



Community Conversation Toolkit

A guide for educators, families, and communities to build relationships and work together for change

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ROOTS OF
INCLUSION

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We are grateful for the collaborative spirit and shared vision that made this project possible. The commitment to fostering positive change and creating more inclusive, equitable, and connected communities enabled us to develop these resources to ensure that our schools and communities are welcoming places where everyone feels a sense of belonging.

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Introduction

Each and every child deserves the opportunity to reach their full human potential. When schools, families, and community are partners in co-creating school environments where teachers feel supported, students receive the resources and support they need, and families feel valued and connected, our young people thrive. It takes all of us working together to create a school community that is truly a place of belonging.

Building equitable and inclusive schools does not fall to the people who work in schools alone: It takes a community of people who know and care about young people and what they need to thrive in school and in life. Families are especially essential partners in this work. They bring a wealth of information and assets that can support the success of their children and result in school communities where we value and affirm the experiences, abilities, identities, cultural values, and languages.

Understanding issues that present barriers to success and belonging for students is essential for making our schools more equitable and inclusive for students of all races, cultures, abilities, identities, and linguistic backgrounds. Schools and community members with diverse experiences and perspectives must work together to build a shared understanding of an issue impacting the community, examine areas of the school community system that need to change, and commit to a shared ownership for that change.

Roots of Inclusion developed this toolkit to give families, educators, and community leaders a set of tools to plan and hold a Community Conversation on an issue impacting their community. The goal of the conversation is to build a shared understanding of the importance of an issue and systemic change that addresses the needs of the whole school community.

What Is a Community Conversation?

A Community Conversation¹ is an event that brings diverse community members together to collectively listen, learn, and brainstorm strategies and resources that can address an adaptive challenge. An adaptive challenge is one that involves changing the values, beliefs, and actions of people who are part of a complex system. Adaptive challenges differ from technical challenges, which have clear answers. Think of a technical challenge as something an expert can jump in and solve, like if a school website isn't working. By contrast, adaptive challenges require leaders to work with and learn from the various people involved in the system. Building inclusive schools is an adaptive challenge because it requires coordination from many people involved in school systems, including administrators, teachers, families, and community

¹ The Community Conversation model is based on a project of the Natural Supports Project, the University of Wisconsin-Madison Waisman Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, and Tennessee Works, a collaboration supported by the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities.

members. Community Conversations bring together natural community partners: members of the community who are involved in the systems that impact young people. This might include families, educators, business owners, representatives of community-based organizations, staff members of state and local agencies, and other community members.

Community Conversations typically last two hours. They are a fun, engaging way to identify new opportunities and partners for creating welcoming, equitable, and inclusive schools and communities where everyone belongs.

The primary objectives of a Community Conversation are to:

- 1. Identify natural community partners:** Engaging and involving people who have an interest in and are most impacted by an issue is essential to identify what needs to be done differently.
- 2. Engage the community:** Bringing together diverse people, organizations, and community partners provides an opportunity to build new relationships and strengthen discussions.
- 3. Build a shared understanding of an issue impacting the community:** To collaborate effectively and efficiently, community members need to understand the work ahead.
- 4. Find new partners:** Sharing information about an issue in your school and community and work that may already be happening to address it creates opportunities and connections.
- 5. Encourage further dialogue and develop opportunities for collaboration:** Creating pathways for people to contribute and building capacity to work together differently on an issue resulting in long-lasting systemic change.

Why Engage Families and Communities?

Families and communities hold great wisdom, cultural strengths, connections, and resources. Their input and involvement should inform decision-making and build the relationships and understanding needed for work to address an issue impacting a school community to be successful. Engaging families and community members will help identify:

- People's aspirations on an issue impacting students or the school community
- People's concerns about an issue impacting students or the school community
- How people think and talk about an issue in relation to the community
- What changes are needed
- What people believe can be done and who they can trust to take action

How Will Input From Community Conversations Be Used?

Community Conversations are designed to engage families, educators, school leaders, and community members; invite new people into the conversation; and build the relationships necessary to work on a challenge facing the community and flourish. Feedback and ideas discussed in Community Conversations help local education agencies and their communities identify what actions to take and which issues to consider as they work on an issue impacting their students and/ or school community.

Foundations of a Community Conversation

The goal of Community Conversations is to help solve an adaptive challenge impacting our school communities. That means Community Conversations need to move communities toward changing the beliefs, and actions of people who are part of the complex education system. To do this effectively, it is important to understand several foundational elements that the Community Conversation was built on. These are key ideas and approaches that help communities think about adaptive challenges and work together to make lasting change.

