

Attachment C - Contractor's Proposal 20260333



PROPOSAL SUBMITTED IN RESPONSE TO

State of Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

RFP NO. 2026-08

Inclusionary Practices Technical Assistance Network

November 13, 2025

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Roots of Inclusion

P.O. Box 6784
Bellevue, WA. 98008
www.rootsofinclusion.org
November 13, 2025

Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI)

Attn: Contracts Office
P.O. Box 47200
Olympia, WA 98504-7200

To Whom It May Concern:

Roots of Inclusion is pleased to submit this proposal in response to OSPI RFP No. 2026-08 to support the Inclusionary Practices Technical Assistance Network (IPTN). We are honored to continue and expand our contributions to inclusive education in Washington State, grounded in disability justice, family and community-based leadership, and lived experience.

Please accept this letter as our official submittal and certification of the following:

1. Contact Information

- Organization Name: *Roots of Inclusion*
- UBI Number: 604 328 181
- Federal Tax ID: 83-3154035
- Primary Contact Name: Jennifer Karls
- Title: Co-Founder and Director
- Email: jennifer@rootsofinclusion.org
- Phone: 425-495-5796
- Mailing Address: P.O. Box 6784, Bellevue, WA. 98008

2. Authorized Signatory

I certify that I am authorized to submit this proposal and bind the organization to the terms and conditions outlined in the RFP. Roots of Inclusion understands and agrees to comply with all contractual requirements should we be selected for this engagement.

3. Non-Collusion

I certify that this proposal has been independently prepared and that no collusion with any other proposer has occurred.

4. Acceptance of Terms

Roots of Inclusion acknowledges that the organization will comply with all RFP terms and conditions, including OSPI's standard contractual terms unless exceptions are clearly stated.

We are excited about the opportunity to continue our partnership with OSPI and the IPTN network and look forward to the next phase of this important work.

Sincerely,
Jennifer W. Karls
Co-Founder and Director
Roots of Inclusion
jennifer@rootsofinclusion.org
425-495-5796

EXHIBIT A
CERTIFICATIONS AND ASSURANCES

Bidder must sign and include the full text of this Exhibit A with their proposal.

Bidder makes the following certifications and assurances as a required element of the proposal to which it is attached, understanding that the truthfulness of the facts affirmed here and the continuing compliance with these requirements are conditions precedent to the award or continuation of the related contract(s):

1. Bidder declares that all answers and statements made in the proposal are true and correct.
2. The prices and/or cost data have been determined independently, without consultation, communication, or agreement with others for the purpose of restricting competition. However, Bidder may freely join with other persons or organizations for the purpose of presenting a single proposal.
3. The attached proposal is a firm offer for a period of ninety (90) business days following receipt, and it may be accepted by OSPI without further negotiation (except where obviously required by lack of certainty in key terms) at any time within the ninety (90) business-day period.
4. In preparing this proposal, Bidder has not been assisted by any current or former employee of the state of Washington whose duties relate (or did relate) to this proposal or prospective contract, and who was assisting in other than his or her official, public capacity. (Any exceptions to these assurances are described in full detail on a separate page and attached to this document.)
5. Bidder understands that OSPI will not reimburse Bidder for any costs incurred in the preparation of this proposal. All proposals become the property of OSPI, and Bidder claims no proprietary right to the ideas, writings, items, or samples, unless so stated in this proposal.
6. Unless otherwise required by law, the prices and/or cost data which have been submitted have not been knowingly disclosed by the Bidder and will not knowingly be disclosed by Bidder prior to opening, directly or indirectly, to any other Bidder or to any competitor.
7. Bidder agrees that submission of the attached proposal constitutes acceptance of the solicitation contents and the attached sample contract and general terms and conditions. If there are any exceptions to these terms, Bidder has described those exceptions in detail on the Contract Issues Exhibit.
8. No attempt has been made or will be made by the Bidder to induce any other person or firm to submit or not to submit a proposal for the purpose of restricting competition.
9. Bidder grants OSPI the right to contact references and others, who may have pertinent information regarding the Bidder's prior experience and ability to perform the services contemplated in this procurement.

**EXHIBIT A
CERTIFICATIONS AND ASSURANCES**

10. Bidder acknowledges that if awarded a contract with OSPI, Bidder is required to comply with all applicable state and federal civil rights and other laws. Failure to comply may result in Contract termination. Bidder agrees to submit additional information about its nondiscrimination policies, at any time, if requested by OSPI.

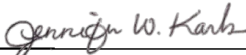
11. Bidder certifies that Bidder has not, within the three-year period immediately preceding the date of release of this competitive solicitation, been determined by a final and binding citation and notice of assessment issued by the Department of Labor and Industries or through a civil judgment to have willfully violated state minimum wage laws (RCW 49.38.082; Chapters 49.46 RCW, 49.48 RCW, or 49.52 RCW).

12. Bidder has not been debarred or otherwise restricted from participating in any public contracts.

13. Bidder certifies that Bidder has not willfully violated Washington State’s wage payment laws within the last three years.

14. Bidder acknowledges its obligation to notify OSPI of any changes in the certifications and assurances above.

I certify under penalty of perjury of the laws of the State of Washington that the foregoing is true and correct.

	11/10/2025	Redmond, WA
Signature of Bidder	Date	Place Signed (City, State)
Jennifer W. Karls	Director	Roots of Inclusion
Printed Name	Title	Organization Name

**EXHIBIT B
QUALIFICATION AFFIRMATIONS**

CONSULTANT INFORMATION	
Bidder:	<u>Roots of Inclusion</u>

MINIMUM QUALIFICATIONS
<p><i>Please check all boxes that apply.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Licensed to do business in the State of Washington. If not licensed, provide a written intent to become licensed in Washington within thirty (30) calendar days of being selected as the Apparent Successful Bidder. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Knowledge of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Washington Administrative Code (WAC) 392-172A, inclusionary practices, and Washington K-12 Learning Standards. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Experience in providing effective, engaging, and culturally relevant professional development, specifically coaching/mentoring, to adult learners at a district, state, or national level. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Experience in convening heterogeneous groups of Washington education professionals and families, to identify growth opportunities, develop a change plan, and implementation of a plan. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Demonstrated successful experience utilizing project management principles and coordinating a budget of at least \$100,000 when successfully implementing complex projects for students/families, education leaders, or educators. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Demonstrated ability to communicate clearly and accurately verbally and in writing, and manage multiple projects, while ensuring timelines are met and goals are achieved. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Evidence of demonstrated impact for increasing inclusionary practices in Washington state including the priority areas described in this RFP. This could include data, outcomes gathered through evaluation, or reports. <p>Consultants who do not meet the minimum qualifications noted above will be rejected as non-responsive and will not receive further consideration. Any proposal that is rejected as non-responsive will not be evaluated or scored.</p>

**EXHIBIT B
QUALIFICATION AFFIRMATIONS**

ADDITIONAL DESIRED QUALIFICATIONS	
<i>Please check all boxes that apply.</i>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Experience in conducting action research and presenting findings.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Examples of successful experience building relationships and communicating effectively with diverse stakeholder groups.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Positive brand awareness within the state (e.g., experience and recognition for positive and valued professional development).
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Demonstrated successful experience utilizing project management principles and coordinating a budget of at least \$250,000 when successfully implementing complex projects for students/families, education leaders, or educators.

I certify under penalty of perjury of the laws of the State of Washington that the foregoing is true and correct.

<u><i>Jennifer W. Karls</i></u>	<u>10/20/2025</u>	<u>Redmond, WA</u>
Signature of Bidder	Date	Place Signed (City, State)
<u>Jennifer W. Karls</u>	<u>Director</u>	<u>Roots of Inclusion</u>
Printed Name	Title	Organization Name

Technical Proposal

Roots of Inclusion (ROI) is a Washington-based nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing educational equity, inclusion, and belonging for students with disabilities and their families. With deep expertise in adaptive systems change, inclusive education, and family-community engagement, ROI supports school systems, educators, families, and communities through technical assistance, training, and resource development. Our work is rooted in Disability Justice, family partnership, and the lived experiences of those most often excluded from educational decision-making.

ROI was a foundational partner in the Family Engagement Collaborative during IPTN 1.0 and 2.0 and has contributed to advancing inclusive practices and systems thinking across Washington State. As a continuing IPTN partner, ROI proposes to continue and deepen our contributions and support to reduce exclusionary practices, especially for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities and Black students with disabilities, through technical assistance anchored in family and community engagement, professional learning, and community storytelling. We bring a unique lens that integrates lived experience, disability justice, and adaptive systems change with a strong emphasis on family and community voice and accessibility.

Roots of Inclusion Approach and Methodology

ROI approaches technical assistance through a lens of adaptive systems change, Disability Justice, and meaningful family and community engagement. We recognize that sustainable inclusion must center the lived experiences of those most impacted by exclusion, especially students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) and Black students with disabilities. Our methodology blends systems thinking, narrative change, and inclusive facilitation strategies that build local capacity while shifting norms and policies.

Our work is relational, responsive, and grounded in equity. We use co-design and feedback loops to ensure offerings are responsive to need and driven by family and school community priorities. This includes story-based approaches (e.g., Community Conversations), structured collaboration (e.g., Gracious Space Facilitation Framework), and technical assistance anchored in reflective practice and action planning. We are committed to continuing and expanding our collaboration with OSPI and IPTN members to achieve the following IPTN aim statement:

The IPTN will provide high-quality guidance, technical assistance, and professional development resources to districts to disrupt segregated systems of disproportionality and reduce exclusionary practices in Washington schools. This will result in improved student outcomes, with an additional focus on the outcomes and inclusion of students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) and for Black students with disabilities.

Values and Guiding Principles

We believe that meaningful inclusion begins with belonging and is sustained through trust, shared accountability, and deep relationships. Our work is rooted in Disability Justice, Racial Equity, and the lived experiences of students with disabilities and their families, especially those who have historically been excluded from school decision-making, quality instruction, and inclusive learning environments.

We recognize that transforming family-school partnerships requires more than strategy, it requires cultural change. That change begins with relationships, centering families and students as leaders, and aligning systems to reduce barriers and uphold dignity.

Our Values

- **Belonging is a right, not a reward.** Every student deserves to be seen, valued, and included as a full member of their school and community.
- **Families are essential partners** in creating inclusive, culturally responsive, and accessible schools. Their knowledge and lived experience must guide adaptive systems change.
- **Students with disabilities**, including those with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), those in the most restrictive placements, and Black and Brown

students with disabilities, must have equitable access to high-quality, standards-based instruction.

- **Inclusion is not a placement; it is a practice.** It requires intentional actions to remove systemic barriers and reimagine school culture, policy, and leadership.

Our Guiding Principles

- **Relational work is systems work.** Family-school partnerships must be built on trust, shared leadership, and sustained relationships.
- **A Dual Capacity-Building approach** should include healing-centered engagement and co-learning for both families and educators.
- **Inclusive change is collective.** We are committed to collaborating across education associations, family-serving organizations, and agencies to align efforts, tools, and learning across the state.
- **System alignment must be equity-driven.** To transform outcomes for students with disabilities, especially Black students and those with IDD, we must address policy, practice, relationships, and structures across multiple systems.
- **We learn in public.** We approach our work with humility, reflection, and a commitment to listening to those most impacted by exclusion.

Work Plan

ROI's technical assistance work is developed to increase the capacity of families and schools to form effective partnerships that will lead to sustainable inclusionary practices for Black students with disabilities and students with IDD. We believe every student and family holds deep wisdom, cultural knowledge, and strength that can transform school communities for the better. Advancing equitable, inclusive practices requires more than training, it requires a shift in school culture, policy, and relationship-building approaches. Our technical assistance helps school systems and community organizations reflect on adaptive challenges, align practices, and create the conditions for shared learning and authentic inclusion.

We recognize that inclusion cannot be achieved in silos. We know that issues arise when families and educators receive disconnected and separate learning opportunities that are not informed by lived experiences. We build relational, collaborative partnerships across family-serving organizations, school districts, and professional associations. By strengthening alignment across systems and deepening strategies rooted in family and community engagement, we aim to embed inclusion and belonging into the daily practices of schools and communities across Washington State.

Proposed Tasks and Activities

The ROI work plan explains how we will meet the expectations of IPTN members and conduct technical assistance and evaluation activities. We will complete the following tasks and activities from February 2026 (or upon execution of the contract) to October 31, 2026.

Task 1: Development of Resource Materials with State-Level Reach and a Focus on Student, Family, and Community Engagement

ROI will develop and disseminate equity-centered resources that strengthen student, family, and community engagement and contribute to sustainable inclusionary practices across Washington State.

Professional Development Sessions

ROI will design inclusive, equity-centered professional learning experiences that equip educators, family leaders, and IPTN partners with strategies to strengthen family-school partnerships and reduce exclusionary practices. These sessions will be grounded in lived experience and focus on the adaptive shifts required for systems-level change.

Topics may include:

- Leveraging relational neuroscience in education to build cultures of belonging
- Understanding the intersection of race and disability and its implications for access and belonging
- Leveraging Parent-Community Partnerships to Strengthen the Educator Workforce to Foster Inclusive Schools
- The Importance of Communications Access for Inclusive Schools and Communities

All professional development sessions will be aligned with the IPTN Theory of Action and will be accessible statewide. We will track participation and collect feedback to assess impact and inform resource development.

Development of Statewide Tools and Resources

To extend the reach and impact of our professional learning, ROI will design and publish open-access resources that reflect our training content and support implementation across communities.

Each resource will be co-branded with OSPI, released under a Creative Commons license, and designed with accessibility in mind. Resources will be translated into multiple languages as needed and distributed through the ROI website and our local and state partners.

Collaboration & Reach

ROI will collaborate with other IPTN members, such as SETC, PAVE, UW Haring Center, The Arc of King County, and CoDesign Works, on at least one jointly developed resource or session.

We will collect data to demonstrate reach and usefulness, including:

- Participation numbers and demographics
- Regional spread of resource downloads and training access
- Qualitative feedback from attendees

Deliverables

- Professional Development opportunities and learning resources for educators, family leaders, other professionals
- Reach & Use Data showing professional development participation and resource downloads and training access

Task 2: Coordination of Technical Assistance (TA) and Services

ROI will provide strategic, values-aligned technical assistance in coordination with the broader IPTN, rooted in disability justice and family-community partnership.

