Community Building for the Success of All Children

A Participant Resource for Dialogue to Action

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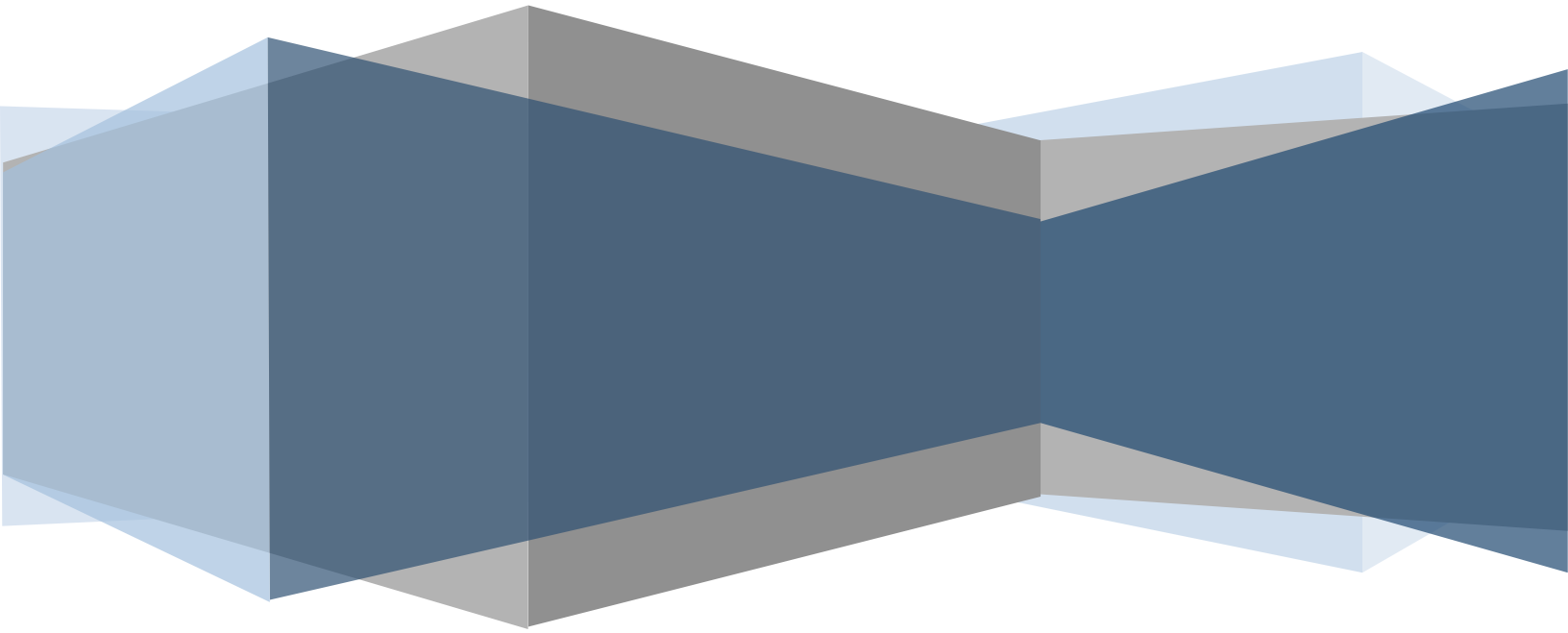

