

*"Shaping our community through the voices of ALL of our students!"*

# Community Conversations

## A Toolkit for a Student-Led Event



**A resource guide based on “Launching Inclusive Efforts Through Community Conversations” written by Beth Swdeen, Molly Cooney, Colleen Moss and Erik W. Carter**  
*A publication of the Natural Supports Project and the Waisman Center’s University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities*

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**Autism Center at Grand Valley State University**  
**[www.gvsu.edu/autismcenter](http://www.gvsu.edu/autismcenter)**



**“I’ve learned that it’s not about telling kids what to do, it’s about knowing what’s going on in their lives. It’s about bonding with them and having fun.”**

**-4th grade peer**





# Shaping the Community Through the Voices of All of Our Students

**What is a “community conversation”?** Erik Carter—a Professor of Special Education at Vanderbilt University—describes a community conversation as “a way to bring a diverse set of community members together to collectively brainstorm strategies and resources that can be used to address a challenge facing the community.” Traditionally, community conversations engage adults. However, in April 2018, Berrien Regional Education Service Agency’s (Berrien RESA) Peer-to-Peer program, with the help of the Statewide Autism Resources & Training (START) team, flipped the traditional model and hosted a conversation where students took the lead. Students are uniquely positioned to understand the social and learning cultures within their schools, yet rarely are they given opportunities to spearhead change initiatives.

As part of Autism Awareness Month, Berrien RESA’s Peer-to-Peer program hosted its first Community Conversation which included over 150 students, parents, school leaders, board members and business representatives during the school day. The task was to brainstorm solutions to two questions that were developed by LINK students (students of all abilities who participate in the Berrien County Peer-to-Peer program). The questions were:

1. How can we increase opportunities for students with disabilities to participate in social events, recreational activities and gain access to employment in Berrien County?
2. What specifically can I do to increase opportunities for students with disabilities to participate in social events, recreational activities and gain access to employment in Berrien County?

The students, with help from their school district’s Peer-to-Peer program facilitators, were responsible for coordinating the event. They were asked to use their own social capital to identify and invite participants, decorate and set up the meeting space, participate in media interviews and contribute to the conversations the day of the event. Not only did the experience give ALL students a voice, the event contributed to strengthening their planning, organizational and leadership skills as well.

During the conversation, students (from elementary through high school) shared solutions they felt would support a more inclusive community. For many students, it was the first time that they felt their ideas were heard by school leadership, community members, fellow students and others. Students felt empowered when realizing that “speaking out” about change, can move systems in a direction to shape the community in which they reside.

“We had a chance to learn from adults that we don’t really know and they had a chance to learn from us. They could hear our side of the story and understand what it is like to need (and have) support available in the community” -Berrien County Peer-to-Peer student

For Berrien County, hosting a student-led community conversation proved to be a wonderful way to give students a voice-and the data proves that everyone had a lot to say! Through the conversation, 473 suggestions were identified as potential answers to the two questions asked. From those 473 suggestions, six ideas were identified as being actionable solutions. Based on the feedback received using follow-up surveys after the event, a student-led action committee has been formed with the goal of further developing the solutions. The committee plans to meet over course of school year 2018/19 to move from ideas to action.

*Peer to Peer support involves general education peers who model typical academic and social behavior in educational environments throughout the school day. Peers provide support for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in promoting independence and socialization skill development. Teaching peers to interact with, and support, their peers with ASD within natural environments leads to new skills, and a sense of belonging for all students that transcends school walls and changes communities.*

# STUDENT LED COMMUNITY CONVERSATION

## HERE'S THE DATA (APRIL 2018):

### 11 DISTRICTS MANY STUDENT VOICES

85% of Berrien RESA's districts were represented during the Community Conversation. Of the 11 districts present, 9 sent teams of students.



### COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT 21 PARTNERS

Agency and business leaders from 21 different organizations joined students during the conversation.



### 473 IDEAS GENERATED

Through open and inviting brainstorming session, 473 ideas were shared by students and adults alike.



### ACTION PLAN 6 NEXT STEPS

From the 473 ideas collected, 6 ideas will become actionable goals that will be addressed by a student-led committee over the school year.



### #BERRIENCONVERSATIONS

Learn more by visiting [www.berrienresa.org](http://www.berrienresa.org)



This document was created as a resource tool for educators by Berrien RESA's Supervisor of Communication, Karen Heath, and Autism Spectrum Disorder Consultant, Kathy Hickok along with Margie Mayberry, START Project Consultant for Grand Valley State University. The document is reflective of their personal experience hosting a student-led Community Conversation. It reflects some adaptations from the approach described by Erik Carter and his team.

All materials are available for public use.