Active Participation and Coordination

ROI will actively participate in all IPTN meetings, network convenings, and Communities of Practice (CoP) activities. Our project leads will attend all required CoP sessions, contribute to working groups, and collaborate with fellow providers to ensure alignment with the IPTN Theory of Action.

We bring deep experience in working relationally with educators, families, youth, community partners, and disability leaders, and will help foster a collaborative, accountable, and welcoming working environment within the network.

Coordination Systems

ROI will maintain and contribute to shared calendars, communication protocols, and workstreams. We will document timelines, responsibilities, and key dates for deliverables across partners to reduce duplication and enhance alignment. Each quarter, we will contribute to shared coordination reports and summarize key insights and contributions.

Ongoing Reporting and Evaluation

ROI will submit bi-monthly summaries of TA activities, including:

- Coordination contributions (e.g., planning meetings, working groups)
- Responsive shifts in TA delivery
- Opportunities for shared capacity-building
- We will also participate in the year-end TA coordination evaluation process, contributing lessons learned and actionable recommendations for strengthening TA systems across the IPTN.

Deliverables

- **Quarterly TA Coordination Calendar**, updated and shared with IPTN partners
- **Bi-Monthly Coordination Summary Reports**
- **Year-End TA Coordination Effectiveness Report**, detailing:
 - Trends and lessons learned
 - Opportunities for aligned technical assistance
- **Active Participation** in a designated IPTN Community of Practice (CoP), contributing to meeting activities, shared resources, and alignment strategies
- **Meeting Logs and Notes** that document attendance, contributions, and collaboration

Task 3: Long-Term Sustainability Planning

ROI brings an existing sustainability framework to our participation in the IPTN. Our current fee-for-service model includes structured training and coaching support for the Community Conversation Toolkit, which equips school teams and partners to host inclusive, family-centered engagement processes. This existing model positions us well to continue and expand support beyond the life of the current contract.

Building on Existing Fee-for-Service Structures

We will continue to offer and refine our current fee-based training and coaching packages for the Community Conversation Toolkit and explore opportunities to expand these offerings to include other resources and facilitation tools developed through IPTN contracts.

As part of our mid-year sustainability planning, we will assess which additional tools or training offerings are most viable for scale and inclusion as part of our services, especially those that support equity-centered school-family partnerships and shared adaptive systems change strategies.

Collaborative Strategy Development and Shareholder Input

Our sustainability planning will be shaped by input from partners in the IPTN advisory and network, community-based organizations, family leaders, and education service districts. We will host at least two engagement sessions focused on refining sustainability priorities, strengthening relationships, and identifying new partnership and funding opportunities.

We will also explore long-term collaboration opportunities with other IPTN members to braid training resources and develop aligned outreach strategies for greater statewide reach.

Deliverables

- **Mid-Year Sustainability Strategy Plan**, including evaluation of the current Community Conversation Toolkit fee-for-service model, identification of additional offerings for expansion, and actionable partnership goals.
- **Two Shareholder Engagement Sessions** to gather input and document recommendations for sustainable scale and accessibility.
- **Year-End Recommendations Memo** highlighting progress, new opportunities, and ROI's commitment to advancing sustainable, inclusive systems change beyond the contract period.

Task 4: Centering IPTN Aim Populations & Data Collection

ROI is deeply committed to centering the voices, leadership, and lived experiences of Black students with disabilities and students with intellectual and developmental

disabilities (IDD). Our approach to data collection is rooted in equity and guided by relationships, stories, and patterns of exclusion that too often go unexamined in traditional data systems.

Equity-Centered Data Practices

We will design a data collection plan that includes both quantitative and qualitative indicators related to inclusion, belonging, and access. This will include participant and partner surveys, educator and family reflections from training and technical assistance sessions. We will disaggregate our data by race, disability, and language access to track equity gaps and align with the IPTN's Theory of Action.

ROI already uses reflective practices in our training and coaching, such as exit surveys, and participatory evaluation tools that will be extended for this project. We will gather feedback not only on participant satisfaction, but also on perceived shifts in mindset, relationships, and readiness to implement inclusive practices.

Lived Experience as a Core Data Source

We will embed aim population voices throughout our work. For example, our Community Conversation Toolkit includes facilitation tools designed to elevate disabled, BIPOC, and multilingual perspectives. Stories from families in these groups will be prioritized in our reports and deliverables and will help guide adaptations in technical assistance or sustainability approaches.

We also plan to document and share at least two examples during the contract period where feedback from families of Black students with disabilities and/or students with IDD directly informs decisions related to technical assistance or long-term planning.

Reporting and Accountability

We will submit mid-year and end-of-year reports analyzing how our services are reaching and impacting the aim populations. These reports will include lessons learned and identify both successes and barriers to advancing meaningful inclusion. All materials and stories will be developed with consent and transparency and made available in accessible formats to honor the communities who share them.

Deliverables

- **Data Collection Plan**, including inclusion and belonging indicators aligned with IPTN aim populations

- **Mid-Year and End-of-Year Impact Reports** on inclusion, access, and TA outcomes for Black students with disabilities and students with IDD
- **Two Documented Examples** where lived experience directly shaped ROI's technical assistance or sustainability planning

Project Schedule

A project schedule indicating when proposed tasks and activities will be completed and when deliverables will be delivered.

Project Timelines: February 1, 2026 to October 31, 2026

Tasks and Activities	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct
Execute OSPI contract	x								
Establish/maintain project management system	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Update and maintain information sharing systems	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Update/maintain FEC Website	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Task 1: PD & Resources									
PD Session 1 – Design, coordinate and conduct event	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		
PD Session 2 – Design, coordinate and conduct event	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		
PD Session 3 – Design, coordinate and conduct event	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
PD Session 4 – Design, coordinate and conduct event	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	

Co-Branded Tools/Resources - Development and Publishing						x	x	x	x
Translation & Access Formatting								x	x
Participation & Use Data Collection								x	x
Task 2: TA Coordination									
Attend IPTN meeting and activities	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Engage in outreach and partnership activities	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
TA Coordination Calendar (Quarterly)	x		x		x		x		
Bi-Monthly Coordination Summaries	x		x		x		x		x
Community of Practice Engagement	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Year-End TA Coordination Report							x	x	x
Task 3: Sustainability Planning									
Mid-Year Sustainability Strategy Plan			x	x					
Stakeholder Engagement Sessions (2)		x		x					
Year-End Recommendations Memo								x	x
Task 4: Aim Population & Data									

Data Collection Plan Finalization	x	x							
Mid-Year Impact Report			x	x					
End-of-Year Impact Report								x	x
Aim Population Case Examples							x	x	x

Deliverables

A list of deliverables provided below as described in the Proposed Tasks and Activities section.

Task	Deliverable	Description	Due Dates
Task 1: Professional Development & Resources	Professional Development Sessions	Inclusive, equity-centered learning experiences for educators, families, and IPTN partners; topics include race/disability intersection, neuroscience of behavior, family-school partnerships	August 31, 2026 September 30, 2026
	Statewide Tools & Resources	Co-branded open-access tools aligned with training content; published with Creative Commons license and designed for accessibility and translation	September 30, 2026 October 31, 2026
	Participation & Reach Data	Collected data on training attendance, resource downloads, demographics, and regional access	September 30, 2026 October 31, 2026
Task 2: Technical Assistance & Coordination	Quarterly TA Coordination Calendar	Shared tool documenting upcoming TA activities across IPTN	March 2026 June 2026 September

			2026
	Bi-Monthly Coordination Summaries	Internal reports summarizing meetings, contributions, challenges, and shifts in TA delivery	April 30, 2026 June 30, 2026 August 31, 2026 October 31, 2026
	Year-End TA Effectiveness Report	Lessons learned, trends across TA delivery, and recommendations for future improvement	October 31, 2026
	Active Participation in IPTN Network and PLC	Contributions to meetings, shared resources, and aligned implementation strategies	February 1, 2026 thru October 31, 2026
Task 3: Sustainability Planning	Mid-Year Sustainability Strategy Plan	Assessment of current fee-for-service offerings (e.g., Community Conversation Toolkit), expansion opportunities, and goals for scale	June 30, 2026
	Two Stakeholder Engagement Sessions	Feedback sessions with IPTN Advisory and partners to co-develop sustainability strategies	April 30, 2026 June 30, 2026
	Year-End Sustainability Memo	Recommendations for ongoing reach, partnership, and integration of IPTN-developed tools into ROI's service model	October 31, 2026

Task 4: Centering Aim Populations & Data	Data Collection Plan	Plan to include quantitative and qualitative indicators of inclusion, belonging, and access for Black students with disabilities and students with IDD	March 31, 2026
	Mid-Year & End-of-Year Impact Reports	Analysis of equity-centered data, inclusive practice implementation, and impact on aim populations	June 30, 2026 October 31, 2026
	Two Examples of Aim Population Voice Impact	Case documentation of family or youth feedback influencing TA or sustainability decisions	October 31, 2026

Performance-Based Contracting

ROI’s work plan uses a performance-based approach grounded in shared goals, clear deliverables, and measurable outcomes. Our project management process includes regular internal check-ins, documentation of progress toward deliverables, and reflection on outcomes that align with the IPTN goals. We have structured our cost proposal around the successful completion of specific deliverables and will provide quarterly and annual reports to share progress and impact.

Risks

ROI recognizes several potential risks that could impact successful delivery of services under this contract. These include:

1. Short Timelines for Service Delivery

The RFP’s timeline may limit flexibility in scheduling and implementation. ROI will mitigate this risk by building on tested project structures, clearly defined deliverables, and internal project tracking tools. We will maintain a standing meeting schedule, assign specific staff roles to deliverables, and apply learnings from previous IPTN contracts to

guide pacing and prioritize milestones.

2. Changes in Key Personnel

Staff transitions could disrupt continuity. ROI mitigates this risk by ensuring at least two team members are actively engaged across all areas of the project. If transitions occur, replacement personnel will be brought up to speed quickly using our project management tools.

3. Disruptions to School Operations

Unforeseen events such as public health closures, staffing shortages, or emergency responses in school districts may limit access to educators and families. ROI will remain flexible in our timelines, adapting training, technical assistance, and data collection schedules as needed.

4. Sustainability and Resource Alignment

A long-term risk to inclusionary practices is the availability of sustained resources and infrastructure. ROI's sustainability plan includes leveraging existing fee-for-service models (such as Community Conversation Toolkit training and coaching), aligning with IPTN members, and offering support that can scale.

By planning for these potential challenges, Roots of Inclusion is well-positioned to deliver consistent outcomes in alignment with the goals of the IPTN.

Outcomes and Performance Measurement

ROI will implement an evaluation process aligned with our values of learning in public and shared accountability:

- **Ongoing Reflection:** Internal team check-ins to reflect on implementation, feedback, and alignment with values
- **Feedback Loops:** Post-training surveys and podcast listener engagement metrics
- **Partner Check-ins:** Regular dialogue with IPTN leadership and IPTN partners to assess alignment, identify needs, and support continuous improvement
- **Documentation:** A summary report highlighting activities, outcomes, lessons learned, and recommendations for continued work

Roots of Inclusion is committed to learning in partnership and using evaluation as a tool for accountability, reflection, and improvement. Our evaluation approach for this project will include both formative and summative components and will center the experiences of those most impacted by our work.

1. Evaluation Objectives

We will evaluate our work in relation to the following goals:

- Assess the reach and usefulness of technical assistance and learning sessions
- Understand how our resources and supports are helping to build inclusive mindsets, practices, and partnerships
- Collect reflections and feedback that illustrate impact
- Ensure that learning opportunities are accessible, relevant, and equitable

2. Evaluation Methods

Method	Description
Participant Feedback	Brief surveys or feedback forms following TA sessions, workshops, podcast listening sessions, or events
Partner Check-ins	Mid-project reflections with IPTN partners to gather insights and course-correct if necessary
Family & Youth Voice	Reflections of educators and families involved in professional development and learning opportunities
Usage Metrics	Analytics on attendance, resource/tool downloads, and event registration
Accessibility Review	Regular review of transcripts, visuals, documents, and training platforms for usability and access
Internal Learning Sessions	End-of-project staff and partner reflection to synthesize lessons and inform future IPTN collaborations

3. Sample Indicators

Area	Example Indicators
Technical Assistance	Number delivered and survey reflections
Professional Learning	Increased confidence in inclusive practices, relevance of tools provided
Convening	Participation rates, diversity of attendees, feedback on usefulness
Collaboration	Number of partners engaged and co-developed resources or events
Accessibility & Equity	Accessibility features in place, accommodations provided, usability feedback

4. Use of Evaluation Results

Evaluation findings will be used to:

- Share progress with OSPI and IPTN partners
- Adjust project plans and supports during the grant period
- Inform the design of future offerings (e.g., tools, events, TA models)
- Contribute to cross-partner learning within IPTN

Management Proposal

Roots of Inclusion brings extensive, sustained experience from its active leadership role in both IPTN 1.0 and 2.0. Since 2020, ROI has served as a core technical assistance provider within the Family Engagement Collaborative (FEC), co-developing tools, trainings, and coaching strategies to advance inclusive practices across Washington. Our team contributed to the design and delivery of statewide resources, led community-centered engagement strategies, supported data-driven continuous improvement, and

collaborated closely with OSPI and other IPTN partners. This deep familiarity with the network’s history, vision, and infrastructure positions ROI to seamlessly continue and expand on the progress made during earlier phases.

Project Management Approach

ROI will lead this project using a collaborative, values-aligned project management approach rooted in transparency, flexibility, and accountability. The project will be co-led by ROI’s Co-Founders and Directors, who will oversee strategy, implementation, fiscal management, and communication with OSPI and IPTN partners.

We will maintain internal systems to track deliverables, timelines, and budget alignment, with monthly reviews and shared digital workspaces to ensure documentation, continuity, and shared understanding across the team. Regular internal check-ins will allow us to adjust staffing or pacing in response to emerging needs or opportunities.

Team Structure

Team Member	Role	Responsibilities	Time Commitment
Jennifer Karls Co-Founder Director Sarah Butcher Co-Founder Director Anita Erskine Program Manager	Project Co-Leads, Program Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strategic direction ● OSPI liaisons ● Deliverables oversight ● Project documentation ● Coordination of professional development ● Technical assistance delivery ● Resource design and development 	~ 0.5 FTE ~ 0.1 FTE
Professional Development Collaborators (stipend)	Subject Matter Experts/ Trainers	Develop and deliver training sessions, support development of presentation materials	Varies by session or deliverable

Technical Support Contractors	Specialized Support	Graphic design, language access, facilitation support, documentation	Varies by task
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Note: All stipend collaborators and speakers will be onboarded with clear scopes of work, deliverable expectations, and alignment with OSPI co-branding and accessibility requirements.

Subcontractors

ROI will not engage traditional subcontractors for this project. Instead, we will provide stipends to individual collaborators and contracted presenters in alignment with state procurement guidance. All deliverables and public-facing materials will be managed and reviewed by ROI staff to ensure quality and consistency.

Internal Controls

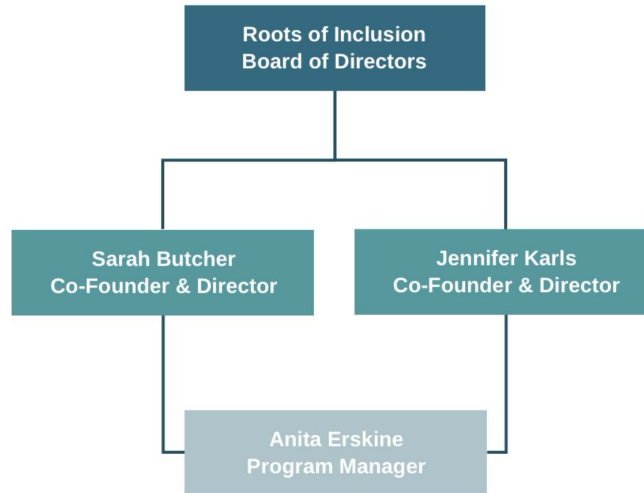
To ensure project success, ROI will implement the following internal controls:

- **Financial Oversight:** Monthly reviews of expenses and deliverables will be conducted by the Co-Directors and reviewed by the board treasurer. Budgets are tied to performance-based deliverables.
- **Documentation & Workflow Tools:** ROI uses cloud-based tools (e.g., Google Workspace, Airtable) to track timelines, host shared workspaces and maintain version-controlled documentation for all project materials.
- **Continuity & Risk Management:** Two staff members will be fully briefed on each component of the project to ensure backup and role coverage in the event of illness, leave, or other interruptions. Collaborator files and notes will be centrally stored.
- **Compliance:** ROI will follow OSPI and state requirements for subcontractor tracking and co-branded material sharing and make all materials available under a Creative Commons license as requested.

Organizational Structure & Authority

ROI’s organizational chart reflects a flat, collaborative leadership model in which the Co-Founders and Directors jointly oversee strategy, staff, and programmatic activities. Both

report directly to the ROI Board of Directors. The proposed project falls within ROI’s state-level systems change portfolio, under the supervision of the Co-Directors who hold final decision-making authority for all project activities.



Experience of the Consultant/Staff/Subcontractors

Relevant Experience

Roots of Inclusion is a small, woman-owned business that will provide training and materials to help school teams plan and facilitate Community Conversations that position families as experts, equalize power imbalances, and contribute to trusting relationships. The co-founders and directors, Jennifer Karls and Sarah Butcher, are parents of children with disabilities who are committed to family engagement and to making critical system, policy, and practice changes to facilitate equitable, accessible, and inclusive education. Roots of Inclusion is a community-based nonprofit organization that is committed to amplifying the voices of youth and families to promote equity, inclusion, and belonging in schools and communities in Washington. The directors use an adaptive community leadership approach to understand and implement sustainable systems change.

Sarah Butcher, Co-director and Co-founder of Roots of Inclusion, will co-lead Roots of Inclusion's technical assistance related to the Professional Development Sessions, development of statewide tools and resources, participate in the IPTN, and lead outreach activities with IPTN partners, state associations and community-based organizations. As a parent of three children with disabilities, Sarah knows the critical importance of equitable access to learning, inclusion, and belonging in school and in life. Sarah co-founded Roots of Inclusion with Jennifer Karls in 2018, but her community organizing, advocacy, and policy work began in 2011. Roots of Inclusion focuses on intersections of systems impacting young people to promote compassion, belonging, and school and life success. Roots of Inclusion is recognized as a connector, bridging gaps and building relationships across critical organizations and stakeholders within education and disability advocacy. For example, Sarah built SEL for Washington, a project of Roots of Inclusion and statewide grassroots coalition advocating for the social, emotional and academic skill development of all Washington students. SEL for Washington has been leading the policy and practice work around social emotional learning in Washington and has been a model and resource for numerous other state level social emotional learning coalitions. Sarah serves on multiple state-level workgroups and committees representing families of students with disabilities. She holds a graduate certificate in Adaptive Community Leadership from Saybrook University and has been recognized for her advocacy and policy work for students with disabilities and social emotional learning as the 2014 Washington State PTA Advocate of the year and 2014 Parent Map Superhero.

Jennifer Karls, co-director and co-founder of Roots of Inclusion, will co-lead Roots of Inclusion's technical assistance related to the Professional Development Sessions, publish statewide tools and resources, participate in the IPTN, manage the FEC website, and lead reporting and evaluation activities. Jennifer is the parent of two children, one of whom has an intellectual and developmental disability and has received special education services since 2004. She learned through advocating for her daughter that the systems that parents find themselves involved in, both inside and outside of the education system, are difficult to navigate and become even more difficult when other barriers to access exist. She began her advocacy with PTA in 2006 and in 2012 co-founded the Bellevue Special Needs PTA, focused exclusively on supporting students and families whose children are served in special education or needed support in their learning environment. That work resulted in a journey of advocacy through supporting the efforts of the SEL for Washington project and launching Roots of Inclusion in 2018 with Sarah Butcher. Roots of Inclusion focuses on intersections of systems impacting young people to promote compassion, belonging, and school and life success. Jennifer has served on multiple Bellevue School District committees, Washington State Work Groups and on the Board of Directors of The Arc of King County and Leadership Eastside. Jennifer has received the Outstanding Service Award from Washington State PTA and the Outstanding Advocate from the Bellevue PTSA Council. She was also named a Parent Map Superhero in 2014 along with Sarah Butcher for their work in Washington related to social emotional learning.

Anita Erskine, Program Manager, will support Roots of Inclusion's planning for the Professional Development Sessions and design work for statewide tools and resources. Anita deeply understands the critical importance of disability rights, equity, and advocacy shaped by her lifetime of lived experience as a full-time wheelchair user. Having personally navigated barriers to education that persist today, she is deeply committed to ensuring that youth with disabilities have access to inclusive systems and the tools and confidence to shape those systems themselves. Anita previously worked as a classroom teacher, summer camp director and curriculum developer where she designed inclusive learning experiences. She holds a B.A. in Elementary Education with an ESOL endorsement and an M.ED. in Literacy, Language, and Equity with a Reading endorsement from Seattle Pacific University.

Related Contracts

Contract	Contract Period of Performance	Contact
Inclusionary Practices Professional Development Project (IPP)	6/30/2022 to 6/30/2024	Tracy Kahlo, Executive Director PAVE 6316 So. 12 th St. Tacoma, WA 98465 (253) 566-8052 tkahlo@wapave.org
Inclusionary Practices Technical Assistance Network	10/28/2024 to 06/30/2025	Suzanne Hay Education Northwest 1417 NW Everett St., Suite 310 Portland, OR. 97209 suzanne.hay@ednw.org
Portland Public Schools	11/1/2024 to 6/30/2025	Jey Buno Office of Student Support Services Portland Public Schools P.O. Box 3107 Portland, OR. 97208-3107 jbuno@pps.net

References

Name of Organization	DSHS/DDA
Contact Name	Rose Spidell
Email Address	rose.spidell@dshs.wa.gov
Phone	360-229-4697
Description of Services	ROI has collaborated with the Washington State Developmental Disabilities Administration (DDA) through the IPTN working in partnership to advance inclusive education in Washington schools. Together, our efforts have focused specifically on addressing systemic barriers experienced by students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) and Black students with

	<p>disabilities. This collaboration has been grounded in a disability justice framework and guided by the principle of “Nothing About Us Without Us,” with an intentional focus on elevating the voices and leadership of people with lived experience.</p>
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Name of Organization	Education Northwest
Contact Name	Ashley Sheppard
Email Address	Ashley.Sheppard@ednw.org
Phone	503-275-9497
Description of Services	<p>Roots of Inclusion partnered with Education Northwest to design and create the Washington Stateside Family Engagement Center (WASFEC) to deliver statewide training, technical assistance, and tools that supported inclusive family-school-community partnerships. Our work focused on elevating the voices of families of students with disabilities, co-developing accessible resources, and leading professional learning sessions centered on equity, accessibility, and adaptive systems change.</p>

Name of Organization	Evergreen Public Schools
Contact Name	Dr. Talia Casci Noethig
Email Address	Talia.CasciNoethig@evergreenps.org
Phone	360-604-6713
Description of Services	<p>Roots of Inclusion provided training and coaching to district staff and family leaders to implement the Community Conversation Toolkit and host a Community Conversation</p>

	<p>focused on inclusive practices across the school district. We supported the district in planning, hosting, and harvesting insights from inclusive engagement sessions that centered the experiences of families of students with disabilities. Our support included pre-event facilitation coaching, accessibility planning, and follow-up reflection sessions to guide next steps and build sustainable, equity-centered partnerships.</p>
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Past Performance

Roots of Inclusion has not received any notifications of contract breach.

Roots of Inclusion has a strong track record of producing high-quality, equity-centered professional learning and tools that promote inclusive education and family-school partnerships across Washington State. Our previous work includes the development of webinars, training recordings, facilitation toolkits, information briefs, and documents, that are available through the Roots of Inclusion website and the Family Engagement Collaborative (FEC) platform. These resources are grounded in disability justice and co-created with families, educators, and community partners to reflect lived experience and advance adaptive systems-level change.

Five selected examples of ROI’s contributions to inclusive education are included in Appendix A, illustrating our deep experience in resource development, storytelling, and collaborative technical assistance aligned with the goals of the Inclusionary Practices Technical Assistance Network (IPTN).

1. ROI Community Conversation Toolkit - Inclusion Takes a Community
2. Strengths-Based Evaluations Webinar and Resources
3. Family Engagement PODCAST “Rooted in Washington” and Companion Resources
4. Report: Postsecondary Experiences of Students with Disabilities in Washington State

Subcontractors

Roots of Inclusion anticipates engaging a small number of subcontractors to support the

delivery of professional development sessions and resources aligned with the IPTN work plan. These subcontractors will include content experts, facilitators, and community collaborators who bring expertise, lived experience, and culturally responsive practices that enhance the reach and relevance of our services. Compensation for these subcontractors will be issued in the form of stipends or speaker fees or consulting services, as appropriate to the scope of work. All subcontractor costs are detailed separately in the cost proposal. While none of our confirmed subcontractors are currently certified through the Office of Minority and Women’s Business Enterprises (OMWBE), ROI prioritizes collaboration with women, BIPOC, and disabled-led individuals and organizations.

Cost Proposal

Roots of Inclusion’s cost proposal aligns directly with the proposed deliverables and activities across the four IPTN 3.0 tasks. Our approach balances sustainability, equitable compensation, and efficient delivery of high-quality, statewide professional learning and technical assistance.

Identification of Costs

Task Area	Activity Summary	Primary Staff/Contributors	Cost
Task 1: Professional Development Sessions & Resource Development	Design and deliver 4–6 professional learning sessions; develop and publish 2–3 open-access, co-branded tools and/or guides, including translation, interpretation, and accessibility	ROI Co-Directors, Program Manager, Contractors - (Editor, Interpreters, Translators)	\$45,000

<p>Task 2: Technical Assistance & Coordination</p>	<p>Participate in IPTN meetings, Communities of Practice, PLC's, and network convenings; maintain coordination systems; prepare bi-monthly reports and year-end TA evaluation summary</p>	<p>ROI Co-Directors</p>	<p>\$30,000</p>
<p>Task 3: Long-Term Sustainability Planning</p>	<p>Conduct sustainability strategy planning and shareholder engagement; host two advisory sessions; develop recommendations memo; assess expansion of fee-for-service model</p>	<p>ROI Co-Directors, Administrative Support Program Manager</p>	<p>\$20,000</p>
<p>Task 4: Centering Aim Populations & Data Collection</p>	<p>Develop data collection plan; analyze inclusion and belonging indicators; complete mid-year and end-of-year reports; document examples reflecting lived experience impact</p>	<p>ROI Co-Directors, Evaluation Consultant</p>	<p>\$15,000</p>
<p>Administrative, Oversight, and Reporting</p>	<p>Fiscal management, FEC website maintenance, compliance reporting, documentation, and overall project management</p>	<p>ROI Co-Directors, Administrative Support</p>	<p>\$10,000</p>

Subtotal: Labor and Contracted Services			\$120,000
Indirect & Contingency (4%)	To cover indirect costs and minor adjustments within contract period		\$5,000
TOTAL			\$125,000

Fee-for-Service Model

ROI maintains an active fee-for-service model that supports sustainability and scalability beyond the contract period. Our Community Conversation Toolkit Training and Coaching Series serves as a tested model for fee-based offerings, providing structured professional development and adaptive systems-change coaching for schools and districts.

Under this model:

- ROI provides a 3-hour foundational training and 4 virtual coaching sessions for implementation.
- Training and facilitation are billed at \$200 per hour per facilitator, inclusive of preparation and coaching materials.
- Schools and districts may purchase follow-up sessions or train-the-trainer support.

This structure allows ROI to expand the sustainability framework established under Task 3, aligning IPTN developed resources with a proven implementation model that can be scaled statewide.

Travel, Subcontractor, and Indirect Costs

- **Travel:** Up to \$2,500 for in-person convenings or regional events (in

compliance with OFM rates).

- **Subcontractors:** Accessibility reviewer, language interpreters and translator(s), editor, evaluation consultant, stipends aligned with state pay equity standards.
- **Indirect Costs:** Limited to 4% of total budget, below OSPI's maximum allowance, to ensure maximum funds are directed to program delivery.

Summary

ROI's budget and cost proposal are performance-based and directly tied to deliverables outlined in the technical proposal. Costs are structured to ensure:

- Delivery of all training, professional development, and data deliverables within the contract period.
- Alignment with OSPI's fiscal accountability and reporting requirements.

Appendix. A

Work Samples



Community Conversation Toolkit

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

Published 2024



ROOTS OF
INCLUSION

Acknowledgment

Roots of Inclusion extends our deepest gratitude to the Washington Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, the Washington State Legislature, and the U.S. Department of Education for their invaluable support and unwavering dedication to promoting inclusive communities. Their steadfast commitment to family and community engagement was instrumental in developing the Community Conversation Toolkit.

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.

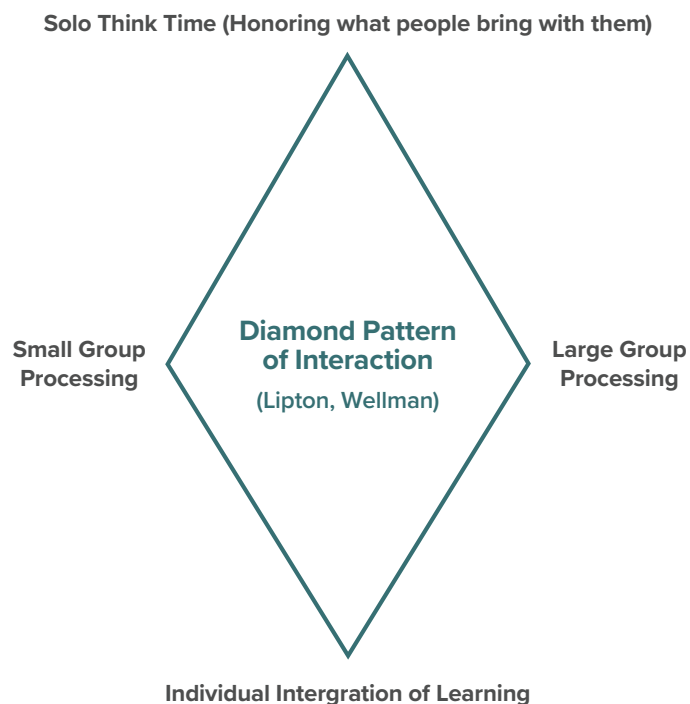


Image description: A graphic representation of the Diamond Pattern of Interaction by Lipton and Wellman. The interactions include solo think time, small group processing, large group processing, and individual integration of learning.

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

Hughes, P. M. (2004, 2010). *Gracious space: A practical guide to working better together (with Bill Grace)*. The Center for Ethical Leadership.

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.

Trainor, A. A., Carter, E. W., Swedeen, B., & Pickett, K. (in press). Community conversations: An approach for expanding and connecting opportunities for employment for adolescents with disabilities. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*.

Washington State Governor's Office of the Education Ombuds. (n.d.) *Communicating with families with language access needs*. <https://www.oeo.wa.gov/en/education-issues/language-access>

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



Inclusion Takes A Community

A companion document for the Community Conversation Toolkit Guide

Published 2024



ROOTS OF
INCLUSION

Acknowledgment

Roots of Inclusion extends our deepest gratitude to the Washington Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, the Washington State Legislature, and the U.S. Department of Education for their invaluable support and unwavering dedication to promoting inclusive communities. Their steadfast commitment to family and community engagement was instrumental in developing the Community Conversation Toolkit.

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.

Special Education Evaluations

Roots of Inclusion (June 2024)



Towards Strengths-Based, Whole-Student Evaluations

From a Past of Deficits and “Normalcy” to a Celebration of Strengths and Perspectives



The special education system comes from a medical model where some students are seen as in need of fixing and their educational needs are determined by measuring how far from “normal” students are. Often special education evaluations are understood as solely determining whether a student qualifies as having a disability. The students perceived to have the most minimally disruptive disabilities in an academic setting get more time in general education classrooms with their nondisabled peers. Students perceived to have the most

diverging needs or to be “furthest from the norm” are segregated in separate spaces, with educational goals designed to manage behavior rather than focus on students’ access to, and progress in, grade-level general education curriculum.

Under this approach, the student and their skills or performance levels are seen as the problem, not the classroom environment or school system that was never built with student variability, diverse learning needs, or meaningful access in mind. Ableism (bias towards non-

disabled people) and disablism (bias against disabled people) also shape evaluations and learning environments. When adults see the problem as within the child because of their disabilities, they set them up for failure. Disability is actually a mismatch between a person's needs and the environment created by others¹– composed of everything from physical barriers and ineffective instructional methods, to prejudice and educator communication preferences.

Building on Strengths from a Disability Justice and Whole-Child Perspective

Much of the training that professionals in the school system receive to evaluate a student for special education comes from this dated mindset that does not acknowledge wholeness, build and honor positive disability identity, or see disability justice as part of anti-racist pedagogy and diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. However, schools do not need to be limited to these outdated evaluation methods that often only serve to establish eligibility and offer little information beyond that. Disabled students can thrive where systems and educators examine how they need to adjust their approaches and their views about learning and disability rather than assuming a student is not capable of much. When educators and systems are obligated to uncover access needs and dismantle barriers, special education evaluations become an essential vehicle for providing usable, empowering information for an inclusive Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

“Defining Strengths-Based, Whole Child”

Strengths-based evaluations prioritize identifying and leveraging students' strengths and interests rather than focusing too much or solely on perceived deficits or divergencies. Every student has unique strengths, assets, and preferred ways of being that offer meaningful and student-centered ways to support their learning and engagement. A strengths-based approach

¹ Note the difference between disability and a person's difference in mental or physical functioning (impairment). For example, the Centre for Disability Studies at the University of Leeds distinguishes between what is happening with a person's body and/or mind and when they interact with the social environment. “A disabled person is a person with an impairment who experiences disability. Disability is the result of negative interactions that take place between a person with an impairment and her or his social environment. Impairment is thus part of a negative interaction, but it is not the cause of, nor does it justify, disability.” <https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/Northern-Officers-Group-defining-impairment-and-disability.pdf>

is also a whole child strategy because it encourages a positive self-concept and esteem and enhances students' engagement and participation by emphasizing their abilities, passions, interests, and autonomy. Therefore, school becomes a place where any teaching or support builds on existing strengths and resources and focuses on facilitating access for— not fixing—the student.

Core Values of Strengths-Based Evaluation

Strengths-based evaluations begin with a shared commitment to these core values:

- **Presumption of Competence:** Believing that all students can and will learn, offer valuable perspectives, and thrive where adults and peers build authentic relationships with them that honor who they are and how they communicate.
- **Strengths-Based Language:** Using affirming and empowering language to describe students, their abilities, and their achievements.
- **Collaboration:** Involving students, families, and interdisciplinary teams in the evaluation process as equal participants. Schools work with the student and family to build positive relationships, trust, and rapport, through listening, humility, vulnerability, and acceptance of changing dynamics.
- **Comprehensive and Holistic Approach:** Considering and integrating information and input from a variety of sources that capture multiple domains of functioning, including academic, social, emotional, and physical strengths. Realizing that normed tools are only the beginning and that evaluations can and should provide the groundwork for authentically meaningful and empowering Individual Education Plans (IEPs)
- **Building Communities of Belonging:** Prioritize tangible actions to foster communities that value all members and whose members all participate in various roles. Shifting focus from individuals, and limited ideas of achievement and success, towards the functioning of a classroom and school community.

Implementing Strengths-Based, Whole-Student Evaluation

Before conducting any formal evaluation or rewriting the IEP, the school members of the team should engage students and families as active, equal partners in understanding and setting the purpose of the evaluation, exploring strengths and interests, and determining priorities. While every special education evaluation must satisfy standards for IDEA, the law does not limit schools and districts to using antiquated tools or valuing only professionals' perspectives. Students and families bring valuable, unique perspectives to the evaluation process.²

To recognize the student as a whole person in assessment, the evaluation team should prioritize tools that build on the values of this model and incorporate student self-assessment, observations, and alternative assessment methods to capture different assets, interests, preferences, and skills across multiple contexts and environments. They can include formal assessments, interviews, and portfolio reviews to gather meaningful data. However, any results should be easy to share or summarize with the student and family members of the team because their feedback is essential to a collaborative process.

The questions behind a strengths-based, whole-student evaluation should always be:

- How can we as a team, as a school, and as a community support the student in being involved in and making progress in the grade-level general education curriculum?
- How can we support the ways the student communicates?
- How can we facilitate the student's existing connections and relationships and facilitate potential further connections?
- How can we acknowledge and honor the student's learning preferences?
- How can we encourage intrinsic motivation and foster joy in learning?

² For more information about going beyond compliance-oriented IEPs and evaluations to anti-ableist pedagogy, see Jessica Murray's "Resources for Practicing Anti-Ableist Pedagogy" (focused on higher education, but applicable to K-12):

<https://transform.commonsw.cuny.edu/2022/11/16/resources-for-practicing-anti-ableist-pedagogy/>

- How can we find ways for and support the student in demonstrating their knowledge and learning?
- How can we establish and maintain general education classrooms that are responsive to and respectful of the student variability in them?

The team can then create a strengths-based IEP that has (1) present levels and goals consistent with general education standards; and (2) provides every support so that the student can learn with their peers rather than be in a different place or prevented from accessing general education

Resources to Consider:

- Anti-Ableist Teaching Project: <https://www.antiablistteaching.com>
- Building an Anti-Ableist Pedagogy: <https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/building-an-anti-ableist-pedagogy>
- Many Benefits of Strengths-Based IEPs:
<https://www.edutopia.org/article/many-benefits-strengths-based-ieps/>
- Understood: Strengths-Based IEPs: <https://www.understood.org/en/articles/strengths-based-ieps-what-you-need-to-know>
- Unlocking Potential: <https://www.teachtasticiep.com/post/unlocking-potential-the-power-of-a-strength-based-approach-for-students-with-disabilities>
- Writing Strengths-Based IEPs for Students with Disabilities in Inclusive Classrooms: https://rdw.rowan.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1016&context=education_facpub

APPENDIX A

Strengths-Based Evaluation Tool from Our Partner Inclusion For ALL

Inclusion For ALL (www.inclusionforall.org) created these forms to get educator, caregiver, and student input for evaluations and IEPs that center students, promote anti-ableist teaching and learning practices, and support reflection and relationship-building.

The questions in these forms are meant to engage both caregivers and educators in thinking about all students competent learners whose learning can present in a myriad of ways. The questions intentionally focus on identifying opportunities, barriers, and needs to aid in designing for access, support, and belonging.



IEP Input Form for Educators and Other Professionals

What are your student's strengths? Reflect on whether your answer might include 'teacher pleasing' or 'classroom-management easing' behaviors rather than strengths meaningful to the student.

What are your student's interests? Focus on interests that might create a bridge to engagement and learning for the student.

How would you describe your student as a learner? Are they hands-on, like to listen and observe from afar, do they like to see things happen, are they enthusiastic or prefer to wait and see, etc. Are they consistent in this, or does it vary?

When your student is both happy and engaged, what circumstances are in place? Reflect on your expectations and focus on the ones that are recognizably anti-ableist and equitable. Focus on how the student's environment might be facilitating a sensory-safe space or how you might be offering moments of felt-safety, connection or co-regulation.

What helps to make your student feel successful? Reflect on your perceptions and focus on the ones that are recognizably anti-ableist and equitable.

What helps your student focus and maintain focus? Reflect on your perceptions and focus on the ones that are recognizably anti-ableist and equitable. Focus on moments during which the student's nervous state is primed for learning. Differentiate between authentic focus and perceived focus.



How does your student like to communicate and be communicated to?

What in different environments might your student find distracting or bothersome? Are there tasks your student finds distracting or bothersome? Reflect on the environmental aspects and tasks and categorize these as either potentially ableist and inequitable or anti-ableist and equitable in your answer. Reflect on when environmental aspects might provoke nervous states of unsafety, disconnection and produce a barrier to co-regulation.

What situations does your student find difficult? How does your student negotiate or deal with these situations? Categorize these situations as either potentially ableist and inequitable or anti-ableist and equitable in your answer. Reflect on your role as providing safety, connection or co-regulation.

What tools does your student use, or do you think they would benefit from? Some examples of helpful tools include but are not limited to: phone, tablet, apps, Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), alarms, timers, schedules, fidgets, weighted items, and visuals. Mention any access gaps you've observed.

How do you see your student make friends and relate to others? Are you aware of reciprocal and balanced friendships? Does the student seek connections with peers?



IEP Input Form for Caregivers

Caregivers: Please discuss these questions with your child and include their input in your responses, or have them fill out their own Student Input form (attached).

What are your child's strengths?

What are your child's interests?

How would you describe your child as a learner? Are they hands-on, like to listen and observe from afar, do they like to see things happen, are they enthusiastic or prefer to wait and see, etc. Are they consistent in this, or does it vary?

When your child is both happy and engaged, what circumstances are in place?

What helps to make your child feel successful?

What helps your child focus and maintain focus?

How does your child like to communicate and be communicated to?

What in different environments might your child find distracting or bothersome? Are there tasks your student finds distracting or bothersome?



What situations does your child find difficult? How does your child negotiate or deal with these situations?

What tools (e.g., phone, tablet, apps, Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), alarms, timers, schedules, fidgets, weighted items, visuals, etc) **does your child use or want to use?**

What things are happening right now that are working well for your child at school that you wouldn't want to change?

What is the biggest area of stress or frustration for your child at school? Is there something that makes them feel like they are not successful? What needs to change?

How does your child make friends and relate to others? Does your child have friends? Does your child want friends?



IEP Input Form for Students

What are your strengths? What are you good at?

What things interest you?

Think about when you are learning something new. How would you describe yourself as a learner? Do you like to try new things right away, or do you like to wait and see first? Do you like to listen and watch? Do you like to learn by doing it yourself? Do you always learn best the same way, or does it change?

Think about when you feel happy and interested. What is happening when you feel happy and interested? What helps you feel this way?

What does success mean to you?

What helps you feel successful?

What helps you get focused when you are distracted? What helps you stay focused?

How do you like to communicate? How do you want people to communicate with you?

What is distracting or bothersome to you in classrooms or other spaces? Are there tasks you find distracting or bothersome?



What situations are difficult for you? What do you do in those situations?

What tools (e.g., phone, tablet, apps, Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), alarms, timers, schedules, fidgets, weighted items, visuals, or other tools) **do you use or wish to use?**

What things are happening right now that are working well for you at school and you wouldn't want to see change?

Is there something at school that feels stressful right now? Is there something that makes you feel like you don't belong? What needs to change about it?

How do you feel about your friendships? Do you find it easy or difficult to make friends and relate to others? Would you like to make more friends, or are you happy with the way things are now?





Family Engagement Through Storytelling and Podcasting: A Toolkit for Washington State's K-12 Schools

Family engagement is a cornerstone of student success, and storytelling is a powerful tool for understanding families' experiences and strengthening their ties to school. In 2025, Roots of Inclusion, with support from the Family Engagement Center, launched a seven-episode podcast series about family engagement in Washington State called *Rooted in Washington*. Taken from the lessons learned as part of that process, this toolkit provides strategies for using storytelling, including podcasting, to foster meaningful connections among schools, families, and communities.

Why Storytelling Matters in Education

From birth, we encourage families to read to their children. Some of students' earliest experiences of school also involve educators sharing books with them, or inviting them to tell themselves a little about their families. While those examples at first glance might seem like just good techniques for increasing literacy or building a classroom environment, we see by digging further that the benefits of storytelling in education include:



Enhancing Engagement and Retention

Stories make learning more memorable and accessible. Stories are also the foundation of what we tell ourselves about the meaning of our lives, the interactions we have, and our visions for the future. People are more likely to remember stories than they are spreadsheets or charts alone.



Fostering Inclusivity

Storytelling amplifies diverse voices, creating a more inclusive school environment. When students and families don't see themselves in the literature our libraries have, the posters on our classroom walls, or in the talent shows our school communities sponsor, they don't see that their perspectives are valued, and the rest of the school community misses out on those voices.



Building Emotional Connections

Personal narratives cultivate empathy and trust. When people share their stories, others understand where they come from and what perspectives they bring to the school community. Stories make us feel more connected to others when we are able to see themes and common fears and hopes, while also challenging us to understand that our experiences of the world can be unique to us.



Developing Critical Thinking Skills

Storytelling—both through the act of sharing stories and the art of listening—encourages analysis, creativity, and problem-solving. Storytelling requires us to learn how to craft and ask better questions that are open and honest. Storytelling also invites us to look for patterns across people and places, and take the individual experience as a sign of how systems might work.

Creating a Welcoming Environment for Storytelling

Schools, family groups, community organizations, and other partners interested in increasing storytelling in schools might wonder where to begin. The following six stages of work are not necessarily linear, but they can act as a good starting point for mapping a storytelling initiative.

You can't have good content without offering a space that invites opening up about people's experiences:

- Establish spaces where families feel comfortable sharing their experiences. For example, if a parent-teacher group is hosting a school event, consider ways that families could add their stories to a wall, or record a story in a "pop up" podcasting booth.
- Use multilingual storytelling to recognize the diverse linguistic and cultural communities of your school and honor families and students.
- Go beyond career days by inviting parents to participate in classroom storytelling activities, such as sharing stories about immigration experiences, civil rights advocacy, and their own school experiences. Engage with elders in communities to document the history of people and places.

Eliciting and Sharing Stories

While you might be tempted to launch a storytelling effort with the biggest names or personalities in your school community, you should consider where the best stories can be found:

Community Story-Sharing Events

Consider hosting a school-wide activity where families and students are encouraged to share their stories through different forms, such as visual arts or spoken word. Partner with community arts organizations interested in offering mini skills-building activities or capturing the stories for posterity.

Structured Prompts

Use structured prompts to help students and families craft meaningful stories. Ensure that those prompts are created by and vetted by communities first.

Oral Histories

Collect oral histories from families to integrate into the curriculum. Teach students how to interview their families and other community members.

School Storytelling

Consider storytelling as a means of telling the school's story, too, as every school is composed of former students and families, and the community in which it is situated.

Examples of Storytelling Prompts:

- Documenting School and Community History: Record stories from alumni, longtime residents, and educators to capture the evolution of a school and its impact on the community.
- Highlighting Student Advocacy Over Time: Share stories of student-led movements, activism, and leadership that have shaped school policies and culture.
- Preserving Native Language: Collaborate with local tribal nations to document and share stories in Native languages, preserving cultural heritage for future generations.
- Promoting Community Pride Projects: Collect narratives about what makes the school or town unique, fostering a sense of belonging and shared identity.
- Fostering Intergenerational Mentoring through Storytelling: Connect students with elders in the community to create podcasts or digital archives showcasing wisdom and experiences across generations.

Identifying and Generating Meaningful Questions

Asking the right questions is crucial for eliciting powerful stories. Consider the following approaches:



Use Open-Ended Questions

Encourage detailed responses (e.g., "Can you share a time when your family addressed a challenge together?", "Tell me what gives you hope about your family or community.").



Focus on Personal Experiences

Frame questions around lived experiences rather than general opinions (e.g., "What has your experience been like moving to this new school community?" "What was your biggest fear about how the transition would go for your student?")



Encourage Reflection

Ask questions that prompt deeper thinking, such as "What does your family or culture teach about resilience?"



Do Your Research and Provide Questions in Advance

Ask your participants for a brief bio and do a bit of online research about them so that you have a sense of what they might highlight through their stories or interviews. Offering some starter questions in advance can ease nerves and give you the opportunity for feedback.



Adapt Questions for Different Audiences

Tailor language and complexity based on the audience, whether students, parents, or community members. For example, rather than asking elementary students to reflect on "inclusive practices" or "instructional methods", ask them when they most feel like they belong in the classroom. Ask what the teacher or their peers were doing when that happened.

Being a Culturally Reflective and Adaptive Host

To create an inclusive and respectful storytelling environment, hosts should:



Recognize and Acknowledge Bias

Reflect on personal assumptions and how they might impact conversations. Consider whether the questions you're asking are about yourself unintentionally, so that you feel comfortable and have a response, or if you're hoping to learn respectfully from the interaction. Be open to the surprises from stories.



Respect Cultural Nuances

Be aware of different storytelling traditions and communication styles across cultures. Master the basics such as name pronunciation. Ask when you're in doubt.



Encourage Authentic Representation

Allow participants to share their stories in their own words, without imposing interpretations. If that means that the participant switches between languages or decides to rephrase a question, support them in doing so.



Create Spaces Focused on Fostering Psychological Safety

Foster an environment where participants feel valued and heard. Realize that even the simplest conversations about family or education can become emotional. Don't take sadness or anger as something you must fix. Express gratitude for people sharing their stories, especially when they have been vulnerable. Honor them through deep listening.

Seek Feedback and Ensure Sustainability:

- Solicit feedback from families through surveys and focus groups.
- Establish a storytelling committee to oversee projects.
- Integrate storytelling into long-term school engagement strategies.

Embracing, Not Dreading, Legal and Ethical Considerations

The best storytelling practices also honor ethical and legal boundaries. Protecting participants' privacy means that you are trying to build trust and be a reliable partner. Before beginning a storytelling project, review school, district, state, and federal policies about student and family data protection and privacy. Then consider the fundamentals of legal and ethical storytelling:



1 Obtain Consent

Secure written or verbal consent before recording or sharing any stories. Written consent is helpful for recordkeeping.

2 Protect Privacy

Avoid using full names, images, or identifying details unless permission is explicitly granted.

3 Identify Sensitive Topics in Advance

Inform participants of potential discussion topics and allow them to opt out of any that make them uncomfortable. Ask everyone if there are any topics that are off limits.

4 Provide Support Resources

If sensitive topics arise, ensure that participants have access to support services if needed.

5 Encourage People to Tell Only Their Stories

Inadvertently, storytellers might share sensitive details about someone else. Always remind participants that they should tell their own stories.

Making an Accessible Format Even More Inclusive

One of the strengths of storytelling is that it is accessible to many people. However, the format in which it is delivered can be a barrier or bridge. First, ensure that your technology is accessible. Use platforms that are mobile-friendly and compatible with screen readers. Don't hide your content behind a paywall, either. To ensure additional accessibility, consider the following:



Provide Transcripts

Offer written versions of oral recordings such as podcasts to accommodate those who are Deaf, hard of hearing, have audio processing disabilities, or prefer reading.

Auto-generated transcripts are often inaccurate. While common applications such as Otter, Zoom, and Descript can offer first draft of transcripts, you should edit transcripts for clarity and offer those versions in an accessible space and format.



Include Closed Captions

For video-based storytelling, ensure captions are available and accurate. You might need to spend time correcting any auto-generated captions.



Use Simple Language

Avoid jargon and complex terms to make content understandable for audiences of different ages and backgrounds. Spell out acronyms. Provide context for recordings through show notes or other documentation.



Offer Multi-Language Support

Translate stories, offer multi-language interpreters, and provide summaries in multiple languages to reach all families.

Modern Storytelling: Podcasting as a Tool for Family Engagement

Embracing storytelling and podcasting requires intentional steps. Every community has unique stories worth sharing, and educators can amplify voices that might otherwise go unheard.

Define the Objectives and the Format

Determine the purpose, audience, theme, number of episodes, hosting structure, and whether it will feature interviews, standalone stories, or roundtable discussions.

Plan for Legal, Ethical, and Accessibility Compliance

Create a release form covering ownership, distribution, content format, and participant compensation.

Gather Stories

Collect narratives from students, parents, and educators.

Choose Accessible Technology

Use free or low-cost recording tools like Audacity, AdobePodcast, PodBean, GarageBand, or Spotify for Podcasters.

Train Participants

Provide guidance on storytelling techniques and basic audio editing.

Produce and Share Content

Determine release schedule and publish on school platforms, social media, radio, or free podcasting services like Spotify, Apple, Amazon, and YouTube.

Complete the Feedback Loop

Measure impact through guest debriefs, collect listener feedback for future topics, and track resources used and audience reach.

By integrating podcasting into family engagement, schools can build stronger, more inclusive communities. This toolkit helps educators harness stories to connect, educate, and inspire. Through sharing our stories, we foster a sense of belonging.

To hear examples of family engagement podcasting, listen to Roots of Inclusion's Rooted in Washington 7-episode series on Apple Podcasts, Amazon Music/Podcasts, IHeartRadio Podcasts, Spotify, and YouTube Podcasts. Transcripts and guest photos are available at <https://www.rootsofinclusion.org/>

Parting Inspiration: Lessons Learned from Schools Using Storytelling

Digital Storytelling in Australia

K-12 students created multimedia projects based on local history.

- Year 7 needed support with storyboarding
- Year 9 engaged deeply with technology
- Year 11 reconnected through digital storytelling

[The effectiveness of digital storytelling in the classrooms: a comprehensive study - Smart Learning Environments](#)

Student Podcasts in U.S. Schools

Students explored social justice, school culture, and local history.

- Enhanced public speaking skills
- Promoted project-based learning
- Developed media literacy

[5 Steps to Start a School Podcast](#)

[Using Podcasting in the Classroom: Activities and Recommendations](#)

[Podcasting Creates an Audience for Student Storytellers](#)

Language Learning Podcasts

Old Dominion University integrated podcasting into language instruction.

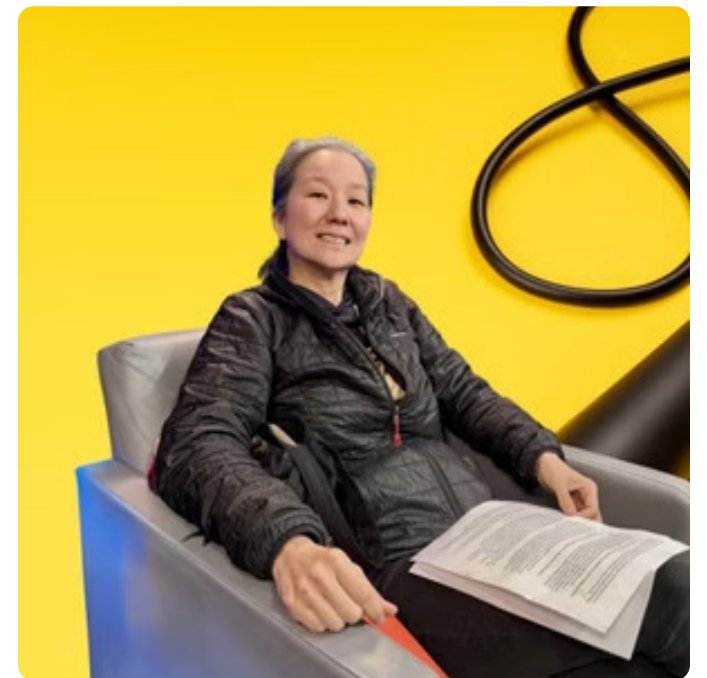
- Provided real-world speaking practice
- Created shareable content
- Could be applied to how K-12 schools support English Learners and dual-language programs

[Use of audio podcast in K-12 and higher education: a review of research topics and methodologies](#)

- Museum on Main Street Storytelling Toolkit, produced with support from the Smithsonian: https://museumonmainstreet.org/sites/default/files/complete_toolkit_v2.1.pdf
- NPR's Student Podcasting Guide: <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/15/662070097/starting-your-podcast-a-guide-for-students>
- Roadtrip Nation Storytelling Kit: <https://www.equitablefutures.org/resources/a-storytelling-toolkit-to-center-young-peoples-stories/>
- The Collaboratory with the US Department of State Podcasting Toolkit (2019): <https://eca.state.gov/files/BoxFiles/ECA/ECA-Podcasting-Toolkit-5.pdf>
- UK National Literacy Trust's Story Collectors' Toolkit: <https://literacytrust.org.uk/resources/story-collectors-toolkit-ideas-and-activities-recording-your-families-stories/>

Thanks to Rooted in WA's Podcast Participants (2025)

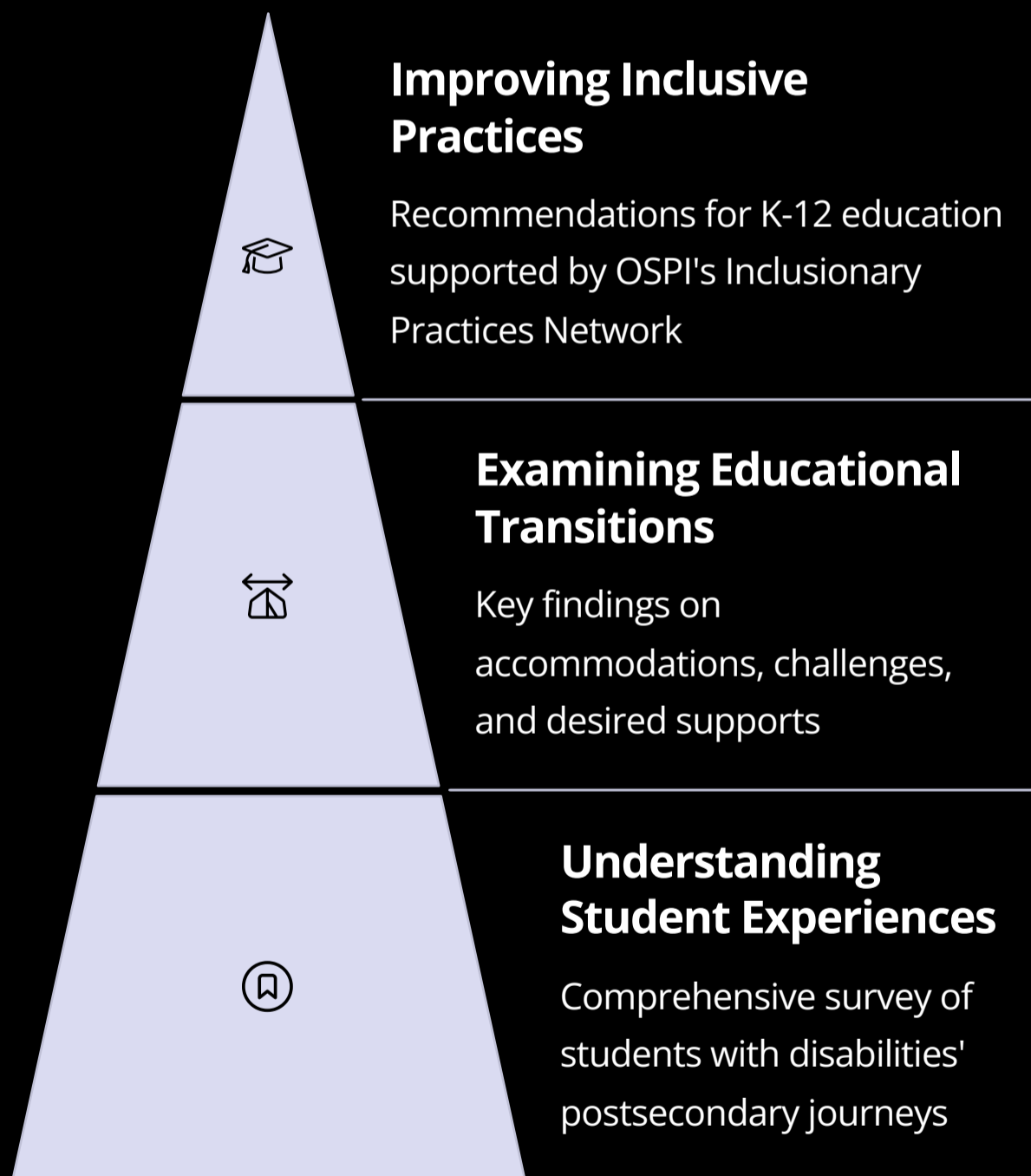
We are grateful to all the amazing individuals who contributed their voices and stories to our podcast.



Their insights and experiences have been instrumental in creating this toolkit for storytelling and family engagement in Washington's K-12 schools. Thanks to Jim, Sarah, Jen, Taina, CiKeithia, Erin, Anna, and our host Carrie.

Final Report: Postsecondary Experiences of Students with Disabilities in Washington State (2025)

Roots of Inclusion, in partnership with CoDesign Works, conducted a comprehensive survey to understand how K-12 education in Washington can better prepare students with disabilities for post-secondary success.



This report summarizes our findings and provides actionable insights to help educators better prepare students with disabilities for successful transitions to college and beyond.



What Students Found Most Surprising

Roots of Inclusion (rootsofinclusion.org), in partnership with CoDesign Works (codesignworks.com), and with support from the OSPI Inclusionary Practices Technical Assistance Network, conducted a survey in Winter-Spring 2025 to examine how K-12 schools in Washington State can better prepare students with disabilities for postsecondary success. Specifically, CoDesign Works surveyed students who had made the transition to higher education in Washington to ask for their reflections and insights. (While the survey was open to students enrolled in vocational programs, only students in 2 or 4-year college or university programs seemed to participate.) This report synthesizes key findings, challenges, and actionable recommendations, supported by the 219 students' responses and current research. The survey revealed several unexpected challenges that students encountered in their transition from high school to postsecondary education:



The Lack of Support Compared to High School

Many students were surprised that accommodations and support services in college were not as proactive as they were in high school. Student Quote: "In high school, my teachers made sure I got the support I needed. In college, I had to figure everything out on my own."



The Complexity of Requesting Accommodations

Students assumed that their high school accommodations would automatically transfer to college, only to find that they had to go through a formal process. Student Quote: "I thought my IEP would just follow me to college. No one told me I had to reapply for accommodations."



The Academic Workload

Many students were not prepared for the increased rigor of college coursework. Student Quote: "The amount of reading and homework was shocking. I had to learn how to manage my time fast."



Limited Awareness of Assistive Technology

Some students discovered assistive technology tools in college that they wished they had been introduced to earlier. Student Quote: "I never knew about speech-to-text software until college. It would have been so helpful in high school."



The Importance of Self-Advocacy

Students found that they had to advocate for themselves more than they ever had in high school. Student Quote: "I had to learn how to explain my disability and ask for help. In high school, my teachers did that for me."

These findings reinforce the need for stronger high school preparation programs that equip students with the skills, tools, and confidence they need to succeed in postsecondary education.

Summary of Interesting Findings

The survey uncovered several compelling insights about the experiences of students with disabilities transitioning to postsecondary education. Some key takeaways include:

The Importance of Self-Advocacy

Many students felt unprepared to advocate for their accommodations and support needs. They emphasized that learning how to navigate disability services and communicate their needs earlier would have made a significant difference. Student Quote: "I didn't even know I had to request accommodations myself in college. I thought they would automatically transfer like in high school."

Challenges in Time Management

A large portion of students struggled with managing their time effectively in college. High school did not prepare them for the level of independence and self-discipline required. Student Quote: "In high school, my teachers reminded me about assignments. In college, I had to figure it all out on my own, and I really struggled."

Disparities in Transition Planning

Students reported that their high school transition plans often lacked meaningful preparation for college, focusing more on compliance than practical readiness. Student Quote: "My transition plan just went over basic information. No one actually helped me practice advocating for myself or understanding what support was available."

Need for Exposure to Assistive Technology

Many students only learned about useful assistive technology after starting college, making their transition harder than necessary. Student Quote: "I never used text-to-speech software in high school, but in college, it became essential. Why didn't anyone introduce it to me sooner?"

These findings reinforce the need for stronger high school preparation programs that equip students with the skills, tools, and confidence they need to succeed in postsecondary education.

Differences by Age, Race, Disability Type, and Gender

Age Differences

- Younger students (18-22) were more likely to struggle with time management and independent learning
- Older students (23+) cited access barriers and financial challenges as major difficulties

Student Quote: "College was a shock after high school. Suddenly, no one was checking in on me, and I had to manage everything myself."

Student Quote: "As an older student, I had to juggle work, family, and school, and I didn't know where to turn for disability support."

Disability Type Differences

- Students with learning disabilities were the largest group to receive testing accommodations but were also the most likely to report struggling with self-advocacy
- Students with psychological or mental health disabilities reported long wait times for disability services
- Students with physical disabilities faced physical accessibility challenges

Student Quote: "I qualified for extended test time, but I didn't know I had to ask for it in college. No one explained the process to me."

Race Differences

- White students were the most likely to report receiving formal accommodations in college
- Black and Latino students were less likely to report receiving accommodations, despite identifying similar disabilities
- Multi-racial and Indigenous students reported more challenges navigating postsecondary disability services

Student Quote: "I didn't even know I had the right to ask for accommodations in college. I assumed I had to just figure it out on my own."

Gender Differences

- Male/Man students were less likely to seek out disability support services, even when they reported challenges
- Female/Woman students were more proactive in requesting accommodations
- Non-binary students were more likely to report feeling isolated due to a lack of inclusive disability and LGBTQ+ spaces

Student Quote: "I avoided going to disability services at first because I didn't want to be seen as 'needing help.' But I ended up falling behind because of it."

Student Demographics

Survey respondents were predominantly white (76%), aged 18-22 (71%), and identified as male/man (60%). The study included diverse participants across age groups, racial backgrounds, and gender identities.

The survey collected responses from students across various age groups, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and gender identities. Below is a summary of the demographics of respondents:

71%

18-22 Years

131 respondents

17%

23-27 Years

31 respondents

10%

28-35 Years

18 respondents

2%

36+ Years

4 respondents

Gender Identity

60%

Male/Man

130 respondents

32%

Woman/Female

70 respondents

5%

Non-binary

10 respondents

3%

Prefer not to disclose

8 respondents

Racial & Ethnic Identity

76%

White

172 respondents

7%

Black or African American

15 respondents

17%

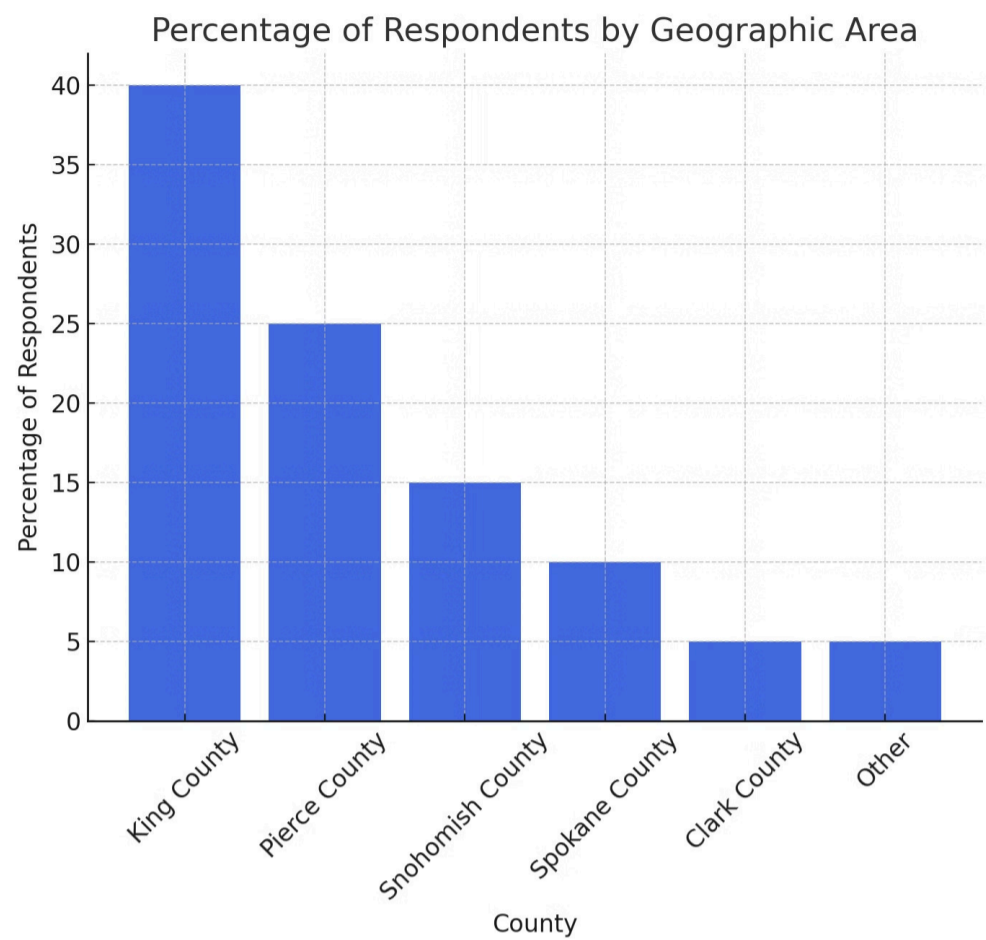
Multi-Racial & Other Groups

28 respondents

The Multi-Racial & Other Groups category includes:

- Multi-Racial: 12
- Native or Indigenous: 8
- Middle Eastern or North African: 3
- Latino/Hispanic: 2
- Asian: 2
- Pacific Islander: 1

Geographic Distribution of Respondents



County Distribution

The survey captured geographic distribution of respondents across Washington State. The majority of participants came from the most populated counties:

County	Percentage of Respondents
King County	40%
Pierce County	25%
Snohomish County	15%
Spokane County	10%
Clark County	5%
Other	5%

This distribution generally reflects the population density of Washington State, with most respondents coming from the Puget Sound region.

Disability Types Reported by Students

History of Supports in K-12: Sixty percent of respondents received special education and had an IEP in high school, while 25% had a 504 Plan. Fifteen percent did not have either in high school but identified as students with disabilities.



The survey collected information on the types of disabilities identified by respondents. A total of 371 responses were recorded from students who identified with one or more disabilities. Below is a summary:

Disability Type	Number of Respondents
Physical disability	25
Sensory disability	18
Intellectual or learning disability	45
Developmental disability	30
Communication disability	12
Psychological or mental health disability	50
Chronic illness	22
Prefer not to disclose	10
Other	8

Common Disability Combinations

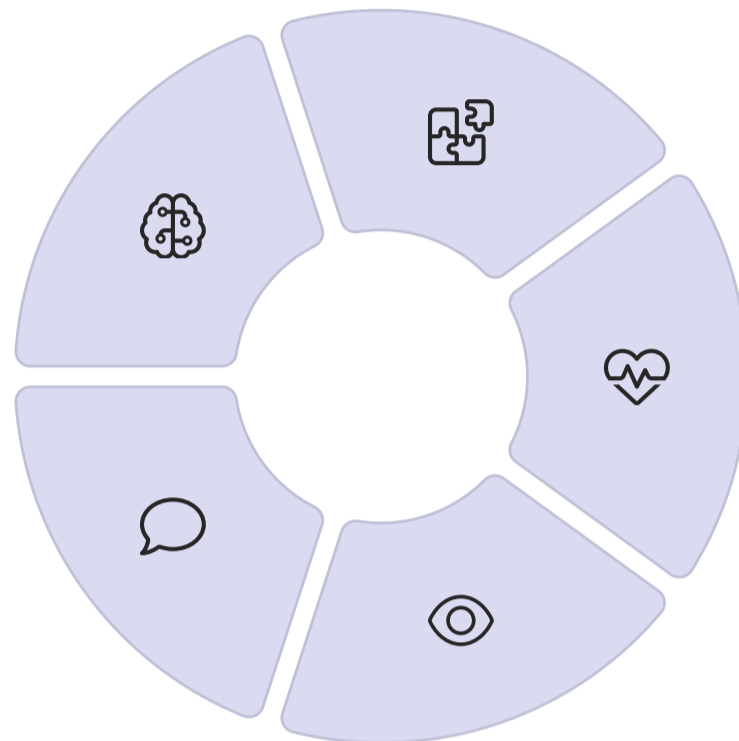
Many students identified as having more than one disability. The most common disability combinations reported included:

Intellectual or learning disability + Psychological disability

35 Respondents

Psychological disability + Communication disability

15 Respondents



Developmental disability + Intellectual or learning disability

28 Respondents

Psychological disability + Chronic illness

22 Respondents

Sensory disability + Physical disability

18 Respondents

These combinations highlight the complex nature of disabilities and the need for comprehensive support systems that address multiple needs simultaneously.

Accommodations Received in Postsecondary Education

Survey respondents reported receiving a range of accommodations in their current educational institutions. The most frequently cited accommodations included:

102

Testing-Related Accommodations

Extended time on exams, distraction-free testing environments, and alternative formats for assessments

85

Assistive Technology

Screen readers, speech-to-text software, and adaptive keyboards

76

Alternative Instructional Methods

Flexibility in teaching styles, access to recorded lectures, and alternative ways to demonstrate knowledge

64

Access to Materials in Alternative Formats

Digital textbooks, audiobooks, and other accessible learning materials

Student Quote: "I was grateful for assistive technology and extra test time, but I wish I had learned how to advocate for them in high school."

Challenges in Transitioning from High School to College

Students faced several difficulties in their transition from high school to postsecondary education. Common themes included:



Time Management

Many students struggled with balancing coursework, extracurricular activities, and personal responsibilities. The increased independence required in college was a significant adjustment.

Student Quote: "Professors expect you to know how to manage your time, but no one ever taught me how. I felt overwhelmed trying to keep up."



Academic Rigor

The increased demands of college coursework were a surprise to some students, as they found it difficult to keep up with the fast pace and higher expectations.



Lack of Self-Advocacy Skills

Students felt unprepared to advocate for their accommodations and support needs. Some had difficulty navigating disability services and understanding their rights.

Student Quote: "I wish someone had helped me practice self-advocacy before college. I didn't know how to request accommodations or even who to talk to."



Access Barriers

Some students encountered challenges accessing disability support services, including long wait times, unclear policies, and a lack of proactive communication from institutions.



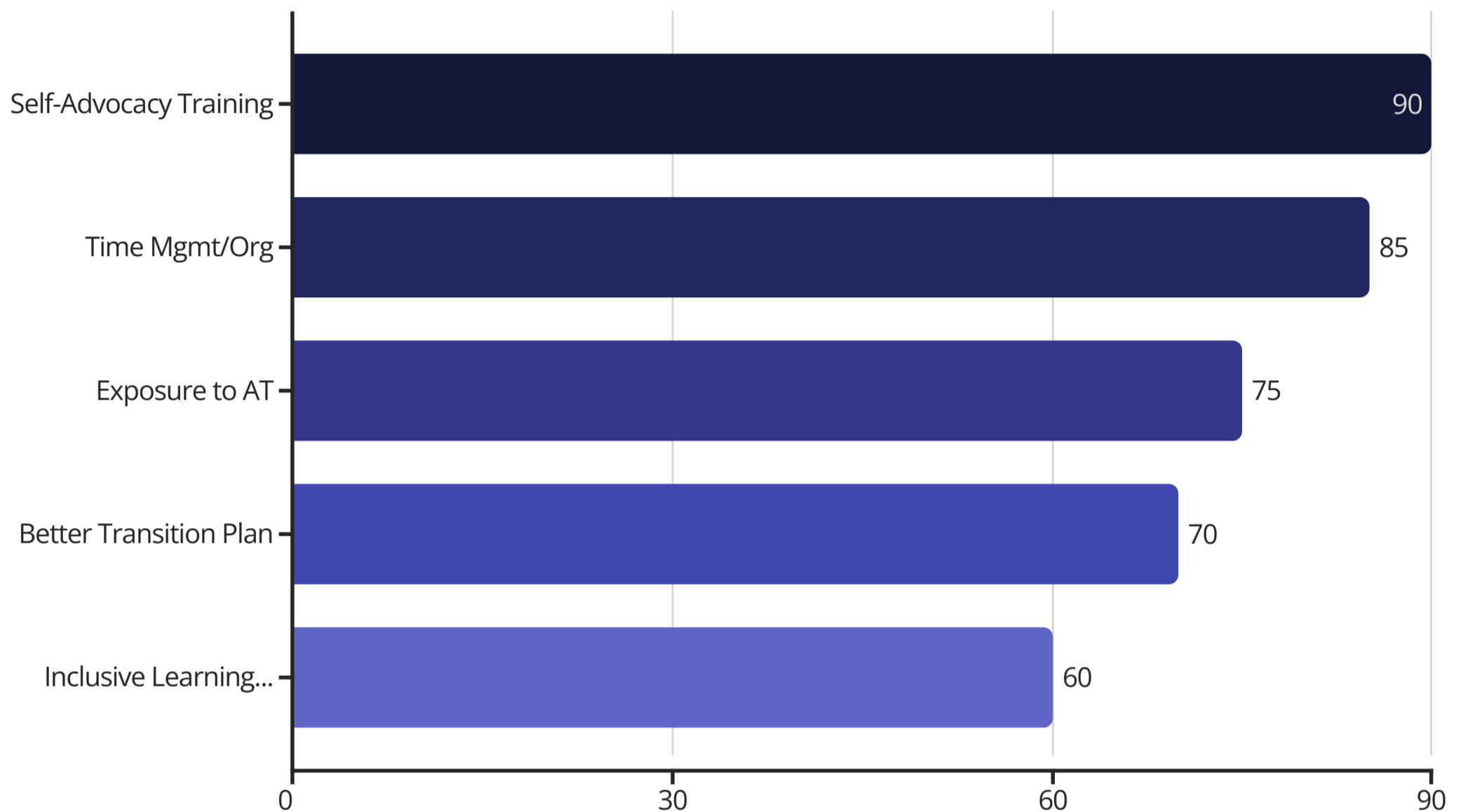
Social and Emotional Challenges

Many students experienced isolation or difficulty forming connections due to a lack of inclusive spaces or peer support networks.

Student Quote: "It was hard to find a community of students like me. I often felt alone navigating both academics and disability support."

Supports Students Wish They Had in High School

Respondents identified several areas where high schools could have better prepared them, including:



Student Quote: "I wish someone had taught me how to manage my schedule and ask for help before I got to college. It was a steep learning curve."

Student Quote: "In high school, I never had to advocate for myself because my teachers handled accommodations for me. In college, I had no idea where to start."

Detailed Look at Desired Supports

Training in Self-Advocacy

Many students wished they had been taught how to effectively advocate for their needs, communicate with instructors, and navigate disability support services in college.

Student Quote: "I had no idea how to advocate for myself in college. If I had learned how to talk to professors and request accommodations earlier, I would have been more confident."

Instruction in Time Management and Organization

Managing coursework, deadlines, and independent study was a major challenge for students who had not been taught these skills in high school.

Student Quote: "College professors expect you to already know how to stay organized and manage deadlines. I struggled a lot because I never had to do that in high school."

Greater Exposure to Assistive Technology

Some students were unaware of the technology available to support their learning, such as screen readers, note-taking apps, and speech-to-text software.

Student Quote: "I didn't even know assistive technology existed until I got to college. If I had learned about it earlier, I would have had an easier time with my classes."

Better Transition Planning in IEP and 504 Plans

Some students felt that their transition planning was inadequate, and they were not fully prepared for the differences between high school and college accommodations.

Student Quote: "My transition plan didn't really prepare me for what college would actually be like. I wish I had practiced self-advocacy and independence before graduating."

"I had no idea which services I could access after high school. If someone had connected me with adult agencies earlier, I wouldn't have felt so lost."

Students benefit when IEP teams facilitate early connections with agencies such as:

- **Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR)** for employment-related services.
- **Developmental Disabilities Administration (DDA)** for long-term supports.
- **Colleges and universities, including community colleges and vocational schools**, to learn about disability services offerings.
- **Assistive technology providers, such as those groups listed at the DSHS website:**
<https://www.dshs.wa.gov/dvr/assistive-technology>

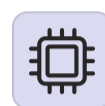
What the Research Says

Recent studies have highlighted key factors influencing the postsecondary success of students with disabilities. Research underscores the importance of self-advocacy, access to assistive technology, executive functioning skills, and effective transition planning as crucial determinants in easing the transition from high school to college.



Self-Advocacy and Transition Planning

Studies indicate that students with disabilities often struggle with self-advocacy in postsecondary settings due to inadequate preparation in high school. A study from the *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability* (Dong et al., 2024) found that students who had explicit self-advocacy training in high school reported significantly higher confidence in requesting accommodations and navigating disability services in college.



Assistive Technology Use

Research from the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* suggests that early exposure to assistive technology, such as text-to-speech and speech-to-text software, improves educational outcomes for students with disabilities by increasing accessibility and independence.



Institutional Barriers and Faculty Support

Findings from the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report (2024) highlight ongoing challenges with faculty reluctance to implement accommodations and institutional policies that make accessing support difficult. The GAO recommends increased faculty training and institutional reforms to streamline the accommodation process.

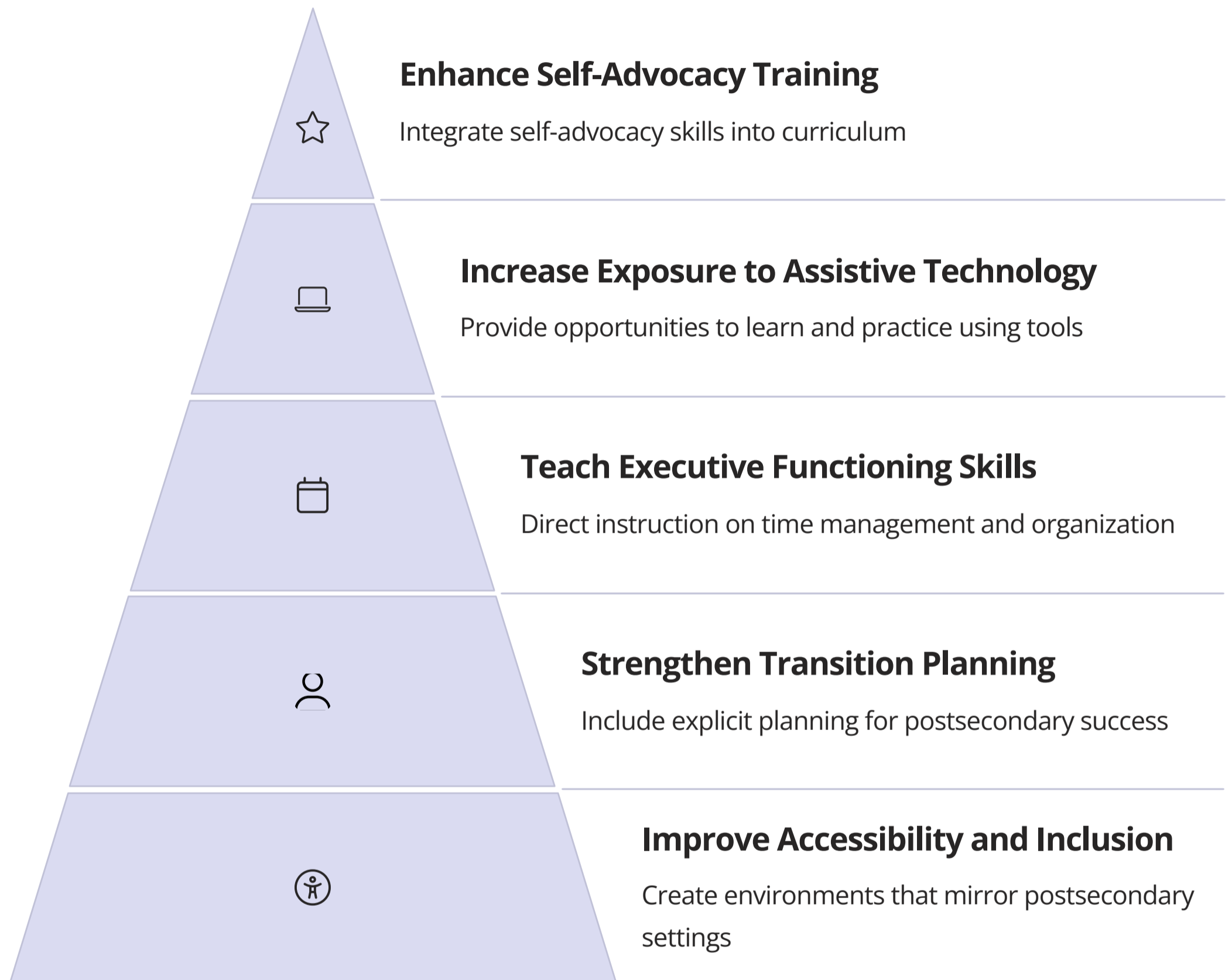


Peer Support and Inclusive Environments

Studies emphasize the need for inclusive peer support networks. Research by Lipka et al. (2020) found that students with disabilities who engaged in disability-related student organizations and peer mentoring programs reported higher social integration and retention rates in college.

Recommendations for K-12 Schools

Based on these findings, we recommend that K-12 institutions take the following actions to improve post-secondary readiness for students with disabilities:



These recommendations are based directly on student feedback and research findings, addressing the most significant gaps in current transition practices.

Enhancing Self-Advocacy Training

Schools should integrate self-advocacy skills into their curriculum, ensuring students understand their rights under disability laws and are equipped to request accommodations effectively. This should include role-playing exercises, peer mentoring, and direct instruction on navigating postsecondary disability services.

Understand Your Disability

Students should be able to explain their disability, how it affects their learning, and what accommodations help them succeed.

Know Your Rights

Students should understand disability laws like the ADA and Section 504, and how these laws apply in educational settings.

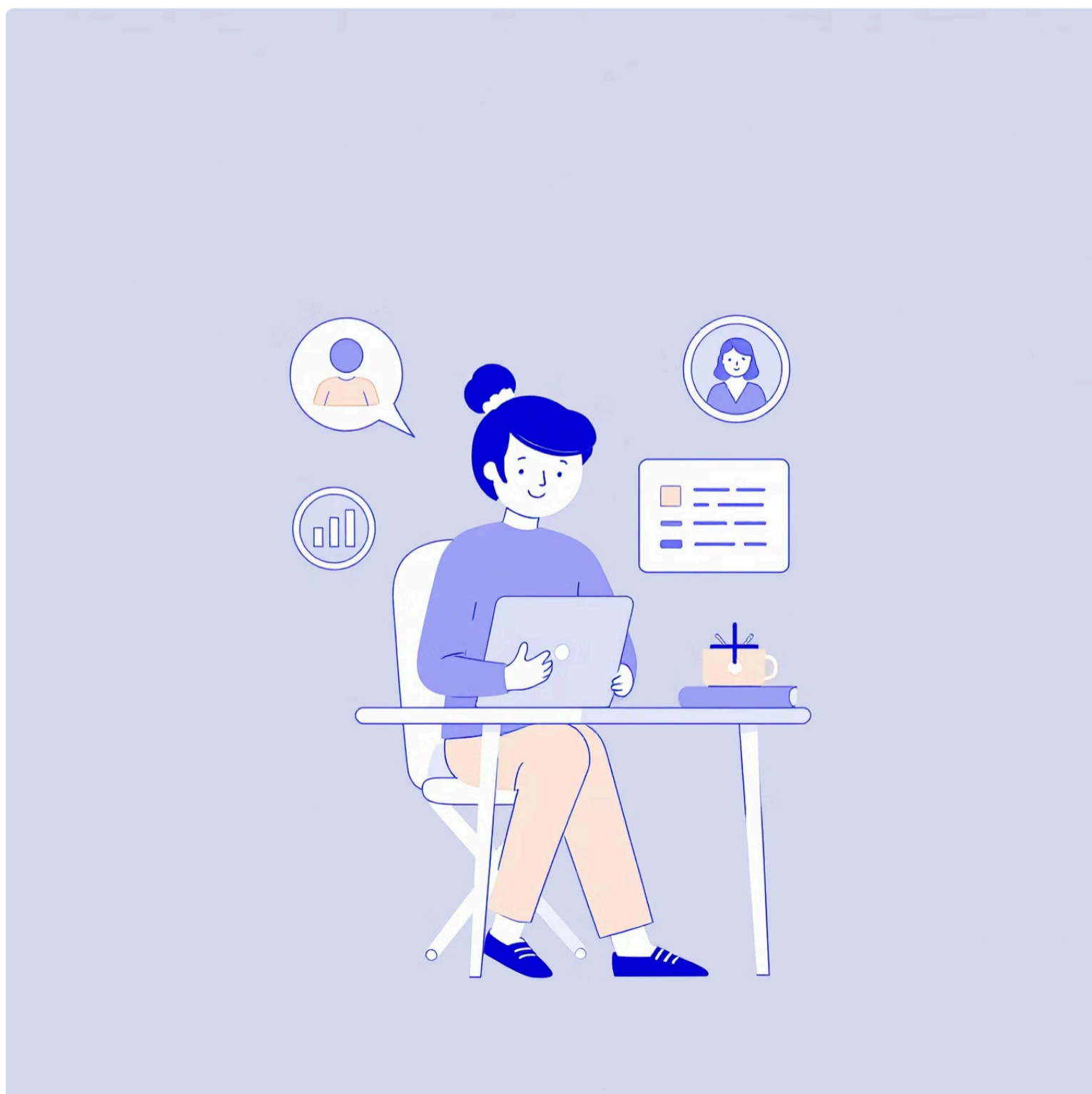
Practice Communication

Students should practice explaining their needs to teachers, administrators, and peers through role-playing and real-world scenarios.

Navigate Support Systems

Students should learn how to identify and access support services at colleges and universities.

Student Quote: "I had no idea how to advocate for myself in college. If I had learned how to talk to professors and request accommodations earlier, I would have been more confident."

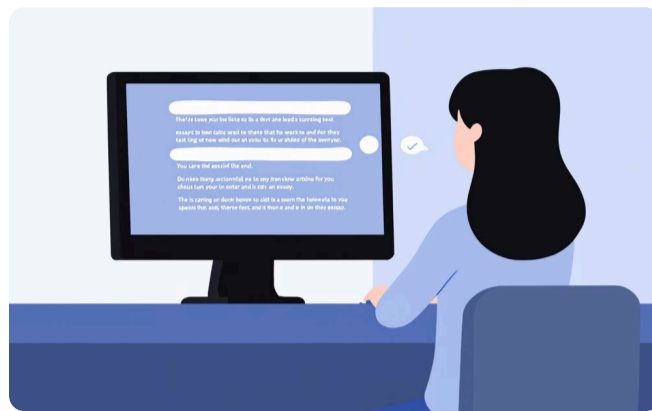


Increasing Exposure to Assistive Technology



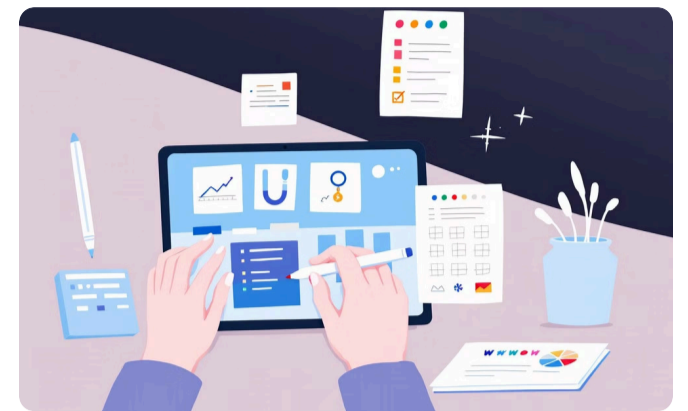
Text-to-Speech Software

Programs that convert digital text into spoken words, helping students with reading difficulties or visual impairments access written content.



Speech-to-Text Tools

Applications that convert spoken words into digital text, assisting students with writing difficulties or physical disabilities.



Note-Taking Applications

Digital tools that help students organize information, record lectures, and structure their thoughts in accessible formats.

High schools should provide students with opportunities to learn and practice using assistive technology tools that they may encounter in college. Schools should also ensure that teachers are trained in these technologies so they can support students effectively.

Student Quote: "I struggled in my first year of college because I wasn't familiar with the tech that could have helped me. High school never introduced me to these tools."

Teaching Executive Functioning Skills



Schools should offer direct instruction on time management, organization, and study strategies to prepare students for the independent demands of college. Teaching students how to use planners, break down assignments into manageable steps, and create effective study habits can make a significant difference in their post-secondary success.

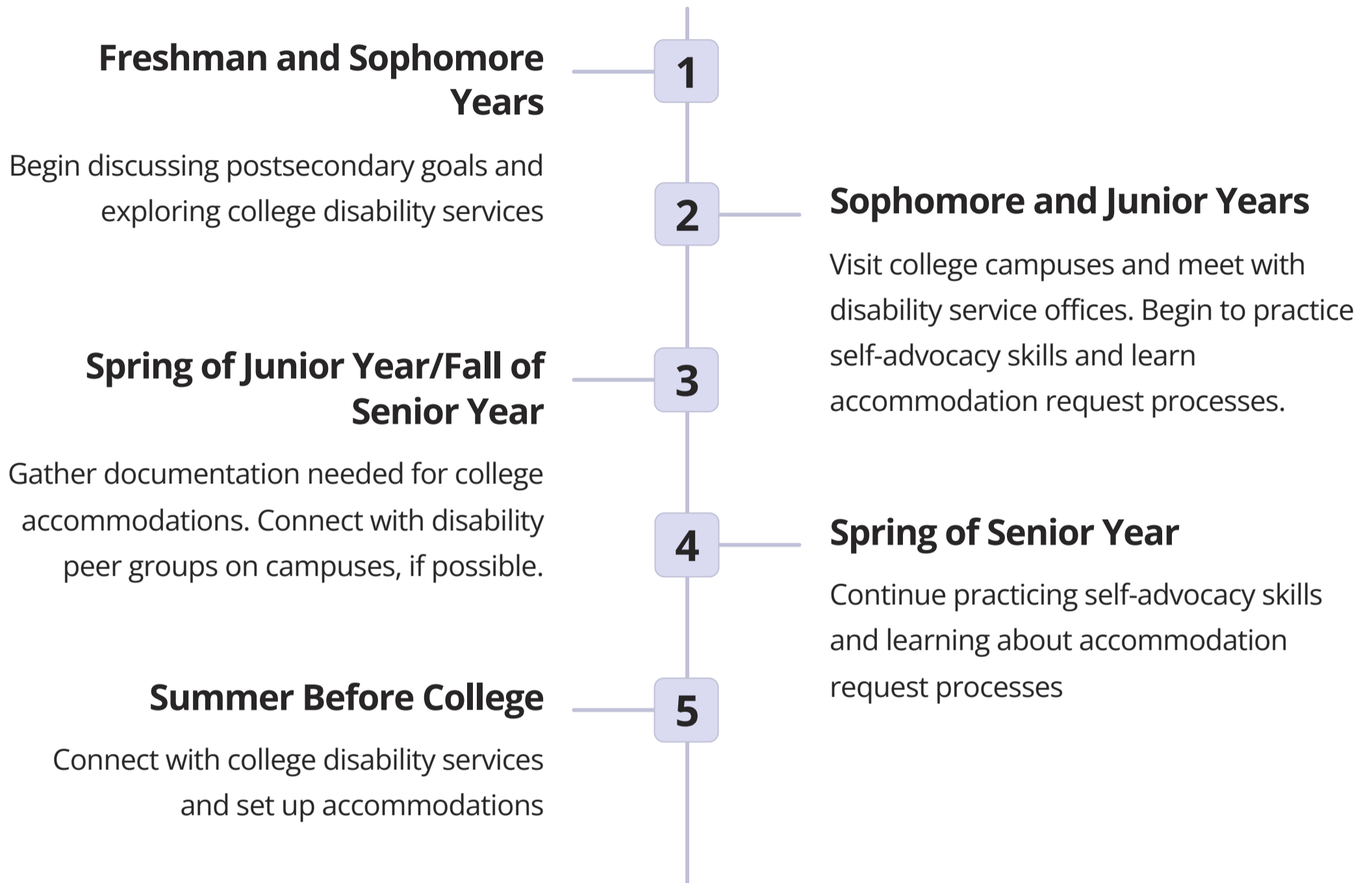
Key Executive Functioning Skills to Teach:

- Time management and prioritization
- Task initiation and completion
- Organization of materials and information
- Planning and goal setting
- Self-monitoring and reflection
- Seeking psychological support and reducing stress

Student Quote: "College was overwhelming because I never learned how to manage my time. I wish I had been given more responsibility in high school to practice these skills."

Strengthening Transition Planning

IEP and 504 Plan transition services should include explicit planning for postsecondary success, including partnerships with colleges and universities to ease the transition. Schools should host information sessions where students can meet disability service coordinators from local colleges and understand the differences between K-12 and postsecondary accommodations.



Student Quote: "My transition plan just checked boxes. I wish someone had actually walked me through what to expect and how to prepare."

Improving Accessibility and Inclusion

Schools should create environments where students with disabilities can practice self-advocacy and experience inclusive education that mirrors postsecondary settings. This includes universal design for learning (UDL) principles, flexible learning formats, and better collaboration between special education and general education teachers.

Universal Design for Learning

Implement UDL principles that provide multiple means of engagement, representation, and action/expression to accommodate diverse learning needs.

Inclusive Classroom Practices

Train all teachers in inclusive practices that benefit students with and without disabilities, creating a more accepting and supportive learning environment.

Collaborative Teaching Models

Foster collaboration between special education and general education teachers to ensure consistent support and accommodations across all classes.

Student-Led IEP Meetings

Encourage students to lead their own IEP meetings, practicing self-advocacy in a supportive environment before college.

Student Quote: "I never felt like I belonged in high school, and that made it harder to adjust to college. Schools need to do more to make students with disabilities feel included and valued."

Conclusion

This survey underscores the need for more robust support systems in K-12 education to help students with disabilities navigate the transition to college successfully. By implementing the recommendations above, Washington schools can foster greater inclusion, equity, and preparedness for students with disabilities, ultimately improving their educational and career outcomes.

By addressing these key areas, schools can better prepare students with disabilities for the challenges and opportunities of postsecondary education, helping them achieve their full potential and contribute their unique perspectives and talents to society.

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