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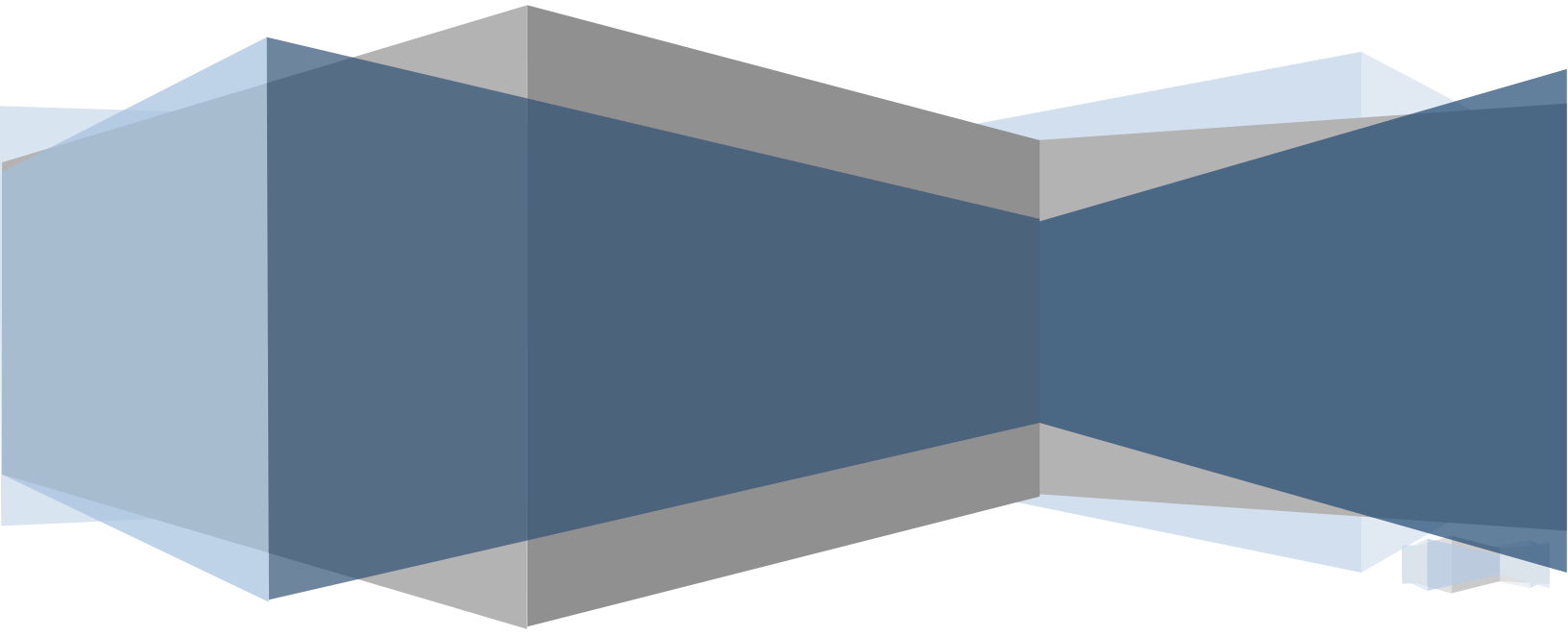

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the committed community members from Petersburg, Virginia, and Northampton and Halifax counties in North Carolina for their willingness to pilot and field test the *Dialogue to Action* participant and facilitator guides. Your feedback has helped us to refine these documents and make them more useful tools to communities seeking answers and clarifying their role in ensuring the success of all children.

Special thanks are due to Everyday Democracy (formerly the Study Circles Resource Center) for their cooperation in allowing us to adapt their model for the benefit of struggling communities.

Part 1
From Dialogue to Action

Throughout America, the plight of our children and youth has developed an increasingly familiar face. Rural, urban, or suburban, Black or White, Hispanic or Asian, rich or poor, male or female, our young people are facing challenges that generations before them never imagined.

Rather than despair or point fingers, many communities are beginning to ask why. With all the resources available to us as a world power, why are America's children not achieving well academically? Why are we not providing *all* of our children a quality education? And even if we were, is quality education as we have come to view it enough to ensure their success on the global or even local stages of the 21st Century?

Individuals and organizations are also beginning to ask, "What can we do?" *Community Building for the Success of All Children* is a community dialogue-to-action guide, intended to help you and your community answer that question.

The process outlined in this guide is an adaptation of the discussion guide and format developed by Everyday Democracy (formerly the Study Circles Resource Center). It is a powerfully engaging process that helps diverse stakeholder groups find an entry point and a venue for working together for the success of all children.

Why Success for *All* Children?