# Getting Started

## Step 1

*Hosting a student-led Community Conversation is a wonderful way to empower students to be change agents in their school communities. When planning the event, adult peers should serve as guides. Students should be making most of the decisions and leading the experience. Use the event as a way to help students develop leadership skills which may include delegating, coaching, and encouraging their peers as well as adults who may be serving on various committees. It is important to include all students (students with Individual Education Programs and LINK students). Everyone will have something to contribute.*

### Helpful tool:

To learn more about the basics of a Community Conversation, check out the [University Center for Excellence in Development Disabilities](https://ucedd.waisman.wisc.edu/products/) (<https://ucedd.waisman.wisc.edu/products/>)



### 8-9 months prior to event

## Checklist

- Secure funding through your START (RCN) Regional Collaborative Network; this initiative may be included as part of the overall contract application submitted to START by your RCN. The budget allocated for the Berrien Student Led Community Conversation was \$500.
- Form a committee that includes same age peers, teachers and other advising adults.
- Provide meeting opportunities where students are able to openly share collectively what is and is not working in their school and communities to include and support their peers with disabilities. This conversation will help students develop their community question (s).
- Assign responsibilities (organizer, facilitator, table host and participants.) Make sure peers are included. Students should not only help plan all aspects of the event, but should also be free to participate in the community conversation itself.

## Tips:

- Set aside dollars in your decoration budget to purchase Peer-to-Peer logo items to help participants remember their experience.
- Contact the START office to reserve the Peer-to-Peer Quilt for your event. The backdrop of the quilt is a powerful display of the statewide impact of the Peer-to-Peer program.
- As a group spend time on crafting your questions. They need to be direct, concise and solution focused.
- Don't be afraid to include students from all grade levels on the committee. All students will have something to contribute to the conversation and the planning of the event.

## Organizing the Event

### Step 2

*When inviting students and school staff to participate in a community conversation, it is critical to think about school schedules. When will students be available? Is it during the school day (morning or afternoon) or after school? How will students get to the venue? Is busing available? Will schools need substitute teachers if staff participate?*

*When choosing a venue, peers should consider selecting a location that is accessible, as well as is inviting. Should the event be at the local movie theater, restaurant, or even at a school gym or auditorium?*

*Students should use this activity as an opportunity to learn how to create a budget. Based on that budget, they should help establish committees for the event (decorations, invitations, media, and food.)*

#### Helpful Tools:

Consider having timers, name tags which can also serve as sign-in sheets, sticky notes and a variety of writing instruments at your event. You may also wish to [create customized documents and templates to organize your event.](https://www.berrienresa.org/UserFiles/Servers/Server_148518/File/Education%20Services/Special%20Education/Community%20Conversations/Student%20Led%20Community%20Conversations%20Helpful%20Tools.pdf)

([https://www.berrienresa.org/UserFiles/Servers/Server\\_148518/File/Education%20Services/Special%20Education/Community%20Conversations/Student%20Led%20Community%20Conversations%20Helpful%20Tools.pdf](https://www.berrienresa.org/UserFiles/Servers/Server_148518/File/Education%20Services/Special%20Education/Community%20Conversations/Student%20Led%20Community%20Conversations%20Helpful%20Tools.pdf))

Don't forget to provide

- [training for your table hosts](https://www.berrienresa.org/UserFiles/Servers/Server_148518/File/Education%20Services/Special%20Education/Community%20Conversations/Student-Led%20Community%20Conversation-Table%20Host%20Training%20Guide.pdf)  
([https://www.berrienresa.org/UserFiles/Servers/Server\\_148518/File/Education%20Services/Special%20Education/Community%20Conversations/Student-Led%20Community%20Conversation-Table%20Host%20Training%20Guide.pdf](https://www.berrienresa.org/UserFiles/Servers/Server_148518/File/Education%20Services/Special%20Education/Community%20Conversations/Student-Led%20Community%20Conversation-Table%20Host%20Training%20Guide.pdf))
- an [introduction for the guests attending](https://www.berrienresa.org/UserFiles/Servers/Server_148518/File/Education%20Services/Special%20Education/Community%20Conversations/Student-Led%20Community%20Conversation%20Introductory%20Presentation.pdf) your event  
([https://www.berrienresa.org/UserFiles/Servers/Server\\_148518/File/Education%20Services/Special%20Education/Community%20Conversations/Student-Led%20Community%20Conversation%20Introductory%20Presentation.pdf](https://www.berrienresa.org/UserFiles/Servers/Server_148518/File/Education%20Services/Special%20Education/Community%20Conversations/Student-Led%20Community%20Conversation%20Introductory%20Presentation.pdf))
- follow-up surveys to help plan your next steps