Before you host your own Community Conversation, spend time learning about these four foundational elements:

- Understanding systems
- Engaging natural community partners
- Creating a space of belonging
- Considering access and inclusion

Understanding Systems

Education is a complex social system that involves many people and organizations. Understanding the systems in our schools and communities, and how to effect change in those systems, is essential for moving toward equity, access, and inclusion.

Before hosting a Community Conversation or addressing adaptive challenges, we want to think about three parts of a system: people, relationships, and rules and structures.

- **People exist in systems.** They are impacted by systems and also affect how systems function.
- **Relationships in a system help maintain existing behaviors, or the status quo.** By understanding what relationships currently exist, we can begin to consider what relationships need to be created or reinforced to change behaviors to be more equitable and inclusive.
- **Rules and structures bind the system to its current outcomes.** When we understand the existing rules and structures, we can modify them to result in more equitable outcomes.

In every system, these parts align to produce certain outcomes. Understanding each part of the system we want to change will help ensure that the changes we make are equitable, include all the people who will be impacted, and will last for a long time.



Watch “The Systems Mapping Training Module” for more guidance on taking a system approach to a problem and thinking about schools and communities as systems:
<https://www.fecinclusion.org/facilitator-video-modules.html>

Engaging Natural Community Partners

Communities are made up of many interconnected systems, some small and some large. These include families, neighborhoods, organizations, classrooms, schools, and local education agencies. Each system is made up of natural community partners: people who have an interest in or are impacted by an issue in the system.

The systems within communities are diverse, as are the people, relationships, structures, and rules in each one. Given this diversity, building a system where each person feels included requires intentional engagement and conversation. This means that schools that commit to equity, inclusion, and belonging for every student must listen to and work with the natural community partners involved in the systems that impact young people. All young people benefit when the natural community partners focus on shared goals and work together in a coordinated and responsive way.

NATURAL COMMUNITY PARTNERS IMPACT POSITIVE STUDENT OUTCOMES

Healthy relationships with

- Peers
- Adults
- Parents/caregivers

School and life success

- Engaged and supported socially, emotionally, and academically
- Positive self-identity
- High expectations for every young person

Active community involvement

- Interconnected systems (no gaps)
- Coordinated and responsive
- Shared responsibility and ownership



Image description: A graphic representation of the natural community partners that intersect with the lives of young people and impact positive student outcomes. The partners include parents and families, schools, community-based organizations, agencies, and businesses.

Creating a Space of Belonging

When communities gather to solve a problem, no matter the size or scope, it is important to create an accessible and inclusive environment where people can build relationships and work better together. Any time people with different perspectives come together, they can experience conflict or stress, even when they agree on a shared goal. Building an environment where people feel a sense of belonging can decrease stress and make it easier for everyone to participate fully.

We can create a space of belonging using a process modeled on the Gracious Space approach, developed by the Center for Ethical Leadership. Gracious Space is a highly effective way to foster authentic dialogue and engage a diverse group in deep listening and shared learning in times of complexity and change. The Center for Ethical Leadership defines Gracious Space as “a spirit and a setting where we invite the stranger and embrace learning in public.”²

Ensuring that our schools and communities are spaces of belonging demands that we work together in different ways. Using Gracious Space in a Community Conversation centers relationship building and ensures we value:

- **Building trust.** We each have something to learn from one another. No two individuals have the same experiences or life story. Taking time to listen to and learn from others allows us to build trust as we tackle complicated challenges.
- **Having a space to listen.** In a space of belonging, we invite people to listen deeply, ask questions, and learn from one another. This challenges us to consider other perspectives and to improve our ability to empathize and understand the complexities of a problem.
- **Promoting the common good.** When we hear perspectives other than our own, we better understand the status quo that upholds the system and outcomes that we seek to change. Without diverse perspectives, we are likely to address a problem with gaps in our understanding. The collective wisdom of diverse people with different perspectives will lead to a better solution anchored in equity and fairness.

We create a Gracious Space that allows us to build trust and learn from one another when we engage in conversations that highlight inquiry, reflection, and listening. To foster these kinds of conversations, the Community Conversation uses three discussion questions. Each question was designed to be clean and open, meaning it does not influence or mislead participants and allows for multiple different responses. The resulting dialogue provides opportunities for participants to listen deeply to one another and build trust in a group.