Nearly every public statistic tells us that our children are at risk – low achievement, high drop-out rates, increased violence, early court involvement, teen parenthood, alcohol and drug use, persistent poverty. While these issues impact children of all backgrounds, they impact children of color more than others, making them more susceptible to failure than others.

Beliefs about why some children do not succeed in the "land of opportunity" vary with individual perspective. Some believe the lack of success is due to widespread disregard and neglect while others place blame on the children and their families. Some of the most common views include the following:

- Parent's don't care and don't get involved with their children's lives.
- Schools are not doing what they are supposed to do to educate children for success.
- Illegal residents are draining resources needed to address the issues.
- Society has launched an attack on poor and minority people.
- Poor and minority people are to blame for their own plight; they are lazy, short-sighted, and envious of each other's success.
- The issues that challenge our youth are complex and therefore command complex, multi-layered solutions.
- The challenges facing our youth have commanded few satisfactory solutions from those in authority, and none that speak positively to the needs, interests, and communities of people of color and poverty.

Yet, in the face of the many challenges, some children, including children of color and poverty, *have* managed to succeed. Research and experience attribute that success to a number of things, including…

- Individual motivation and resiliency.
- Strong family support.
- Caring adults who mentor, guide, and protect.
- Supportive communities that claim all of the children as their own.

Our different perspectives suggest that we will not all agree on either the causes or the remedies for the lack of success of large numbers of children. What is obvious, though, is that unless we do something to stem the tide, America will lose its standing as a world power. Middle class Americans will be unable to maintain their relatively high standard of living, violence will escalate within our borders and our families and communities will disintegrate – totally.

Why Community Building

The challenges facing our young people did not originate in one place. Likewise, solutions to those challenges will not be found in one place or in one set of actions. Solutions will require multiple supports – home, school, community, institutional, governmental and faith-based. Some of the necessary supports exist in community already; others will need to be developed. Almost always, a vision for how those supports interlock to ensure that all children's needs are met has to be developed. That vision in turn must be supported by progressive policy, informed practice, and broad based engagement of individuals in collaboration with governmental and non-governmental entities. Such is the work of community building.

Why Community Dialogues about the Success of All Children?

Justice oriented community building requires intentional effort to reach all sectors of the community. It begins with dialogue and moves groups to specificity around identified issues. The process helps to…

