

Family Suppers

A Community Listening Project

A city-wide
conversation
on youth, the
issues that affect
them and community-
based solutions that work



Empowering
Changing Liv

Family Suppers Training Manual

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In the Beginning...

Family Suppers were started in the spring of 2013 to engage north Nashville families and communities in dialogue around education. Conversations focused on parental involvement, community engagement and student academic achievement and success. In a series of six dinners, we were committed to listening to youth, families and community members, learning from their experiences and creating a plan of action in response to participant feedback.

“Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.”

~Stephen Covey, author,
“7 Habits of Highly Effective People”

We understood that, by listening, we could understand the needs of students and families in Metro Nashville Public Schools in ways we have not been able to understand in the past. By listening, we hoped participants would feel supported, heard and empowered to take action as advocates for themselves and their children in the public school system.

The Family Suppers turned out to be great learning experiences for the facilitators as well as the supper participants. What we experienced was far beyond our expectations—in only a moment we became a family-- eating, laughing and building relationships through friendly conversation.

Listening without projecting our own perceptions and needs, we were able to hear participants' deepest thoughts, understand student perceptions of the issues they face in school and get a windstorm of ideas for how the community can be more involved.

Listening is
the heartbeat
of Movement
Building.

Why Listen?

Listening is the heartbeat of Movement building. If we want to create social change, we have to stop talking, open our hearts and listen without judgment or assumptions.

When we listen, hear and respond our efforts to improve parent-school and student-school relations are organic and grassroots in nature. We move away from becoming advocates and support families as they take their power, own their experiences and needs, find their voices and take collective action to make the changes they want to see for Nashville's children and youth.

With Family Suppers, participants gather in the name of success for all students. Together, participants can see their value as individuals as well as the influence they can have in the school system if they work together, support each other and advocate collectively for what they believe their children need.

Purpose of the Family Suppers

Imagine a community where all members work to understand each other, celebrate together, and support each other during family and community times of need. The way to initiate the building of community is through first finding common ground. Finding common ground requires community members to ask questions of themselves and each other.

1. How are we alike?
2. How do we differ?
3. How do we complement each other in our differences?
4. What experiences do we have that are universal for us all or for at least a majority?
5. What are our needs?
6. Which of our needs are the same or similar?
7. What are the solutions to meeting our community needs?
8. How can we work together to make sure our common needs are met?

These questions outline the formula for community change. The deep listening that occurs during Family Suppers creates fertile ground for community-building and collective organizing that transforms the community and its members in the process.



The purpose of hosting Family Suppers is to find common ground amongst participants to work together and achieve collective goals on behalf of the community's youth.

~Rasheedat Fetuga
Gideon's Army



It's all about change...

...of self and community

When hosting Family Suppers, participants and facilitators take the first step in organizing their community for transformative change. In the process of building community, community members transform as individuals – becoming stronger, strengthening their support systems, expanding their understanding and broadening their reach within the community. This process becomes more meaningful than traditional community organizing because there is a bridging of the gap between the personal lives of the participants with their lives

trans • form

Verb
Make a thorough or dramatic change in the form, appearance, or character of

and struggles as members of a larger community. This stifles and even eliminates burn-out and drop-out because participants see how their community-building

and organizing efforts enhance their own lives on a personal and familial level. With a focus on personal transformation, participants metamorphose into stronger, more reflective leaders who have experienced radical breakthroughs and shifts in paradigms thus opening the floodgates for the community to experience revolutionary change where individuals mirror what they seek to create in the community. This level of community-building and organizing creates a Movement that is relationship-centered, built on the assets of the community, focused on the present and is closely, if not exactly, what the community envisions. This kind of change is both powerful and irreversible. This is the change we envisioned when creating the Family Supper model.

How It Works:

Family Suppers start out with a wonderful, but simplistic dinner that participants share together. The entire event is usually about an hour and a half to two hours long. The welcome and dinner last for about 45 minutes. After dinner, the event transitions into a discussion led by prepared

facilitators in small groups. We hosted our dinners on Tuesday evenings from 5:30PM-7:00PM, but you may host yours during the time that is best suited for your audience. At the end of the small group discussions, one to two people from each group report to the



Lorraine Stallworth facilitates an engaging group discussion after dinner.

whole group. Once everyone has reported, a facilitator will guide the group in selecting next steps. Usually next steps include one action and a follow-up meeting date. Actions could be anything from a community building project or an initiative to get more parents in the community involved in their children's education—the sky is the limit! If you are running short on time, it is okay to schedule a follow up meeting and determine next steps then, but it is best to schedule your agenda to include time to determine some level of action so that participants leave with a sense of satisfaction and empowerment knowing that they have something tangible they are coming back to work on and accomplish together.

**"THE SECRET OF
CHANGE IS TO FOCUS
ALL OF YOUR ENERGY,
NOT ON FIGHTING THE
OLD, BUT ON BUILDING
THE NEW."**

— SOCRATES

And.... ACTION!