Watch the “Introducing Gracious Space” training module for an overview of Gracious Space and how the concepts have been incorporated throughout this toolkit: <https://www.fecinclusion.org/facilitator-video-modules.html>

² Center for Ethical Leadership. (n.d.) Gracious space. <http://www.ethicalleadership.org/gracious-space.html>

MORE RESOURCES ABOUT GRACIOUS SPACE



- Hughes, P. M., & Grace, B. (2010). Gracious space: A practical guide for working better together.
- The Center for Ethical Leadership: <https://www.ethicalleadership.org/>

Designing for Access and Inclusion

Each choice made while planning a Community Conversation matters for the event to be accessible, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of the community.

The most important initial choice is who will be on the planning team. Identify who in the community is not typically heard from. Use the planning of the event as an opportunity to build new relationships and partnerships. Planning teams are more likely to be aware of possible barriers to meaningful engagement and participation if they include individuals who hold relationships with the community members they want to engage.

Creating spaces that are welcoming, accessible, and offer all participants a sense of belonging is critical for the Community Conversation. The Accessibility Checklist and Language Access Resources provide detailed considerations for physical space, interpretation, translation, accommodations, and support needed for all participants to meaningfully participate.



Watch the “Accessible and Inclusive Events and Trainings” training module to consider which aspects of accessibility and inclusion will be help ensure that all members of the community feel welcome at your Community Conversation: <https://www.fecinclusion.org/facilitator-video-modules.html>

Community Conversation Planning Guide

Roles and Responsibilities

Every Community Conversation has four main roles: planning team, facilitator, table host, and participant.

PLANNING TEAM

A Community Conversation provides an opportunity for a team of diverse individuals to work together, each bringing knowledge, skills, and resources to plan an accessible, engaging, and asset-focused event. The planning team organizes the meeting, finds the venue, and invites a group of people to share their values, experiences, and ideas. The planning team also identifies table hosts, supports the harvest of ideas, and follows up with event participants.

Before the event, the planning team will also map the system in their school, district, or community. This will provide insight into who in the community is impacted by an issue, as well as the relationships that currently exist in the system and those that need to be created. System mapping will help the team ensure that the people who need to be part of the work to advance change on an issue are included in the conversation.

FACILITATOR

The facilitator runs the event. They remain neutral and refrain from sharing their personal views. The facilitator welcomes attendees, explains the process, keeps track of time, moves the dialogue along, and facilitates the harvest at the end of the event. During the harvest, the facilitator may record all the ideas shared, or someone else can be asked to take notes. The facilitator can be a member of the planning team.

TIP FOR FACILITATING



Think of facilitating as simply guiding participants through a process. You can build trust and help participants feel safe enough to learn together and engage honestly by:

- Remaining neutral
- Orienting your body and attention toward the person who is speaking
- Acknowledging participants so they know they have been heard
- Asking clarifying questions
- Summarizing key points heard
- Reframing issues as needed

TABLE HOST

The table hosts stay at a table to facilitate small group discussions. They are responsible for taking notes on the conversation, encouraging everyone to share, and keeping the conversation on topic and focused on building relationships and solutions.

PARTICIPANT

Participants are at a Community Conversation to share their knowledge, experience, lived reality, and opinions. Participants should be willing to follow community agreements set by the facilitators and to engage in the process.

Identifying Who to Invite

Community Conversations are a powerful way to get to know different parts of your community and learn from people you usually don't hear from. System mapping is a process that can help you identify different community partners to invite.

By thinking about your community as a system and exploring that system and the different systems that intersect with it, you will identify more and different people to engage. System mapping will also help you examine the rules, structures, and relationships that need to be established or changed to support moving schools to be more equitable and inclusive. At its core, system mapping helps you to identify the resources and relationships that are necessary for meaningful systems changes to take root and flourish. Use the System Mapping Tool to identify the key voices to include in your Community Conversation.

After you identify individuals and organizations you want to invite, think about the individuals or groups who could help you reach those people. Ask yourself, "Who knows the organizations or people we want to invite?"

It is important to extend personal invitations to people and organizations who may not readily see their connection to the issue you are trying to address. As individuals commit to attending, revisit your System Mapping Tool to see which voices are still missing. Make every effort to hear from people in the community who you don't typically hear from.

A sample invitation is included. If you co-host your Community Conversation with other key partners, try to include their logos on the invitation. Consider using an electronic invitation platform to track confirmed attendees.

