



# **KITCHEN TABLE CONVERSATIONS TOOLKIT**



All materials contained in this document are the sole property of the Fund for Educational Excellence and may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission.

The Fund for Educational Excellence would like to thank the Jacksonville Public Education Fund for allowing us to source some of the following content from its One by One materials and Leadership for Educational Equity for its assistance in developing the training materials contained herein.



## Table of Contents

1. Overview of the Fund for Educational Excellence.....	4
2. Objectives of the Project.....	5
3. Components of Conversation.....	6
4. Roles for Kitchen Table Conversations.....	7
5. Additional Info/Location.....	10
6. Agenda.....	11
7. Invitation Worksheet.....	12
8. Sign-in Sheet.....	13
9. Pre-Conversation Survey.....	15
10. Phone Invite Script.....	16
11. Email Script.....	17
12. Host Opening Statement Template.....	18
13. Meeting Summary/Notes Form.....	19

## OVERVIEW OF THE FUND

The Fund for Educational Excellence is a Baltimore-based non-profit organization that supports promising innovations to increase student achievement in City Schools. We serve as a critical ally to the district as it works to ensure that students have the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in college and in the 21st century global workforce.

At the Fund, we focus our energies on improving City Schools at a systemic level to make it a place where all children can thrive academically. We are proud of the role we play in improving graduation rates, promoting the importance of strong school and teacher leaders, and identifying key levers for improving student outcomes.

As Baltimore's most experienced and trusted education intermediary, the Fund works to align district priorities and community needs and expectations. We do this in three primary ways:

- **Analysis and Engagement.** The Fund aims to build demand for great public education for all students in Baltimore City's public schools, resulting in changes to policy and practice that will produce significant gains in student achievement.
- **District Fundraising.** The Fund works closely with district and funder leadership to shape innovative reform initiatives for potential private investment. As grant manager for these private dollars, the Fund ensures that implementation goals are met, funds are used in accordance with grant guidelines, and results are disseminated to appropriate stakeholders.
- **District Innovation Support.** The Fund leverages a strong understanding of the education challenges and opportunities facing the district to identify, adapt and implement reform strategies with a track record of success to meet the unique needs of City Schools students.



## OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT

Over the past six years, Baltimore City Schools has undertaken a series of ambitious reform efforts designed to push greater resources and supports out to the schools and provide the environments that students need and deserve to learn in. From fair student funding through the focus on effectiveness to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Buildings Initiative, there can be no doubt that City Schools is putting all of its brain power and political will into strategies it believes will help students make significant learning gains.

Despite these years of intense reform efforts in Baltimore City Schools, students are not making the kind of learning gains their parents want for them and their city needs for them. For instance,

- Fully 55% of 4<sup>th</sup> graders in Baltimore City Public Schools scored below basic in reading on the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) – as opposed to 43% for all large cities participating in the Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA).<sup>1</sup>
- Fifty-four percent (54%) of City Schools 8th graders scored below basic in math on the NAEP in 2013. For large cities overall, 35% of 8th graders scored below basic in math on the NAEP in 2013.<sup>2</sup>
- One-third of 9<sup>th</sup> graders in City Schools (33.3% in 2012) have to repeat the grade.<sup>3</sup> Poor performance in ninth grade is a major risk factor for dropping out of high school.<sup>4</sup>
- Only two-thirds of high school students (66.5% in 2012) graduate on time.<sup>5</sup>

The pace of change in this district, while steady, remains slow. We as a city have been too slow to engage in a public discussion with families and communities around promising reforms that could change the course of our children's lives.

### **Baltimore Citizens on Baltimore Schools: a large-scale community listening effort**

With a new incoming City Schools CEO poised to assume his duties in July 2014 and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Buildings initiative in full swing, this seems like a particularly appropriate moment in time to examine what Baltimore City residents want for and from their public schools. To that end, over the first half of 2014 the Fund will conduct a large-scale neighborhood-by-neighborhood study of public opinion about our schools in order to develop a set of recommendations from Baltimore communities for the incoming CEO. In order to do this, we plan to hold between 85 and 130 in-person 'kitchen table' conversations with small groups of residents in every Baltimore neighborhood.

Volunteers will form the backbone of this community listening effort, and we are excited to involve so many people invested in the success of our schools in carrying out this study. There are several volunteer roles to fill, meaning opportunities for Baltimore residents with a variety of interests and skill sets.