Now that you understand the nature of Family Suppers, why they are important, and how they work, it is time for you to make it happen. Planning a Family Supper is a lot easier than you may think. All it takes is a little cooperation and planning to host a successful event. Let's plan it out!

STEP ONE- Determine who you are planning the event for and why.

Are you planning this supper for church members to discuss ways for your congregation to be more engaged in the community? Are you a teacher planning a supper for families and community leaders to find solutions around student drop-out or entrance to college? Or maybe you are a concerned student who wants to address youth violence in your community, city or school. Your purpose and your target audience will determine your planning so it is best to identify these two things and even put them in writing before moving to the next step.



STEP TWO- Create a planning committee. If you are a member of an organization hosting a Family Supper for other members, it is much easier if an established group within that organization hosts the event, but forming a new group can prove to be equally as successful. If you are an individual, you may gather friends or connect with other organizations. This is a creative process that allows you to determine what is best for you and your community. Again, the way you set-up your planning committee relies heavily on



**Original Nashville Family Supper
planning committee**

your purpose and target audience. It will also depend on if you are an individual seeking partnerships or part of an organization with members already in place to help. In creating your planning committee, you want to have 5-10 members depending on the size of your event. You may also need additional volunteers to assist with things like getting the word out and facilitating groups at the supper.

Now that you have a planning committee:

1. Determine the theme and target audience
2. Select a time and date
3. Find and reserve a location
4. Plan the agenda
5. Plan, write and print questions
6. Create a budget and plan the menu
7. Develop an outreach plan
8. Create flyers (optional)
9. Distribute flyers (optional)
10. Develop an invitation list of people to call
11. Order or purchase food
12. Prepare food (or pick up food if it is catered)
13. Create and print sign-in sheets
14. Purchase supplies (table decorations, markers, note paper, etc.)
15. Facilitate the overall meeting and keep time
16. Host the sign-in table
17. Serve food
18. Facilitate groups
19. Record notes
20. Type Notes

Creating an Agenda

If you plan a two hour event, this is what your agenda might look like:

5:30-5:40 Welcome and Introduction of the planning committee

During this time, people are arriving and signing in. You can welcome guests, introduce the planning committee, have an icebreaker or have guests introduce themselves. You can tell participants about the event, why you planned it, what you hope to accomplish by the end of the night and how the event will flow.

5:40-6:15 Dinner and Informal Conversation

Participants eat and enjoy conversation. You may play music or just enjoy the sounds of laughter and relationship building!

6:15-6:20 Transition

Bus tables. Participants can stay at their tables and participate in small group discussions or participants can be divided into groups and guided to their appropriate locations.

6:20-7:00 Small Group Conversations

Facilitators explain the power of the small group discussions and creating community change. Participants are lead in discussion with pre-constructed questions that guide them to identify their major concerns and ideas for solutions.

7:00-7:20 Whole Group Reporting

Small groups report back to the larger group, answers to the open-ended questions they were asked in their small groups.

7:20-7:30 Select a Priority and Schedule Next Meeting

From information given during small group reporting, participants select a priority issue to focus on collectively and schedule a follow-up meeting to begin planning and action. It is optional whether your team provides food at future meetings. Be sure to communicate to participants whether you will serve food or not.

7:30 Closing and Dismissal

Thank participants for coming. Collect all small group notes from facilitators. Dismiss participants in a way that is special to you.

Planning for Discussion

You will develop your questions in three parts. Below are examples to help you create your own questions around the topic that is relevant to your event.

Part One:

Identify Participant Motivation

1. What was your motivation for being present for this discussion tonight?
2. What is your relationship with Metro Nashville Public Schools? How are you impacted by the quality public education in Nashville?

Part Two:

Define the Problem

Academic Achievement Focused Questions:

1. What do you think is the greatest factor affecting student achievement in Metro Nashville Public Schools?
2. What do you think would be the most immediate cause of high student academic achievement in Metro Public Schools? How do you see these things being done in your family, school or community?
3. What needs to be done to increase student academic achievement? (Students, School, Family, Policy)
4. What do you see happening in the school system to increase student academic achievement?
5. How have these solutions affected student achievement? What have the results been? What still needs to be done?
6. What negative school experiences did you have as a child? How have these experiences affected your level engagement in your child's education? (Deeper Level Question)

Part Three

Identify Solutions

1. What kind of power do you feel you have to help students in Metro Nashville Public Schools succeed?
2. What can MNPS do to increase parental engagement in schools across the district?
3. Let's review, summarize and prioritize the issues we identified below. What solutions do you think will be most effective in addressing your two highest priority issues?

SIDE NOTES

- All questions should be open-ended. This means that there will be no questions where participants will answer "yes" or "no." We are facilitating discussion and yes/no questions can bring a really great conversation to a halting screech.
- Each group will responds to about 6 questions.
- All questions must be carefully developed in advance by Family Supper organizers.
- Questions usually start simple and continue with questions that require participants to reflect deeply to answer.
- Print the questions on flipchart paper in advance for each group so participants can have a visual aid to help with discussion.