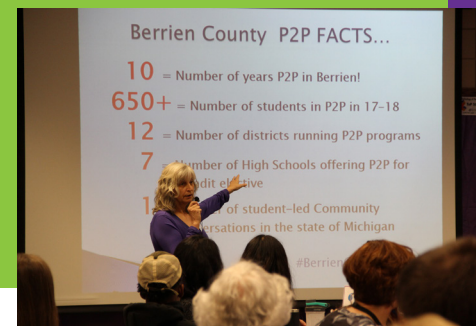
#### 6 months prior to event

### Checklist

- Select a date, time and location. Pay appropriate deposits, if necessary.
- Outline a seating chart that ensures at least 2-3 students are at every table per rotation. It may also be helpful to indicate where guests should go in their rotations on their name tags. This may be done by assigning table numbers, colors or mascots.
- Include all Peer-to-Peer programs in the county in helping plan the event. District Peer-to-Peer program facilitators (adults) make excellent committee members as well as table hosts and interviewees!

### Tips:

- When selecting a date for your event, think about student testing windows, school breaks and holidays, and celebrations (Autism Awareness Month).
- Barriers should not stand in your way. Be creative in how you organize your event. Think about students' needs first—they will be the beneficiaries of the conversation; let them lead the way.
- Consider using some of your budget to purchase breakfast and/or lunch for students who may be using meal times to participate in the conversation.
- Identify a “master of ceremonies” for your conversation. The M.C. may want to show a presentation at the beginning of the event as well as provide instructions and background information for participants.



# Marketing and Invitations

## Step 3

*The date has been set now for the invitations! Encourage the student-led invitation committee to brainstorm all the different ways they can invite guests to attend the event. Community flyers, postcards in grocery bags, marquee advertisements and social media posts are just a few ways to get the word out.*

*The invitation should be created in a format that is accessible to individuals of all abilities. In an effort to save time and money, consider offering only electronic invitations to individuals. (Save the printing resources for posters that can be hung in store fronts that will attract the attention of many people instead of just one person.)*

*Students should be ready to talk about the event with their friends as well as adults they may see in their community. Ask them to practice sharing the details of the event and remind them how guests should confirm their attendance. It is important to provide a website or central information hub where students can direct people for additional information.*

### 3 months prior to event

#### Checklist

- Create an invitation and determine who should be on the guest list.
- Six weeks prior to the event, begin posting flyers and distributing postcards throughout the community.
- Start building the seating chart using the outline created a few months earlier.
- Start printing materials needed at the tables as well as creating name tags.
- The decoration committee should determine how to decorate the venue and begin purchasing supplies. If customized items are being purchased, be sure to work with vendors to provide artwork and proof approvals with enough time for delivery.
- The food committee should place orders for catering needs and any other snack/meals that are being offered as part or your event.

#### Tips:

- It is important for students to personally invite guests to the event. Invitations based on the students' relationships often result in greater rates of participation. The goal is to also include a diverse array of individuals that represent the communities where they live.
- When inviting students from area school districts, encourage school leaders to view the Community Conversation as an educational investment. What other lessons can be learned from the event?
- It is acceptable to email invitations. Using snail mail will only cause delays in your confirmations of participation. Make a spreadsheet to maintain RSVPs.
- Students and Peer-to-Peer Facilitators should talk about the event with all students groups, teams and clubs. Board members should be invited through local superintendent offices.
- Leave postcards with everyone you meet!
- Consider inviting LINK students from all programs and all grade levels. Everyone has something important to say.

## Working with Media

### Step 4

*In addition to specific guests, invite the media to not only advertise the Community Conversation, but to also cover the event as part of their daily news.*

*Contact your school district communication professional (or your ISD/RESA school communicator) for support and guidance. They will help you draft a marketing plan as well as write a media release and social media posts to help ensure coverage. Often these individuals have established positive relationships with journalists in your media market. They can help you pitch why it is important to share this event in the news so that Community Conversation (and its outcomes) gain maximum exposure.*

*\*Tip: Always follow the media procedures outlined by your district's administrative guidelines.*

*Let the students shine! Allow them to represent their schools on camera. Community Conversations is about making their communities become more accessible to them. This is their story. They need to tell it. Bolster their confidence by practicing interview skills and coach students how to provide professional interviews representative of their school districts.*

### 2 months prior to event

#### Checklist

- Contact your school district's communication professional and develop a marketing plan. Be sure to follow your district' media guidelines and procedures.
- Three to four weeks before the event, create a Facebook event advertising the conversation. Begin to draft and schedule social media posts leading up to the event. Be sure to monitor and respond to online discussions and comments. Make adjustments as needed based on the feedback.
- Two weeks before the event, issue a media release inviting the media and the public to the event. Be sure to include radio, television, newspaper and online news outlets in your distribution list.