---

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2013 Reading Assessments

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2013 Math Assessments

<sup>3</sup> Baltimore City Performance Report, 2013, <http://msp.msde.state.md.us/>

<sup>4</sup> 4 MacIver, Martha Abele, "Gradual Disengagement: A Portrait of the 2008-2009 Dropouts in Baltimore City Schools," Baltimore Education Research Consortium, August 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Baltimore City Performance Report, 2012, <http://msp.msde.state.md.us/> (On-time graduation equivalent to four-year cohort graduation rate.)



## COMPONENTS OF A CONVERSATION

Kitchen table conversations are an opportunity for Baltimore neighborhoods to engage in a rich discussion about what they want for their public schools. What we hear from Baltimore residents in these discussions will be used to acquaint the incoming City Schools CEO with the educational priorities of the city as a whole, as well as needs in individual neighborhoods. As such, it is important that each kitchen table conversation follow the same basic structure and address some of the same questions. The Fund will provide a facilitator for each conversation who will follow this approach to the discussion:

- I. What we want for our neighborhood and schools
- II. Current state of our schools
- III. Closing the gap: How do we get from where we are to where we want to be?
- IV. Key themes and takeaways from today's discussion

### **20 min: WHAT WE WANT FOR OUR NEIGHBORHOOD AND SCHOOLS**

- How would you describe your neighborhood today?
- How do public schools contribute to your vision for this neighborhood?
- (If time) In what ways does your description align with your ideal vision for the neighborhood and in what ways does it differ?

### **20 min: CURRENT STATE OF OUR SCHOOLS**

- What are your impressions of Baltimore City Public Schools?
- What is City Schools doing well? What could be improved?

### **20 min: CLOSING THE GAP: HOW DO WE GET FROM WHERE WE ARE TO WHERE WE WANT TO BE?**

- What, if anything, does City Schools need to do differently to achieve the vision we outlined earlier?
- What role should City Schools play? What role does the neighborhood play? What role could you play?

### **15 min: KEY THEMES AND TAKEAWAYS**

- Facilitators will sum up the themes he/she hears in the conversation and ask the group if the summation reflects the conversation.

## ROLES FOR KITCHEN TABLE CONVERSATIONS

The **conversation host** organizes a neighborhood-level conversation in his/her community. S/he will determine an appropriate day and time for a 90-minute discussion – keeping in mind when participants are most likely to be available. The host will also secure a location for the conversation (see **Selecting a Location** on page 10 for more information).

The host will then invite between 20 and 25 neighborhood residents to the discussion with the aim of having between 8 and 10 participants in the discussion group. When thinking about whom to invite, we ask that hosts try as much as possible to invite participants who reflect the demographic make-up of the community – in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, and age. (The Fund will provide each host with a demographic profile of his/her neighborhood in order to help hosts identify the appropriate mix of invitees.) We also ask the host to invite one person to be a scribe who will take notes during the conversation.

As part of the invitation, hosts should be sure to let participants know that we will be making audio recordings of each conversation in order to ensure that we are capturing everyone's thoughts and responses truly and accurately.

On the day of the conversation, the host should set up the space beforehand, including seating, tables, and any refreshments. Before the facilitator frames the discussion, hosts will provide welcoming remarks to the group about the importance of this conversation and why participants were invited.

**Conversation facilitators** are there as impartial guides to frame and focus the discussion and keep everyone on track. They may or may not be residents of the neighborhood where the conversation is taking place. They will be trained by the Fund to use a standard set of questions and facilitation strategies, so we can ensure a consistent experience across neighborhoods.

Once the host has finished his/her welcoming remarks, the facilitator will frame the conversation for participants and guide the discussion using the conversation guide found on page 11.

**Conversation participants** are invited by the host to the discussion. They are likely to be friends, neighbors, acquaintances, community association members, etc. They should be residents of the neighborhood where the conversation is taking place.

Conversation participants do not need to have a current relationship with or strong stated stance on Baltimore's public schools. We are looking for a representative sample of Baltimore City residents. Such a sample will no doubt include residents who went to Baltimore City Public Schools themselves or are currently students, substitute teachers, or members of community organizations who volunteer at the schools in their neighborhoods. It will no doubt also include residents without children or whose children attend parochial or other private schools and residents without ties to community groups involved in our schools.

