



Inclusion Takes A Community

A companion document for the Community Conversation Toolkit Guide

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ROOTS OF
INCLUSION

Acknowledgment

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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.

Introduction

Young people achieve their best in equitable and inclusive schools where they can participate fully and bring the complex experiences, abilities, identities, cultural values, and languages that make them who they are. When schools are equitable and inclusive, young people develop individual skills and achievements and also learn from others who bring abilities, perspectives, and experiences different from their own. When students learn together, all have improved educational, social, and employment outcomes.

Defining Inclusion

We often search for a standard definition when discussing inclusion in our schools. However, inclusion means different things to different people and communities. That is why communities must come together to build a shared understanding of what they want inclusion to look, sound, and feel like in their schools.

While building a shared definition, communities should hold to four critical elements of inclusion:

- 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

Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) and the Inclusionary Practices Technical Assistance Network (IPTN) use the definition of inclusion below. We invite you to use this definition as a starting point for considering inclusion in your community.

Inclusion is the belief that all students have a right to meaningfully participate in the general education setting, both academically and socially. Inclusion is realized when all students, regardless of their designation to receive special education services, are provided with targeted services, supports, and accommodations, allowing them to learn in the general education classroom, interact with peers, and engage the core curriculum. Inclusive instruction rebukes the problematic perspective that students receiving special education services need to 'fit in' or 'earn their way' into general education classes. The belief that general education instruction is not malleable and that students should be making adaptations to be included in the general education setting has contributed to the continuation of two parallel systems of education in which students receiving special education services are marginalized and devalued because of their environmental segregation.

Inclusionary Practices in Washington Schools

Research tells us that everyone learns more when children with and without disabilities are fully included in our schools and classrooms. Despite the evidence, full inclusion for students with disabilities in Washington school settings remains low.

In 2019, the Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) established the Inclusionary Practices Professional Development Project (IPP) to increase students with disabilities' inclusion in general education classrooms and learning experiences. In 2023, the work expanded to become a broader technical assistance and training project called the Inclusionary Practices Technical Assistance Network (IPTN). The network includes OSPI, state agencies, and community-based organizations, all working with local education agencies across Washington state to make schools more equitable and inclusive.

The Inclusion Community Conversation

Families bring valuable information and experiences that help schools center students with disabilities and their families, especially students of color and groups that have traditionally been denied a voice in decision-making. When diverse families, community members, and educators come together to share their perspectives and learn from each other, communities can transform their schools to be more equitable and inclusive.

The Inclusion Community Conversation is a way for families, educators, and community members to listen to and learn from each other and build a shared understanding of inclusion. Gathering diverse perspectives from people in your school community allows you to more fully understand the social, structural, environmental, and cultural contexts that impact inclusion. The result will help you to identify what can be done differently to increase the inclusion of students with disabilities and create a thriving school community where every student has what they need to learn and succeed.

The Inclusion Community Conversation Toolkit guides users to:

- Explore why inclusion matters
- Build a shared understanding of what inclusion means to their community
- Learn about inclusive practices work in their school community
- Generate ideas for eliminating barriers to inclusion

What is in This Toolkit?

This toolkit is a practical guide for families, educators, and community leaders who want to build a shared understanding of inclusion and what is needed to improve relationships and address barriers to inclusion in their schools. It describes the essential components of a Community Conversation and includes detailed planning tools and resources for both in-person and virtual events, including:

- Community Conversation Toolkit Guide
- Community Conversation Planning Tool
- Accessibility Checklist
- Language Access Resources
- Working Effectively with Interpreters
- System Mapping Tool
- Sample Invitation
- Event Protocol and Agenda
- Virtual Event Protocol and Agenda
- Sign-In Sheet
- Group Agreements Table Tent
- Table Host Guidelines
- Community Conversation Slide Deck
- Harvest Tool
- Ticket Out the Door Evaluation Tool
- Reflection on the Community Conversation

Key Takeaways

Intentional work to improve belonging matters and helps everyone in your community feel better connected and empowered to lead change together. As you begin planning for your Belonging Community Conversation, remember:

- Every Community Conversation is an opportunity to grow connections and increase knowledge and understanding of your community.
- Lead with curiosity. Gathering people's perspectives instead of guessing at them helps you better understand what is needed.
- Every individual can help improve belonging for others and, while doing so, strengthen their own belonging, too.
- With belonging, even small steps matter as you work on more significant systemic issues.
- Bridges of connection and relationships are powerful tools to support a school community's equity and inclusion work.
- Relationships with your community help assess whether changes successfully move you closer to your goal of belonging.

Resources

Sweeden, B., Cooney, M., Moss, C., & Carter, E. W. (2011). *Launching inclusive efforts through community conversations: A practical guide for families, services providers, and communities*. Waisman Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison.