

# Haines COMMUNITY CONVERSATION



ELEVATING OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Ask any young person what they most look forward to about life after high school and expect to hear some very familiar themes. Students are quite likely to mention things like getting a great job, going off to college, finding a good place to live, using their talents to make a difference, making new friends, contributing to their community, and finding a place of belonging. Each of these aspirations can be an important part of living a rich and enviable life. Although many students make this transition successfully, many others do not. Their dreams and plans for adulthood do not always come to pass after graduation. This is particularly true for students who have disabilities or others who experience barriers. Yet schools—in close partnership with families and communities—can have a powerful and positive impact on the lives of students. Equipping students with the skills, experiences, relationships, and opportunities they need to find success in their careers, in college, and in community life is at the heart of high-quality transition education.



## What is a Community Conversation?

A *community conversation* is an engaging and effective way of identifying how a cross-section of community members might work together in compelling ways to address an important challenge. The focus of this local community conversation event was on generating ideas, sharing resources, and making connections aimed at strengthening career development and transition preparation for middle and high school students with disabilities attending Haines County School District. The community conversation took place on May 30 at the Haines County Extension Office classroom. 29 members of the community participated, including educators, school leaders, parents, students, disability agencies, and a chamber of commerce representative.

### The Mission of Haines County School District:

“...to provide an environment that enables every student to learn and become a good citizen.”

## What was the Focus of This Event?

Staff from *Transition Tennessee*—a Vanderbilt University project that supports schools in strengthening their transition programming—facilitated the event. They began by emphasizing the importance of working collaboratively to help young people achieve their aspirations for life after high school. They also highlighted the impact schools and communities can have when they invest in high expectations, strong instruction, authentic experiences, creative partnerships, and compelling programs for transition-age students with disabilities.

Using the World Café approach, the group next began a series of “coffeehouse” conversations at small tables in which they shared their best ideas related to three questions:

- What outcomes are important for students with disabilities in our community as they leave high school?
- What could we do to prepare students for success in all of these areas while they are still in school?
- How could we partner better with communities, employers, and families to support this transition?

Each round of small-group discussion lasted 15 minutes, providing every person with opportunities to share with and hear directly from as many as a



### Agenda

- **Welcome and Opening Remarks (5 minutes)**
- **Description of the Conversational Process (5 minutes)**
- **Round 1 Discussion in Small Groups (15 minutes)**
- **Round 2 Discussion in Small Groups (15 minutes)**
- **Round 3 Discussion in Small Groups (15 minutes)**
- **Round 4 Discussion as a Whole Group (15 minutes)**
- **Closing Remarks (5 minutes)**

1

What outcomes are important for students with disabilities in our community as they leave high school?

2

What could we do to prepare students for success in all of these areas while they are still in school?

3

How could we partner better with communities, employers, and families to support this transition?

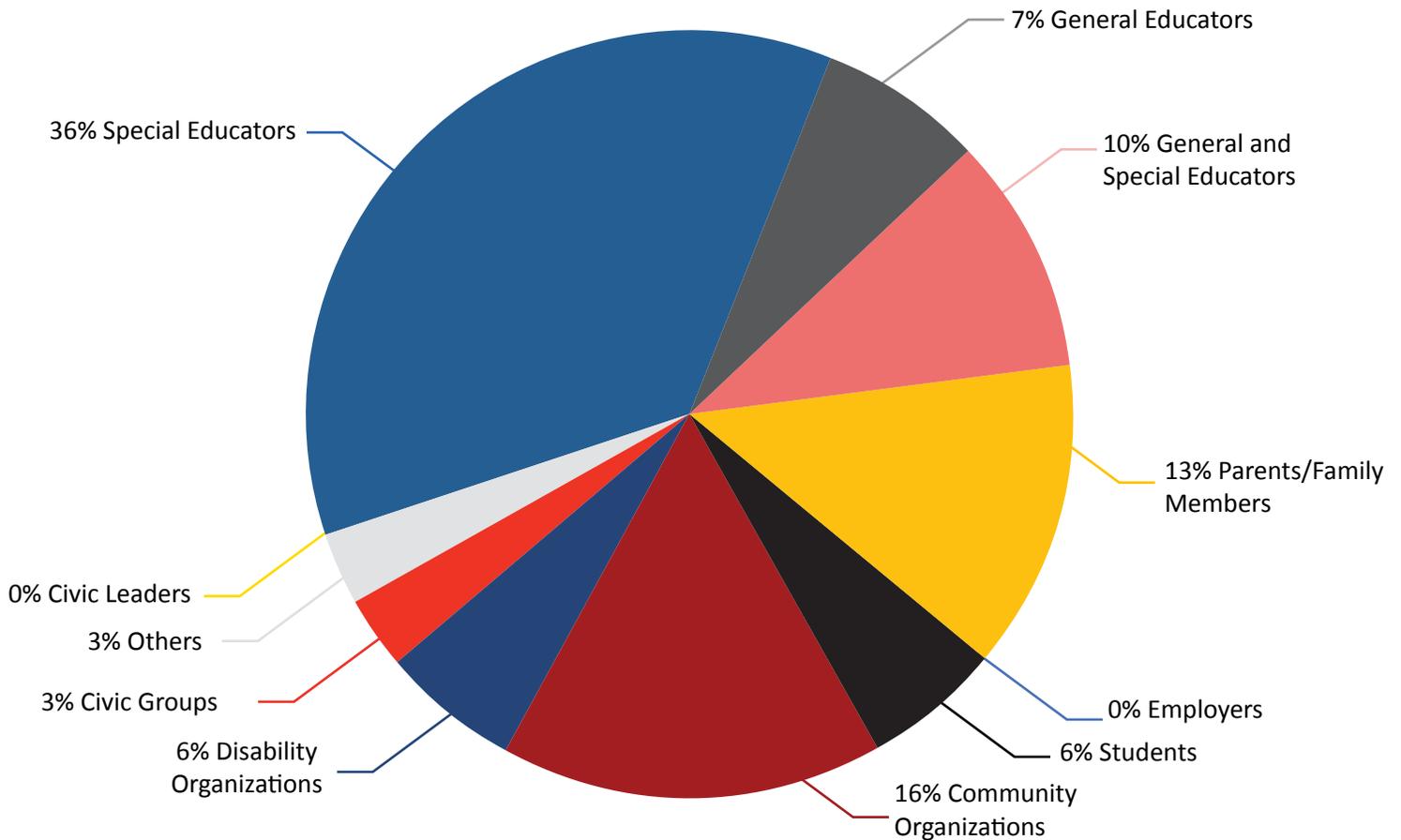
dozen other people from the community.

Attendees shared ideas, resources, or opportunities that could be drawn upon by the community, as well as built upon and refined the recommendations of others at their table. Table hosts wrote down every idea that was shared. Between each round of discussion, everyone switched tables and continued the conversation with a new combination of people.

The final round of discussion took place as a whole group. Individuals from different tables shared out the most promising ideas they heard or emphasized possibilities that had them particularly excited. After completing a short survey, many people stuck around to mingle and some exchanged business cards.



### Roles of Event Attendees





## A Sampling of Ideas Shared During the Event

After the community conversation event, all of the notes taken at each of the individual tables and during the whole-group discussion were compiled and organized. A sampling of these ideas and potential next steps is included below. A full report will be provided to the school later in the year.