## **CONVERSATION HOST GUIDELINES**

### **ROLE OF CONVERSATION HOST**

- Select guest list of 20 to 25 people from your community (as determined by the CSA map provided in your materials).
- Invite 20 to 25 guests of your choosing to participate in a community conversation.
- Select a date and time for the conversation.
- Recruit / invite one of the participants to take notes during the conversation.
- Arrange a location or venue for the conversation.
- Provide refreshments for the conversation.
- Record major themes on chart paper for participants to see (optional).
- Arrive at the conversation site at least one hour early in order to set up the room, including seating, lighting and temperature. Ensure that chairs and tables are set up in a way that allows participants to take notes if they choose to.
- If necessary, put up signs to direct people to the meeting room and restrooms.
- Determine where the sign-in sheet should go.
- Set up refreshments in a location that is easily accessible but will allow for minimal disruption of the discussion.
- Welcome participants and provide an opening statement about the importance of the conversation and why you invited participants to be a part of this discussion. Make sure to let participants know where both refreshments and restrooms are.
- Following the conversation, make sure any notes taken on chart paper are given to the facilitator to turn in to the Fund.

### **CONVERSATION HOST CHECKLIST**

#### **PLANNING**

- Find a place to have the meeting and confirm reservation with date and time.
- Send a card or email invite to guests at least three weeks prior to the meeting.
- Follow-up one week before the meeting to guests who have not yet responded to invite.
- Follow up one week before the meeting to guests saying they are coming to make sure you get a hard count.
- Reach out to the Fund for Educational Excellence if your guest count exceeds 16 people, so we can provide you with a second facilitator for the meeting.

#### **MEETING PREP**

- Arrange seats in the room in a circle or semi-circle with a table in the middle that the audio recorder can sit on.
- Put refreshments on a separate table located in a spot where access will not disrupt the conversation.
- Introduce yourself to the facilitator if you have not yet done so.
- Hang chart paper so that you can easily take notes during the meeting (optional).

#### **AFTER THE MEETING**

- Debrief meeting with facilitator to make sure the chart paper notes reflect the common themes and statements discussed.
- Optional: Send a thank-you note to your guests.

## FACILITATOR GUIDELINES

### ROLE OF COVERSATION FACILITATOR

- Pick up materials for the meeting from the Fund.
- Distribute and collect sign-in sheet and pre-conversation surveys from all participants.
- Set up and run audio equipment.
- Remain neutral about the topics under discussion; this will require an awareness of one's own biases and agenda and the ability to set these aside and really listen to participants.
- At points of disagreement, challenge people to consider others' perspectives and understand why others might think differently.
- Use the conversation guide to keep the discussion focused on the core questions and areas of reflection.
- Be mindful of time.
- Take notes for the summation of key themes at the end of the meeting.
- Be the facilitator, which means talk the least.

### CONVERSATION FACILITATOR CHECKLIST

#### PLANNING

- Contact the host you are paired with and make sure you know details of the location of the meeting.
- Pick up the conversation toolkit from the Fund office (800 North Charles Ave, Suite 400) at least two hours before the conversation is scheduled to start. If the conversation is scheduled for a weekend, pick up the scribe kit the Friday beforehand.
- Review the conversation toolkit and discussion guide.
- Practice introductory statement and framing for the meeting.

#### MEETING PREP

- Review the discussion guide again.
- Check to make sure you know how to operate the audio equipment and test that it is in a location that will pick up the conversation.
- Make sure chart paper is positioned in the meeting space.
- Lay numbered nametags on each chair.
- Write your name on a nametag and put it on.
- Write the norms on chart paper and hang them within sight of the participants.

#### AFTER THE MEETING

- Debrief meeting with host to make sure the chart paper notes reflect the common themes and statements discussed.
- Collect pre-conversation surveys, chart paper, and the sign-in sheet to return to the Fund office.
- Return notes, surveys, and audio equipment to the Fund office within one week of the conversation.

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Kitchen table conversations will happen in March, April and May 2014. On this timeline, we can analyze the data from the conversation transcripts and produce a report in June summarizing what we heard from Baltimore residents. Our goal is to be able to put the preliminary report and recommendations in front of the incoming CEO when he begins in July.

### SELECTING A LOCATION

When you hear ‘kitchen table conversation,’ you naturally think of a meeting or discussion between people seated around a kitchen table. However, anywhere in the neighborhood that is comfortable for and accessible to residents is a great place for a conversation. Where the conversation is held *will* have an impact on who participates and the quality of the discussion. Some other possible locations might include meeting rooms in churches, public libraries or community organizations. Depending on how active a particular community is, these sites may be difficult to secure, so it’s important to reserve the necessary space as soon as possible.