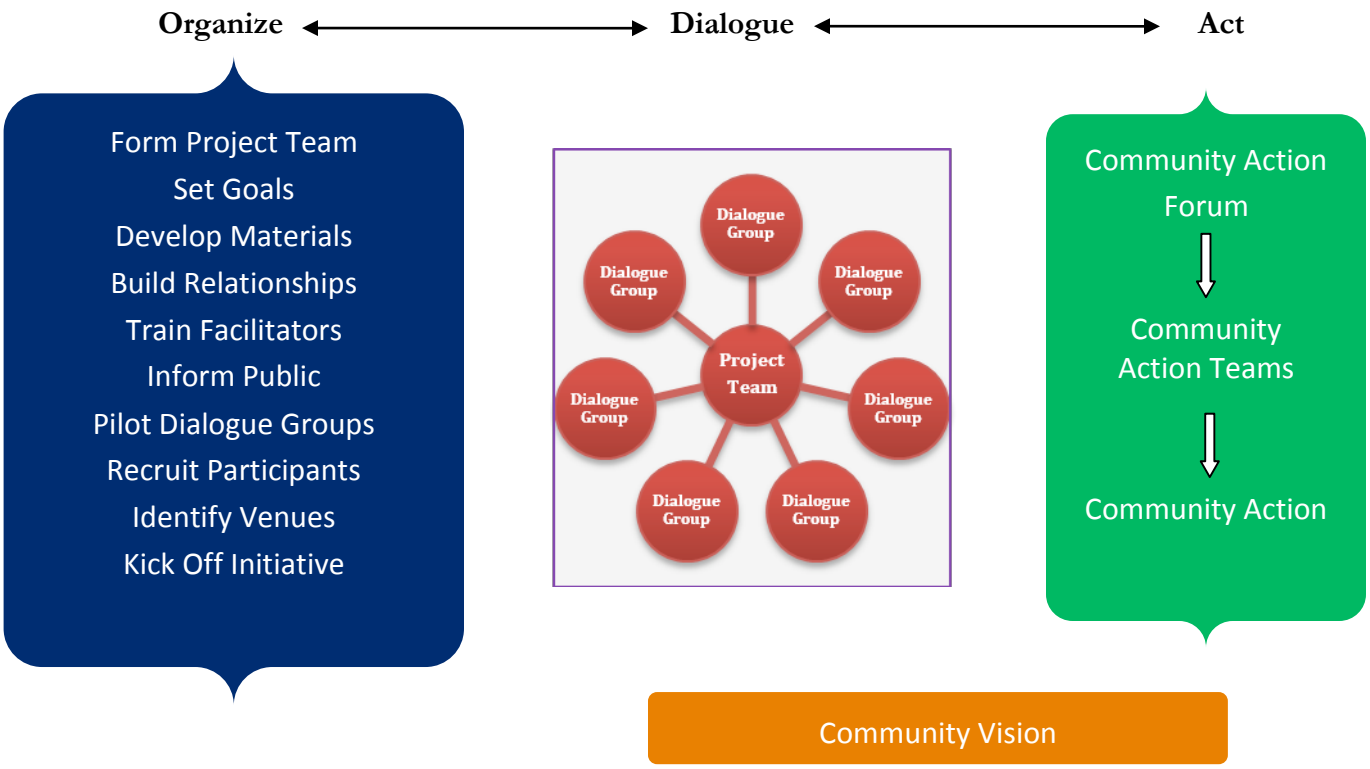
- Build trust and establish common ground across diverse stakeholder groups
- Broaden understanding of the nature and complexity of identified issues.
- Expand thinking about possible solutions.
- Create a unified vision and road map to action.
- Provide opportunity and support for new leadership to emerge.

How Does the Dialogue-to-Action Process Work?

The dialogue-to-action process begins with the formation of a Project Team comprised of diverse stakeholders and the identification of an issue or a key question. (See Figure 1) For the sake of the discussions you are about to undertake, the key question is simply, "What must our community look like to ensure the success of *all* children?"

The dialogue-to-action process in which you are participating began with careful planning by a Project Team of diverse stakeholders. The team set goals, developed outreach materials, recruited participants, and built relationships among various groups and organizations.

Figure 1. Community Dialogue-to-Action Process



Adapted from the Study Circles Resource Center

Facilitators were trained, meeting places confirmed, and a community-wide kickoff held to explain the purpose and recruit more participants.

Over the next few weeks, many small groups will meet simultaneously. Each group will include eight to twelve people of diverse backgrounds and views. Each will meet for four two-hour sessions. All groups will follow the same discussion guide with the help of two trained facilitators.

In **Session 1**, participants will get to know each other, share their thoughts and reflections on success, and receive data that show how young people in the community are faring.

In **Session 2**, participants will analyze the data they received in Session 1 to explore the question of how well the community is serving its young people and discuss why some children are thriving and others are not.

In **Session 3**, participants will create a vision of what their community must look like in order for all children to thrive.

Session 4 focuses on how to bring the vision created in Session 3 to reality. There will be ideas for individual and group action as well as for schools, businesses, faith-based groups, local government and other sectors.

After all of the dialogue groups have completed their fourth session, each group will report its recommendations for action in a community-wide **Action Forum**. The community-wide group will prioritize the recommendations and participants will be asked to sign onto **Action Teams** to develop and implement the selected ideas. **Project Team** members will compile all of the Action Teams' action plans in a community **Dialogue to Action Plan** with a timeline to be shared with the broader community. Community members who might not have participated in the dialogue or Action Forum will be invited to participate on an Action Team.

The Dialogue to Action Plan is a publishable document that can serve as a guide to action, a tool for evaluation, and a proposal for funding and other support. It should be distributed broadly and held up as a significant community accomplishment.