Budget and Menu

Your budget will, of course, determine your menu and how many people you can feed. Your menu may be very simplistic, but it can still be something nice. For our Family Suppers, we served mashed potatoes, green beans, chicken and rolls. We had punch and also served cookies or cake slices for dessert. As you can see, this is a very simplistic menu, but it every meal was very nice and enjoyed by all participants.

Inviting Guests to Your Family Supper

Getting guests to attend your Family Supper can be fairly easy if you start in advance. If you are targeting members of your organization, you may want to create an online invitation or a meetup on www.meetup.com. If your supper is at a school, you may be able to utilize the school's automatic calling system to robo-call parents. If you are inviting members from a church or a collection of churches, adding the event to the church bulletin may be the most effective tool. If you are generating participants from the community as a whole, you may want to deliver flyers door-to-door and possibly even RSVP people as you speak with them.



It is always a good idea to RSVP guests so that you can plan ahead for the number of people who will be attending. Some people prefer to plan for a certain number of people and not ask people to make reservations. The choice is up to you.

Purchasing Supplies

There are not many supplies needed to have a successful Family Supper. Organizers can use table cloths and decorations if wanted, but planning is definitely needed to make sure there are plates and eating utensils, cups, napkins, serving dishes and utensils, printed questions, sign-in sheets, tables and chairs, ink pens, paper for note taking, large easel pad/flip chart paper with tape, markers and any literature you may have on your organization or the issues that will be discussed during the supper.

Listen without Interrupting

~Proverbs 18

Facilitating Great Conversations

Family Supper group discussions take place in small groups of 4-5. This number is flexible, but to make sure everyone is listened to and heard, we recommend that you keep your small group numbers at seven or fewer.

Facilitated group conversations are very powerful conversations based on deep listening and human connections. Participants listen to each other for the sole purpose of listening, understanding and connecting. Together, participants imagine the possibilities and create imaginative solutions to both old and new problems they face in their lives as part of a larger community.

During the welcome at the beginning of the event, the large-group meeting facilitator sets the stage, identifies the reasons for discussion and the outcomes hoped for. Once participants are in small groups, the small-group facilitator describes her understanding of the overall group objective and the specific goal of the session. Facilitator then reviews the questions and rules. The rules are very flexible and should encourage participants to create a safe space where everyone feels safe and where communication is meaningful and effective.

It is best when participants are encouraged to answer questions one at a time, listen without the intention of responding and wait until a person is finished speaking before speaking. Participants will get equal time to answer questions depending on the number of questions and the time allotted for conversation. The facilitator should also discuss proper ways for participants to respond when there is conflict, or when participants do not agree. When prioritizing issues the goal is to reach a consensus. Participants who cannot follow the group rules can simply be asked to participate as observers.

The Art of Facilitation

Meeting facilitators are probably the most important piece of the Family Suppers puzzle. The goal is to leave the event with issues identified and solutions to work toward. The event facilitator will make or break the process that helps each group reach its goals.

GOOD FACILITATORS:

1. Listen and do not skew the conversation by commenting
2. Drive the energy of the group and stimulate discussion
3. Encourage the group to generate ideas
4. Foster curiosity and excitement in the group
5. Stimulate dialogue
6. Keep the momentum flowing toward the ultimate objective
7. Manage time and do not let discussion run out of control
8. Listen! Listen! Listen!

Special Tips:

- Have name tags for participants so that you can call the names of participants who are contributing less or not at all. Call their names and questions or ask for feedback.
- Review the questions in advance if at all possible. Record the questions on flip chart paper.
- Make sure everyone contributes to the conversations. You may have to gently ease participants into the discussion.
- Don't let the conversation derail or take a wrong turn. It is your role to keep the discussion moving. If someone has an issue let them know that they are heard, but that you have to move on and keep the discussion moving. You can always come back if there is time.

After Group Discussion: A summary

When small group dialogue is completed the following occur:

- 1) Small groups report back to the larger group.
- 2) Participants reflect on the issues and solutions prioritized by the small groups and offer feedback.
- 3) Participants consider "Next Steps," which may include:
 - a) Planning a follow up meeting
 - b) Selecting an issue and a set of solutions as a large group to work on during the follow-up meeting
 - c) Developing individual or small group plans for action that address the issues
- 4) The group either determines their next step as a large group, or each group or participant will have a few minutes to communicate their "Next Steps." This is a part of the meeting that must be pre-planned and timed to ensure maximum effectiveness.
- 5) Schedule the follow up meeting.

As you can see, the Family Supper model is a phenomenally effective process that leads participants to action through reflection and collective decision-making. Now that you know how to plan and facilitate a Family Supper, you have no time to lose! Start planning now!