Things to look for in a conversation site:

- A place that people are familiar with and use frequently
- A place that is seen as part of the community
- A private home
- A place available on evenings or weekends
- A place that is sufficiently quiet and free of distractions to enable the facilitator and conversation participants to have a productive discussion
- A centrally located place with plenty of parking and/or near public transit
- A place that is accessible to people with disabilities

### MATERIALS NEEDED AT SITE

With the exception of refreshments, which will be provided by the host, the following materials needed for a kitchen table conversation should be included in the conversation toolkit that the facilitator picks up from the Fund before the conversation:

- Pens/pencils
- Name tags that the participants will only write their number on based on where they are sitting clockwise from the facilitator
- Sign-in Sheets
- Pre-conversation Survey
- Chart paper
- Audio equipment
- Fund for Educational Excellence one-pagers
- Refreshments (provided by the host)

## CONVERSATION GUIDE

### Helpful Tips/Troubleshooting

- Be mindful of airtime of each participant. **Direct questions to participants not talking** and politely interrupt participants who are monopolizing time.
- When introducing the ground rules for the discussion, let participants know that you may interrupt participants who have spoken a lot in order to hear from someone who has said very little.
- Let participants know you will be taking notes throughout the conversation.
- Encourage people to be specific in their responses.
- Do not panic if there is silence. After 30 seconds of wait time, ask if they would like the question repeated.
- If participants are not responding to the question and you have tried repeating and rewording, then move on to the next one.
- Pay attention to the timing of each question. Every person is not going to talk in each section. Make sure that you do engage every person during the meeting.
- Quickly summarize key themes you hear during each section.
- Ask clarifying questions such as: "Could you give an example?"
- Be mindful of ambient noise or soft voices so that the meeting will be picked up on the recorder. Encourage people to speak up.

### I. Introduction (15 min):

- Host welcomes participants and explains the purpose of the meeting
- Distribute sign-in sheet and pre-conversation surveys
- Participants introduce themselves by name and state reason for attending meeting
- Facilitator shares the format of the meeting, norms, and rules for recorded conversations
- **Facilitator announces s/he will turn on audio equipment , re-states that this conversation is being recorded, and receives affirmation from group.** Mention that participants will be addressed by their number and should address each other by their numbers going forward (optional).

### II. Neighborhood and schools (20 minutes)

- How would you describe your neighborhood today?
- How do public schools contribute to your vision for this neighborhood?
- (If there is time) In what ways does your description align with your ideal vision for the neighborhood and it what ways does it differ?

### III. Current state of our schools (20 minutes)

- What are your impressions of Baltimore City Public Schools?
- What is City Schools doing well? What could be improved?

### IV. Closing the Gap (20 minutes)

- What, if anything, does City Schools need to do differently to achieve the vision we outlined earlier?
- What role should City Schools play? What role does the neighborhood play? What role could you play?

### V. Key Themes and Takeaways (15 minutes)

Facilitators will sum up the themes he/she hears in the conversation and ask the group if the summation reflects the conversation. Then host will thank participants and the facilitator.

Please direct participants to email the Fund at [communitystudy@ffee.org](mailto:communitystudy@ffee.org) if they have questions, or if anyone is starting to dominate the conversation.





## KITCHEN TABLE CONVERSATION SIGN-IN SHEET

<b>Host:</b>	<b>Meeting Date:</b>
<b>Facilitator:</b>	<b>Place/Room:</b>

Name	Phone	Email	Address
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			
7.			
8.			
9.			
10.			
11.			



Name	Phone	Email	Address
12.			
13.			
14.			
15.			



## PRE-CONVERSATION SURVEY

This survey is anonymous, and all questions are optional. However, we are collecting this information in order to ensure that the participants in our conversations “match” the demographics of their neighborhood and the city.

Please circle the appropriate answer for each question.

### **Gender**

*What is your gender?*

- Male
- Female

### **Age:**

*Please indicate which age range you fall within.*

- 15 – 17 years
- 18 – 24 years
- 25 – 34 years
- 35 – 44 years
- 45 – 64 years
- 65 + years

### **Race/Ethnicity:**

*Please specify your race/ethnicity.*

- Black/African-American
- White
- Hispanic
- Asian
- Other Race
- Two or More Races

### **Income:**

*What is your total household income?*

- Less than \$25,000
- \$25,000 - \$40,000
- \$40,000 - \$ 60,000
- \$60,000 - \$ 75,000
- \$75,000 or more



## PHONE INVITATION SCRIPT

*This is intended to be a guide. Please modify and personalize it as you see fit!*

Hi, may I speak to \_\_\_\_\_? This is \_\_\_\_ and I am volunteering with the Fund for Educational Excellence. I wanted to be sure you saw the invitation to the Fund for Educational Excellence kitchen table conversation I am hosting. This is an opportunity to come together and share your thoughts on our schools and how they can better serve our kids and our communities. It will be a powerful opportunity to shape the future of Baltimore.