Choosing a Date, Time, and Venue

One of the most important factors in planning the Community Conversation is choosing a date and time that works for the people you want to attend. That may be an evening or a weekend. Be sure to choose a date that does not conflict with any cultural holidays or other events. Most local education agencies and schools have calendars you can check for important holidays and events.

OSPI Common Religious and U.S. Public Holiday Calendars



Community Conversations are more engaging when the location and setup are inviting, accessible, and functional. Venues do not need to be expensive; libraries and community centers are often free or charge a reasonable rate. When choosing a space, consider the following factors:

- Is the location well known in the community?
- Does the space feel safe and comfortable for participants?
- Is it near public transportation?
- Is the space accessible?
- Does the space allow you to offer child care?

TIPS FOR EXPANDING ATTENDANCE



- Invite people personally and encourage others on the planning team to do the same
- Contact people on your email lists or via social media
- Set clear expectations in the invitation
- Ask if people prefer to be contacted through email or text for follow-up communication
- Send a reminder email or text to attendees one week before and then again one day before
- When possible, try to invite people at least six weeks before the event

Choosing a Facilitator

A Community Conversation facilitator does not need to be an expert on the topic of discussion. They are there to guide the conversation, ensure all voices are heard, honor the diversity of perspectives, and capture what is shared. Choose someone who is comfortable presenting and has experience guiding large group conversations.

Choosing Table Hosts

As your list of confirmed attendees grows, think about who you could ask to be a table host. Prioritize people who hold relationships in the community and who may have experience guiding small group conversations.

Setting up the Space

GREETING TABLE

Help every participant feel included as they arrive by greeting them with a personal welcome, having a sign-in sheet, and introducing them to other participants in the room.

TABLE SIZE

Most venues come with tables and chairs. Ideally the tables will be round, but rectangular tables work, too. Aim to have four to six people per table (no more than eight). The goal is to have enough people for a meaningful discussion, but not so many that everyone does not have time to share or feel comfortable speaking.

LAYOUT

Tables and chairs should have enough space between them so that people can move around easily, including people who use mobility devices. Participants should be able to easily access food and restrooms. They should also be able to hear individuals at their table without being too distracted by conversations at neighboring tables. You can use the Accessibility Checklist to set up your space.

TIP



Making your event accessible will benefit everyone and minimize the need for special accommodations. By planning for accessibility, you make sure everyone:

- Feels welcome
- Can get to and navigate within the venue to fully engage in the event
- Can use equipment and software, if holding a virtual event

DECORATING

Consider bringing a couple of plants from home to add some greenery to the space. Use chart paper on tables and scatter colorful Post-it notes and markers so that people can draw and take notes. Keep things simple at the tables so people have space to write things down, draw pictures, and eat snacks.

FOOD

When you gather people together, you should always have food. When deciding what to provide, consider the time of day, how many people are coming, what matters to families in your community, and whether your venue has any limitations around food. You can provide snacks, baked goods and beverages, or a simple meal. Consider providing options for people with food intolerances and allergies. Be sure food and beverages are set up before people begin to arrive.

CHILD CARE

Some people may only be able to participate in the Community Conversation if they can bring their children. Offering child care and/or allowing participants to have their children with them will make the event more inclusive. You may be able to work with partners in your community to offer child care. The Accessibility Checklist provides additional details.

Community Conversation Facilitator Guide

Effective facilitation is essential to the success of a Community Conversation. A facilitator frames the importance of the event, guides participants through the process, and harvests the ideas, connections, and themes.

The facilitator should remain neutral and listen to understand participants' points of view. When participants and table hosts share out, the facilitator will reflect back clearly what they said so that participants know they were heard. Reflecting what was shared back to the group helps identify patterns and insights from the conversation. When a facilitator shows they are listening and people feel heard, they build trust.

Event Protocol and Agenda

An event protocol is the road map for the Community Conversation. The agenda gives participants a clear understanding of how the conversation will go and what to expect. To respect everyone's time, a Community Conversation should always begin and end on time.

Ideally, Community Conversations should be held in person to strengthen connections and relationships. If in-person gatherings are not possible, use the Community Conversation Virtual Event Protocol and Agenda.

Group Agreements

Group agreements are a useful tool to make sure participants have a common understanding of how interactions will take place during the Community Conversation. Group agreements will help people focus on building relationships, listening, and learning from other perspectives. They also give the facilitator something to refer back to in case any conflict arises.

At the beginning of the event, give participants time to review the agreements and ask the group to accept them. You can start by proposing the set of agreements below, which are also available as a table tent. Ask everyone to follow the group agreements during your time together.