Part 2
COMMUNITY BUILDING FOR THE SUCCESS OF ALL CHILDREN
A Community Dialogue to Action Process

Ground Rules for Dialogue Participation

Following are some suggested ground rules. They are intended to help focus the discussion and ensure that discussion sessions are productive. They are also intended to make sure everyone gets a chance to be heard and to feel safe participating in the discussions. You may suggest others.

1. Start and end on time.
2. Share air space.
3. Respect the views of others.
4. Maintain confidentiality.
5. Speak for yourself.
6. Help the facilitator keep things on track.
7.
8.
9.
10.

COMMUNITY BUILDING FOR THE SUCCESS OF ALL CHILDREN
A Community Dialogue to Action Process

Session 1: How have our lives shaped our ideas of success?

In **Session 1**, participants will get to know each other, share their thoughts and reflections on success, and receive data that show how young people in their community are faring.

Agenda (2 hours)	
Welcome	(5 minutes)
Introductions	(15 minutes)
Dialogue Process	(5 minutes)
Ground Rules	(10 minutes)
Discussion	(60 minutes)
Conclusions	(10 minutes)
Questions & Answers	(15 minutes)

Discussion Questions

Think back to your own childhood and communities.

- What did success mean to you, your family, and your community? What did success look like?
- What contributed most to your success or that of others you know? What were the biggest barriers to success in your community?
- How have your ideas and images of success changed over the years?
- What would it mean for all children in your community to be successful?

Some Commonly Held Assumptions

- **Assumption 1:** ***If you get a quality education, you will be successful.***
  People who hold this viewpoint tend to think that education is the key to success. Anyone who gets a good education can be successful.

- **Assumption 2:** ***In America, everyone who tries can succeed.***
  This viewpoint assumes that if people are not successful, it is because they have not tried. It is their fault. America is the "land of opportunity" for everyone.

- **Assumption 3:** ***It is the school's responsibility to see that every child succeeds.***
  People with this viewpoint believe that teachers and school leaders are the experts and the holders of greater knowledge. It is their job to ensure that all children succeed, regardless of their home and community setting.

- **Assumption 4:** ***All children succeed in communities where community members view "all the children in the community as children of the community."***
  This viewpoint assumes first that all children can succeed and second that achieving success is a communal effort. If the community makes children central to its vision and plans, it would ensure the presence of and access to the necessary supports and experiences for success.

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Notes and Action Ideas

COMMUNITY BUILDING FOR THE SUCCESS OF ALL CHILDREN
A Community Dialogue to Action Process

Session 2: How well are we serving our children?

In **Session 2**, participants will analyze the data they received in Session 1 to explore the question of how well the community is serving its young people and discuss why some children are thriving and others are not.

Agenda (2 hours)	
Welcome	(5 minutes)
Reflections on Session 1	10 minutes)
Session Overview	(10 minutes)
Review of Ground Rules	(5 minutes)
Discussion	(60 minutes)
Conclusion	(15 minutes)
A Look Ahead	(5 minutes)
Questions & Answers	(10 minutes)

Discussion Questions

Think about the data we have reviewed.

- What surprised you? Why?
- What overall themes, trends, and relationships did you discover?
- What stories do the data tell about how we are serving our children overall?
- In which areas are we most effective? Where are we least effective?

What Do You Think?

- **Assumption 1:** ***Ones race and socio-economic background determine the quality of services he or she receives.***

  People with this view believe race and economics determine how agencies, institutions, and businesses respond to them and the quality of services they receive. Society is basically unjust and unfair.

- **Assumption 2:** ***Parents and community members do not make strong demands for quality services for children.***

  This assumption reflects a belief that parents and community members are apathetic and do not step up to advocate and demand the best for their children.

- **Assumption 3:** ***Only elected and public officials can be held accountable for ensuring that young people get quality education and services.***

  People with this viewpoint tend to believe that accountability for children's success rests with public officials. Public officials make the policies and the laws that contribute to or inhibit success.

- **Assumption 4:** ***The community has all the services children and families need to be successful.***

  People with this view believe all the necessary supports for child success are in place. Parents and children do not take advantage of what is available. They are not motivated.