I thought you might be interested in representing our neighborhood in this conversation. Would you like to attend?

**If yes OR if a follow-up to yes RSVP:** Great, let me give you more details. [Share the time, date, and location. Give them directions, answer any questions, and let them know if you want them to bring anything.]

Also, I wanted to be sure to let you know that the conversation will be recorded so that the Fund for Educational Excellence is able to capture all of our thoughts and ideas to include in their report to city leaders. However, we will remain anonymous on the recording. Is that all right with you?

**If they express a problem with the recording:** I hope that you will reconsider, we really could use your voice in this conversation. I also want to remind you that you will be completely anonymous in the final report and on the recording.

**If you are having trouble with guest list:** I know you talk with a lot of other people in our community who would probably have a lot to contribute to this discussion. Is there anyone in particular you think I should add to the invite list?

**If not interested in participating:** I am sorry you won't be able to make it. Please let me know if your plans change prior to the meeting.

Thanks for your time.

**Make sure you are clear in this conversation that the conversation will be recorded. It will be reiterated at the meeting, but it is much better if they come prepared with that information.**



## E-mail Template:

**SUBJECT: Please join us for a conversation about Baltimore schools**

[Name],

I am writing to invite you to join us for a ‘kitchen table conversation’ facilitated by the Fund for Educational Excellence. The Fund is a local nonprofit dedicated to supporting student learning in City Schools and raising the level of dialogue around public education in Baltimore City.

I hope you will join me for a conversation with your neighbors about the current state of Baltimore schools – what is going well and what could be going better – and how we get to where we want our schools to be. Our conversation is one of many that will take place across the city, and it will inform a set of recommendations for the incoming City Schools CEO, Dr. Thornton.

### Meeting

Date:

Time:

Location:

Refreshments will be provided. Please let me know if you have any questions. Please RSVP by [date 10 days out]. Hope you can make it!

Signature



## Host Opening Statement Template:

### Host: An Individual

Good (morning/afternoon/ evening). My name is \_\_\_\_\_. Welcome everyone to our Baltimore Citizens on Baltimore Schools kitchen table conversation in (your neighborhood)! I volunteered to host this conversation because \_\_\_\_\_. Thank you so much for joining us to lend your voice to the direction of education in our city. *[If the conversation is not taking place in your home] I would also like to thank (name of host location) for welcoming us into their space.*

Please make sure that you have signed in and completed your pre-conversation surveys. [You may mention where the restroom and refreshments are located, if appropriate.] Now I would like to give everyone a chance to introduce themselves to the group and say a few words about why they decided to join us today. [Pause for introductions.] Now I would like to have our conversation facilitator (facilitator's name) lead us into the discussion.

### Host: An Organization

Good (morning/afternoon/evening). (Name of your organization) welcomes everyone to our Baltimore Citizens on Baltimore Schools kitchen table conversation in (your neighborhood)! My name is \_\_\_\_\_. (Your organization) volunteered to host this conversation because \_\_\_\_\_ [consider describing how your organization's mission complements the mission of Baltimore Citizens on Baltimore Schools]. Thank you so much for joining us to lend your voice to the direction of education in our city.

Please make sure that you have signed in and completed your pre-conversation surveys. [You may mention where the restroom and refreshments are located, if appropriate.] Now I would like to give everyone a chance to introduce themselves to the group and say a few words about why they decided to join us today. [Pause for introductions.] Now I would like to have our conversation facilitator (facilitator's name) lead us into the discussion.

## Meeting Summary/Notes Form

SECTION	QUESTION	NOTES
<b>Neighborhoods and Schools</b>	How would you describe your neighborhood today?	
	How do public schools contribute to your vision for this neighborhood?	
<b><u>Key Themes for this Section</u></b>		

<b>Current State of Our Schools</b>	What are your impressions of Baltimore City Public Schools?	
	What is City Schools doing well? What could be improved?	
<b><u>Key Themes for this Section</u></b>		

<b>Closing the Gap</b>	What, if anything, does City Schools need to do differently to achieve the vision we outlined earlier?	
	What role should City Schools play? What role does the neighborhood play? What role could you play?	
<b><u>Key Themes for this Section</u></b>		



FUND FOR  
EDUCATIONAL  
EXCELLENCE

Realize what's possible.

<b>Reflection</b>	3-5 Key Themes from the discussion	
-------------------	------------------------------------	--