SUGGESTED GROUP AGREEMENTS

1. Be inclusive, allowing everyone to share.
2. Share from your own perspective using "I" statements.
3. Listen to build understanding and learn from others.
4. Practice self-care. Attend to your personal needs.
5. Respect confidentiality. Personal information that is shared should remain in the meeting room.



6. Enjoy the time together!

Diamond Pattern of Interaction

The Community Conversation offers opportunities to interact and engage in multiple ways, which makes participation accessible to people. The facilitator will guide participants through a process that includes individual reflection, small and large group discussions, and integration of learning. This process is modeled after the Diamond Pattern of Interaction, “a sequence of individual work, followed by structured sharing, ending with an opportunity for individual integration of new ideas.”³ By using this process, participants have the opportunity to share their ideas and reflections verbally, in writing, and through drawing.

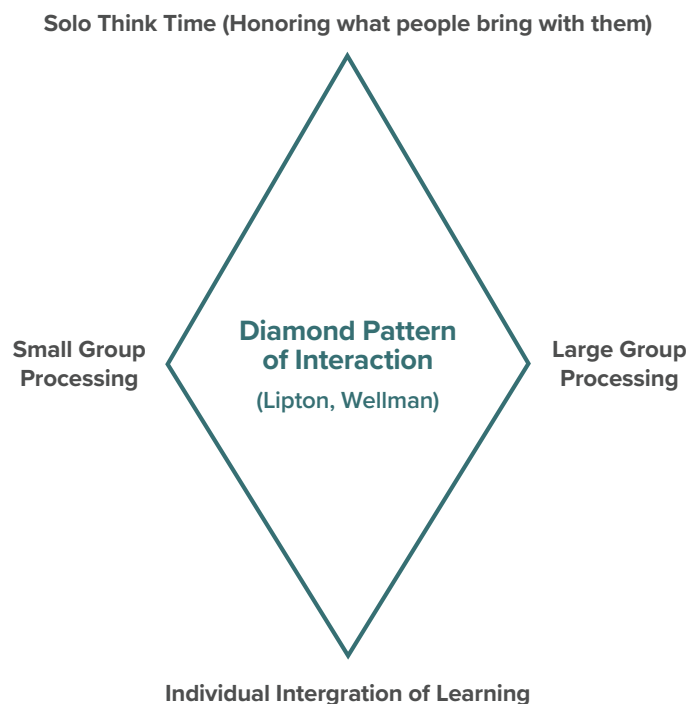


Image description: A graphic representation of the Diamond Pattern of Interaction by Lipton and Wellman. The interactions include solo think time, small group processing, large group processing, and individual integration of learning.

Clean and Open Discussion Questions

Clean and open questions are not leading, meaning they do not reflect the opinions of the planning team. They cannot be answered by a simple “yes” or “no.” Instead, they invite people to think and

³ Wellman, B. & Lipton, L. (2017). Data-driven dialogue: A facilitator’s guide to collaborative inquiry. MiraVia, LLC.

reflect on their answers, allowing multiple perspectives to be shared. Clean and open questions allow participants to see potential in the system rather than focusing on the problems.

Clean and open have been developed for your Community Conversation. One is for Gracious Space and the others are for group discussions. These questions were intentionally designed to provide opportunities for learning rather than simply gathering information. They can help you develop a broader, more comprehensive understanding of what is important to your community and how to achieve more equitable outcomes.

SLIDE DECK

The Community Conversation slide deck is included. Additional slides can be added to fit the event and community as appropriate. Keep in mind that adding slides will add time to the event.

HARVESTING, EVALUATION, AND CLOSING

During the last portion of the event, the facilitator will reflect on what was heard and elevate key ideas and concerns. This is called harvesting. Facilitators can begin the harvest by making connections with statements like:

- “It sounds like there was a lot of great discussion. Let’s think about next steps we can take as a community.”
- “What did you hear today that resonates with you?”
- “What ideas did you hear that we can work together and take action on?”
- As ideas and next steps are discussed, make sure the facilitator or another person takes notes.

The facilitator is also responsible for bringing the conversation to a close at the end of the harvest. Facilitators should ask participants to fill out the Ticket Out the Door. Let participants know that within two to three weeks they will receive follow-up communication with a summary of themes and next steps. Ask participants to leave all notes, drawings, and evaluation forms on the table. Facilitators and members of the planning team should collect those items from each table to further harvest ideas from the event.

TIP

Consider taking pictures of any drawings participants make. When you send a follow-up communication summarizing the event, you can include some pictures to illustrate what ideas participants shared.