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Notes and Action Ideas

COMMUNITY BUILDING FOR THE SUCCESS OF ALL CHILDREN

A Community Dialogue to Action Process

Session 3. What Does Community Building Have to Do with the Success of Children?

In **Session 3**, participants will create a vision of what their community must look like in order for all children to thrive.

Agenda (2 hours)	
Welcome	(3 minutes)
Reflections on Session 2	(8 minutes)
Session Overview	(3 minutes)
Review of Ground Rules	(2 minutes)
Discussion	(90 minutes)
Conclusion	(5 minutes)
A Look Ahead	(3 minutes)
Questions and Answers	(6 minutes)

Imagine a Community

Discuss and brainstorm possible outcomes and activities for the following features of communities in which children are prepared to succeed.

- **Feature 1: All children succeed in communities where community members view "all children in the community as children of the community."**

Possible Outcomes	Possible Activities

- **Feature 2: All children succeed in communities where family support and development are valued and maintained.**

Possible Outcomes	Possible Activities

- **Feature 3: All children succeed in communities that deliberately connect children to their authentic culture and heritage.**

Possible Outcomes	Possible Activities

- **Feature 4: All children succeed in communities where the needs and welfare of children are central to community visioning and planning.**

Possible Outcomes	Possible Activities

Consider Our Assets

Community assets are those people, places and physical characteristics, organizations and associations, institutions and private enterprises that can contribute to ensure success for all children.

- People – Seniors, artists and crafts people, newcomers, demographic concentrations (racial, ethnic, socio-economic), potential partners and allies and other people resources and their expertise
- Organizations and Associations – Town offices, churches, businesses and cultural groups, organizations, social clubs, fraternities and sororities, community development associations, alumni associations
- Institutions – Schools, colleges, libraries hospitals, economic development and industrial councils
- The Private Sector – Banks, businesses, corporations, business and professional chains

Consider Our Strengths

A community's strengths are those things that contribute to its identity – heritage, cultural features, history, political life, unique partnerships, etc.

Envision a Community

Picture your community as a strong place where all children are being prepared to succeed. Two key questions guide the community visioning process.

- What would the community look like if its assets and strengths were leveraged and focused on the success of all children?
- How would conditions and outcomes for children change if the entire community were focused on children's success?

COMMUNITY BUILDING FOR THE SUCCESS OF ALL CHILDREN
A Community Dialogue to Action Process

Session 4: What specific actions will we take?

Session 4 focuses on how to bring the vision created in Session 3 to reality. There will be ideas for individual and group action as well as for schools, businesses, faith-based groups, local government and other sectors.

Agenda (2 hours)	
Welcome	(3 minutes)
Reflections on Session 3	(5 minutes)
Session Overview	(3 minutes)
Review of Ground Rules	(1 minute)
Discussion	(90 minutes)
Conclusion and A Look Ahead	(18 minutes)

Think about Action

Think about actions that can be taken individually or collectively to ensure success for every child. Here are some ideas to consider.

- During each of the previous sessions, you noted action ideas that might be carried out to ensure success for children. From the various lists of action ideas, which ones do you think are most important?
- In session two, we examined education and student academic achievement, juvenile justice, health, economic and other relevant data concerning the overall condition of the young people as well as the general condition of the community. What did we discover from the data in terms of gaps and pressing needs? What action ideas might respond to the concerns raised as we examined relevant data?
- In Session 3, we envisioned our community as a place where all children succeed. What themes united our views? What new ideas surfaced?
- Of the action ideas identified, which ones will move us closer to our vision?
- Of the action ideas identified, which ones can strengthen or enhance efforts and activities already in place?

Who Can Do What?

Consider the list of action ideas. Who or what community entity can be instrumental in carrying them out? Consider what the following groups can do. There might be other groups as well.

- Community-based agencies and organizations
- Faith-based groups
- Schools and the school system
- Families
- Young people
- Law enforcement and the court system
- Business and industry
- All of us, working together

What Are the Priorities?

NOTES

NOTES

“It is when we are in dialogue

that we are most human.”

--Hannah Arendt