participants across the 7 community conversations indicated that nearly everyone felt that the evening was a valuable investment of their time. Almost all said that they learned about resources or opportunities that they had not known existed, including participants who indicated they were teachers or service providers active in transition planning in their community. Nearly everyone said that, after the single evening of conversation, they believed more employment opportunities would be available to youth with disabilities. Furthermore, nearly all participants said their perception of their community's capacity to better the work outcomes for youth with disabilities had improved. The vast majority, however, indicated that additional community events and conversations on this topic were needed.

Contributions of Community Conversations

The conversations confirmed that communities are rich reservoirs of potential partners and natural supports; howev-

Other Possible Community Conversation Questions

Recognizing the link between early work experiences and postschool employment outcomes, the community conversations conducted focused on expanding employment opportunities for youth with significant disabilities. A community conversation, however, can address any issue of concern to a local community. Consider whether any of the following questions might serve as prompts for your event.

- What can we as a community do to better prepare all of our students for a successful life after high school?
- What can we do to more fully include students with disabilities in the life and activities of our high school, including both classes and extracurricular activities?
- What can we do to engage all youth more meaningfully in volunteer and civic experiences throughout our community?
- What can we do to help our schools and our community form more effective partnerships?
- What can we do to make high school a more engaging experience for *all* students?
- What can we as a community do to better support collaboration between parents and educators?
- How can we as a community better support our high school's goals of rigor, relevance, and relationships?
- How can we as a high school more fully realize our mission of _____?

er, in the transition process, these largely are untapped resources. Contrary to usual practices, schools do not have to “go it alone.” Community conversations proved beneficial in several ways as part of an overall intervention package designed to improve summer

conversations, the local publicity generated by the events, and the follow-up activities. The conversations also tapped into the connections and resources of community members beyond those typically involved in the transition process. They generated new

[C]ommunities are rich reservoirs of potential partners and natural supports. . . .

employment for youth with disabilities. The conversations brought together the broader community around a single topic, offering the perspectives of youth, their teachers, and their families. The conversations also generated valuable perspectives of people outside the typical school community as well as people from diverse backgrounds who previously might not have thought about employment for youth with disabilities. Community conversations elevated overall awareness about the importance, value, and potential of youth with disabilities as workers, through community participation in the

ideas, connections, and partnerships that had not been utilized—even in small communities where people felt connected and everyone thought they knew everyone else. The conversations also served as a catalyst to jump-start larger community efforts related to employment for youth with disabilities.

Although these community conversation events focused on youth summer employment, this approach has been used successfully in many different arenas to address a variety of questions and challenges. One urban high school is using it to invite community partners, school staff, families, and stu-

dents to discuss effective ways to build school-community partnerships and increase the community's investment in all of its schools. Another school district is using the World Café model to invite diverse participants from across the community to engage in long-range district planning. Groups involved in climate change have used this model to develop energy-conscious strategies for everyday life. Communities have used conversations to generate creative ideas for maintaining valued programs in the face of budget cuts (see box "Other Possible Community Conversation Questions"). A variety of groups could sponsor a community conversation, including a PTA, a local transition coalition, Arc chapter, or youth-development group (e.g., 4-H Club, Boys Club, Girls Club).

Final Thoughts

Substantial improvements in the employment experiences and outcomes of youth with significant disabilities are more likely to occur if communities are receptive, and meaningful job opportunities and supports are both available and recognized. Community conversations—such as those described in this article—have great potential for expanding employment opportunities for youth by attracting new partners and critical allies, identifying untapped opportunities and community assets, energizing a community around an issue that matters, thinking outside of specific transition systems, and launching new and broader efforts. Yet, such conversations represent only one component in developing the comprehensive, community-based efforts needed to improve transition outcomes for youth. Such events must be accompanied by efforts to foster high-quality transition assessment, planning, and instruction provided by the school; seamless services and funding of adult agencies; and the ongoing support and contributions of families. When community conversations were followed by individualized planning and intentional connections to potential work and volunteer opportunities by school staff and families, youth with severe disabilities were significantly more likely to obtain

summer jobs (Carter, Trainor, Ditchman, Owens, & Swedeen, 2009). By bringing key stakeholders together to generate solutions to common challenges encountered by their community, outcomes for youth with significant disabilities really can be improved substantially.

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