#### See the [Helpful Tools](#) packet for:

([https://www.berrienresa.org/UserFiles/Servers/Server\\_148518/File/Education%20Services/Special%20Education/Community%20Conversations/Student%20Led%20Community%20Conversations%20Helpful%20Tools.pdf](https://www.berrienresa.org/UserFiles/Servers/Server_148518/File/Education%20Services/Special%20Education/Community%20Conversations/Student%20Led%20Community%20Conversations%20Helpful%20Tools.pdf))

- Sample marketing plan
- Sample media release
- "The Big 10 Interview Tips"

#### Tips:

- Be sure to work with your assigned school communications professional. If you do not have one on staff, contact your local Intermediate School District for support. You can contact the Michigan School Public Relations Association (MSPRA) for help as well. They can assist school personnel in finding a school communicator that may be able to provide support if there is no one available in your area.
- Assist the media. Help shape the story by providing an outline of what happens during a Community Conversation. Supply reporters with quotes from students, parents, business owners and community leaders that will be in the audience. The quotes should include full names, titles and contact information. Make sure to have permission first!
- Be sure photo releases are provided to all minors. Share these with students prior to the event so that parents/guardians can complete the forms in a timely fashion.
- Consider using social media and online analytic tools to monitor the success of your social media posts.
- Identify parents, students and educators willing to talk to media. Provide coaching to help prepare them for a quality interview (see The Big 10 Interview Tips.)
- During interviews, wear solid colors. This helps the interviewee stand out against most backgrounds.
- Create a hashtag (and register it) specifically for the event.

Step **5**

**Roles During Event**

*Following the steps of a Community Conversation (introduction and background about Peer-to-Peer, two rounds of brainstorming, harvest, and final thoughts/next steps), it is important to recognize student contributions in both the planning of the event and in the level of participation during the conversation. This event offers a unique opportunity for community leaders and business representatives to appreciate the value of students' opinions.*

*Remember, the goal of the conversation is to be positive and to keep the ideas flowing. The planning committee will worry about the details after the event. All ideas are important, even if they are not vocalized but are scribbled on paper.*

**2 months prior to event and during the Conversation**

**Checklist**

- Identify and invite facilitators (event emcees) and table hosts.
- Provide table hosts with written direction a few weeks before the event and meet with the facilitators a few minutes prior to the conversation to explain procedures and how to utilize materials provided. Also provide talking points or give suggestions to help them maintain positive, inclusive and ongoing conversations.
- Students should identify guests that they personally invited and welcome them to the event. LINK students should be encouraged to network with their peers from other school districts to help broaden their peer circles.
- Committee members should be responsible for not only the set-up of the event, but also the clean-up. Be sure to collect ALL materials on the tables, especially the place mats or doodle pads that were provided. In addition to the Harvest, ideas may have been recorded on the paper (and not necessarily shared out loud).

**Tips:**

- Students should not serve as event facilitators. While it is critical for peers to manage other aspects of the event, during the conversation, they should be free to participate and offer ideas.
- Be sure that the assigned facilitators work to engage students (and others) at all times.
- Project a digital timer on a screen in a room to help everyone stay on task.
- Make sure that after the Harvest, commitment cards are shared. In order for the harvested ideas to come to fruition, volunteers and resources may be identified through those cards. This is also a great way to collect direct contact information for future volunteers.





Step  
**6**

# After the Event

Within one-two weeks of the event.

*You did it! Celebrate your success by sharing what was learned during the Community Conversation with everyone involved. Students should thank guests for their participation and let them know their next steps.*

*Remember, they will now be working on those initiatives/projects that were suggested as part of the Harvest portion of the event as well as preparing themselves for their next Community Conversation. The practice of having community conversations should become a natural part of your school district's culture. Administrators should anticipate some follow up meetings regarding the outcomes of the conversation as well as future Community Conversations.*

## Checklist

- Issue a follow-up survey to thank participants and share meeting outcomes. Share survey sample.
- Create a community report that outlines what was shared during the Conversation.
- Begin meeting with planning committee to address the proposed solutions from the Conversation.

## Tips:

- Use your data! During the event, be sure to collect both qualitative and quantitative information that you can use when you report about the event.
- Share the ideas generated during the event with everyone who participated and ask again if they would be interested in supporting future activities. Use this information to create a report that can be shared with the community at large.
- Consider creating leadership certificates for those students who participated to use as portfolio items.
- Post report on website and create a community landing page for ideas as well as a place to volunteer.
- Be mindful of school year end dates when sending out reports and future invitations. You may want to wait until the following school year so that you don't receive bounce-back emails or out of office notifications.



# Resources

## Need Help?

Contact your START leader or

### **Margie Mayberry**

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### **Kathy Hickok**

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## Further Reading

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

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**“It (the Community Conversation) was one of the most powerful events that I have attended at Berrien RESA.”**

**-Berrien RESA Superintendent Dr. Kevin M. Ivers**



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