### **Round 1: What outcomes are important for students with disabilities in our community as they leave high school?**

- Soft skills needed for getting/keeping a job
- Ability to self-advocate when necessary
- Basic academic skills
- Experience with volunteering in the community
- Experience with job shadowing/ job placement
- Plan for education and training after graduation

### **Round 2: What could we do to prepare students for success in all of these areas while they are still in school?**

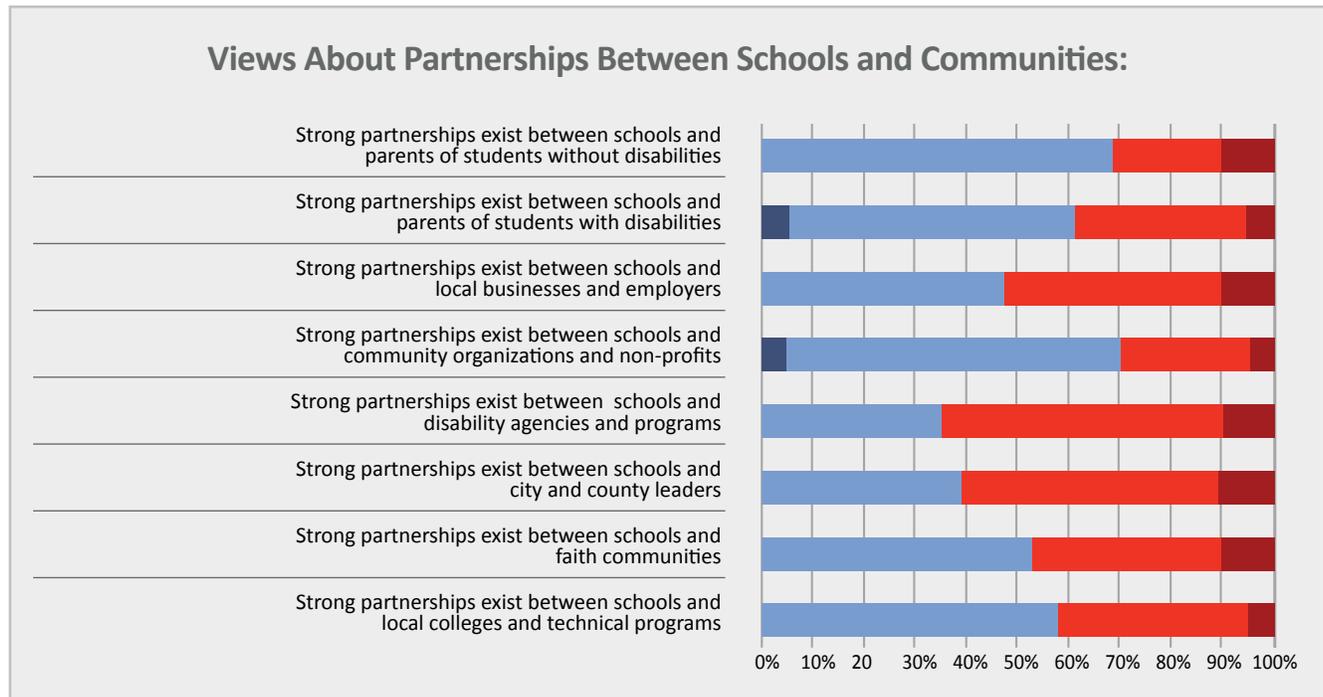
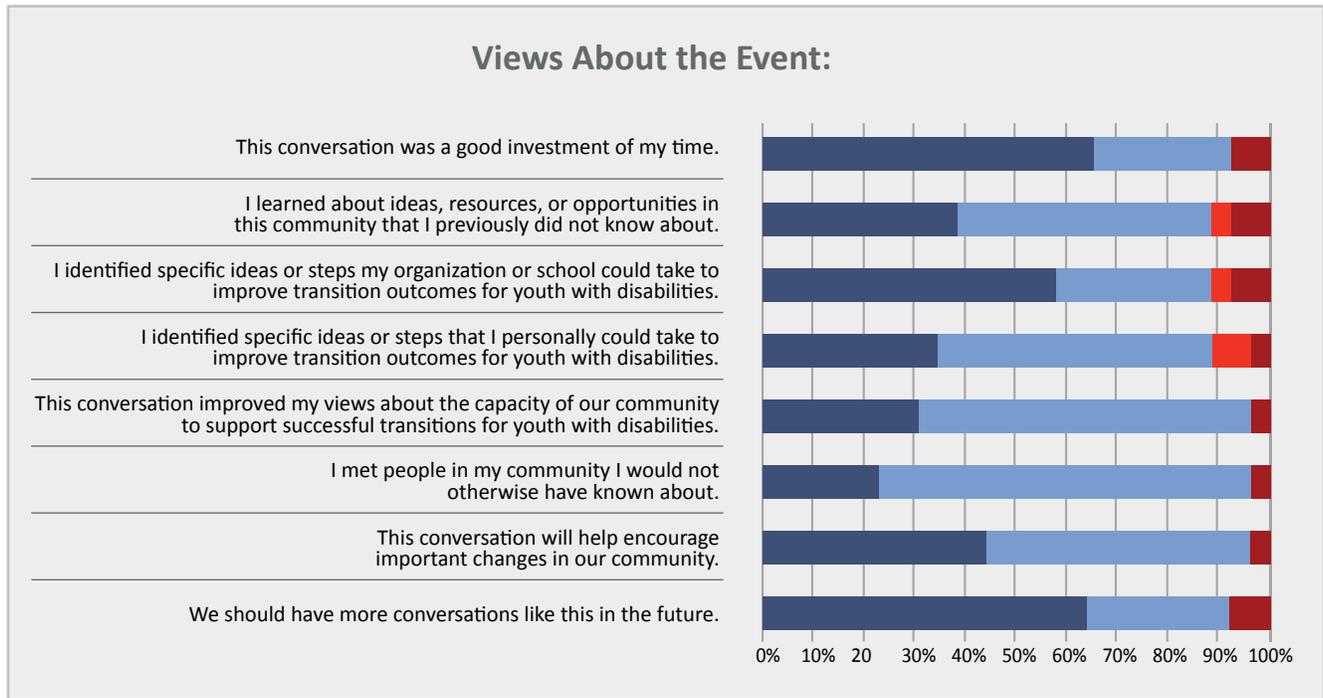
- Create more opportunities for students to have experiences working in different careers during the school year
- Teach soft skills directly to all students
- Provide exposure to all of the career options available to each student
- Take students on tours of post-secondary schools, and meet with the special needs coordinator to learn about accommodations
- Make the CTE classes accessible for students with disabilities (safety test issues)

### **Round 3: How could we partner better with communities, employers, and families to support this transition?**

- Host a transition fair with community members for the high school students
- Share information with parents and connect parents with each other
- Hold quarterly meetings with entire special education staff and school staff to coordinate efforts
- Create a transition board of stakeholders, including parents, special education staff, businesses, disability service organizations, etc
- Improve the transition portion of the IEP for each student

## Perspectives of Attendees

At the end of the event, each attendee completed an anonymous survey.





### Barriers to Successful Transitions

We asked attendees to share what they considered to be some of the biggest barriers to successful transitions for youth with disabilities in this community. Below are selected responses.

- Knowledge of what services and resources available after graduation, and how to access them
- Lack of communication between all stakeholders
- Perceptions of employers and community members regarding students with disabilities

### Community Strengths

We also asked attendees to share what they considered to be the biggest strength of their community. Below are selected responses.

- Haines County is a caring community
- Desire to improve communication between schools and postsecondary options
- Great teachers and education leaders
- Willingness to learn and improve

### Moving Forward

Events like these are just a starting point for a community. The ideas that were shared, the connections that were made, and the relationships that were formed can all be drawn upon to guide schools and their community partners as they move forward toward the goal of elevating outcomes for *all* students in their districts.

## About Transition Tennessee

*Transition Tennessee* is a technical assistance project funded by the Tennessee Department of Education. Our goal is to equip, encourage, and empower schools and communities to improve the transition preparation and post-school outcomes of students with disabilities.

To learn more about our resources and goals, visit [www.transitiontn.org](http://www.transitiontn.org).