Image description: A sample drawing from *The Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging Conference, September 2018*. The drawing depicts a school building listing the elements of an inclusive school community including student centered, engaging and informing, and offering different ways to communicate with families.



After the Community Conversation

Community Conversations can build excitement around an issue impacting the school community and the importance of working together to make changes. Some people will feel excited and ready to take action, while others may feel overwhelmed about the work that lies ahead. After the event, bring the planning team back together to review all the notes and drawings and reflect on what was shared. Use the Harvest Tool to identify action steps, strategies, partners, and other items needed to act on ideas from the conversation.

The Harvest Tool will also help to organize what to share in followp communication. The event summary should include ideas and information harvested from the conversations as well as the identified next steps. Share the summary with all participants, people who were interested but unable to attend, school and district leaders, the school board, parks and recreation departments, city council, and all other groups who would be interested in the community's perspective. Feel free to include pictures of drawings or quotes from the event. You want to show all the great work that happened at your Community Conversation!

The planning team should also evaluate how the event went. Reflect on the planning process and the event itself using the Reflection on Your Community Conversation form.

Taking Action

Taking action on issues identified in the Community Conversation shows families and community members that their voices were heard and that their feedback matters. Aim to act on two or three ideas or next steps using strategies and partners outlined in the Harvest Tool.

Don't be surprised if people want to come together again. Community Conversations should continue. Once you begin to build relationships, you want to nurture and strengthen them. We are stronger when our families, schools, and community work together!

Final Thoughts

Changing systems to be equitable and inclusive is not easy and cannot be done alone. Meaningful and lasting change on an issue impacting a school community requires us to understand the people, relationships, rules, and structures within a system that need to change and who needs to be a part of that work. Families bring strong assets, cultural strengths, and connections to our schools and communities. They must be seen and valued as essential partners.

The Community Conversation Toolkit is not exhaustive, and every community is at a different place in addressing barriers to success and belonging for their students. Additional resources that may help you advance this work in your own community appear in the next section.

The most important thing is to take the first step and hold a Community Conversation on an issue impacting your school community. We are confident that it will be a rewarding experience for you and everyone who attends. As you begin to build connections with your community, you will find the people and resources needed to make lasting change.

We celebrate your commitment to the success and belonging of each and every student in your school community and know that many others in your community will appreciate and support your efforts.

Key Terms

The terms below are ideas that are essential to Community Conversations. Some terms have different meanings in different contexts and communities. We are not trying to give a universal definition of any term. Instead, we want to give more context to help you understand why each idea is important for a successful Community Conversation.

Access: Intentional design of the space, setting, materials, and events that allows more meaningful engagement of people of diverse backgrounds, abilities, and experiences. Access ensures that people will have what they need to attend and participate in the event.

Adaptive challenge: A challenge that involves changing the values, beliefs, and actions of people who are part of a complex system.

Community Conversation: An event that brings diverse community members together to collectively listen, learn, and brainstorm strategies and resources that can address an adaptive challenge.

Equity: Every family brings strong assets, cultural strengths, and connections to our schools and communities. Equity ensures that families who are impacted by something, but may not have power/influence or typically be engaged, are included in decision-making to determine what would be in their best interest. Equity has a focus on eliminating barriers to engagement, involvement, and participation.

Gracious Space: An approach developed by the Center for Ethical Leadership that allows communities to come together to build trust, relationships, and shared understandings that are needed to enact change.

Inclusion: There is no one consistent definition for inclusion; however, there are four key elements of inclusion that communities should adhere to:

- See every student as competent, capable, and a valued learner in general education classrooms
- Build and uphold an equitable and inclusive culture across the entire school and community
- Ensure meaningful access to, and involvement in, academic and social opportunities with additional support as needed
- Welcome every student and family in all aspects of school life so they feel a deep sense of belonging

Natural community partners: The people, businesses, and organizations that are involved in systems that impact young people and can be convened to work together to support positive youth outcomes.

Systems thinking: A set of habits and practices based in the belief that the parts of a system are best understood in the context of their relationships with each other, and with other systems, rather than in isolation.

Resources

Center for Ethical Leadership. (n.d.) Gracious space. <http://www.ethicalleadership.org/gracious-space.html>

City of Bellevue Washington. (n.d.) Universal design: Best practices for accessibility in trainings, meetings and events. https://bellevuewa.gov/sites/default/files/media/pdf_document/2020/Universal%20Design%20Booklet.pdf

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