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Engaging Communities to Improve Employment Outcomes for Youth with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Despite progress in legislation, research, and service development, youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities continue to be employed at significantly lower rates than their peers without disabilities (Trainor et al., 2012). To improve employment outcomes at a local level, stakeholders must collaborate to identify community-specific interventions. One promising approach to facilitate these collaborations is community conversations.

“Community conversations” offer a novel, asset-based approach for launching and informing efforts to improve employment outcomes for young people with disabilities (Carter et al., 2009). These structured community events foster collaborative dialogue on expanding integrated job opportunities for people with disabilities and identifying a range of formal and informal solutions that reflect the priorities, culture, and available resources of a local community.

I conducted a longitudinal mixed-methods study to explore how seven diverse communities applied the community conversation approach to expand local employment opportunities for people with disabilities in their community. In the first phase of the study, I examined community motivations to participate in the project, how they personalized events to reflect their community culture, and what factors contributed to their success.

Although considerable consistency was found among the motivations to launch change efforts, each community identified unique priorities in their personalization of the events. Conversation attendees and organizers viewed these events as promising and productive pathways to begin change efforts. Recommendations to enhance the quality and richness of community conversations are identified.

OBJECTIVES

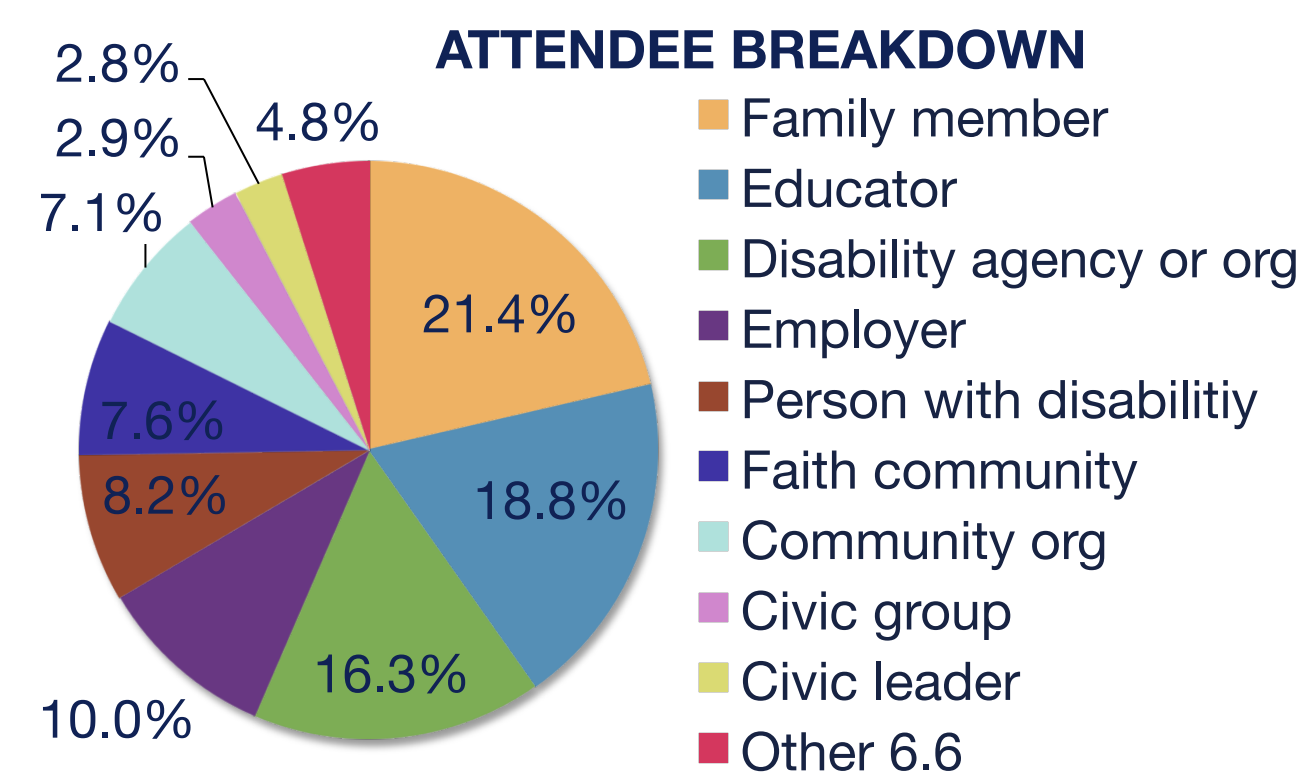
The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to examine how diverse communities applied the community conversation approach to expand local employment opportunities for people with disabilities and to identify factors that informed and strengthened their efforts.

Research Questions:

1. What motivated each community team motivation to launch local employment change efforts?
2. How did planning teams personalize their events to build on the strengths and unique features of their community?
3. What factors influenced the richness and quality of each event?
4. How did attendees view these events and their communities?
5. What community-generated strategies emerged within and across events?

PARTICIPANTS

- We analyzed ideas and feedback shared by the 548 community members who attended the seven community conversation events (M = 78; range, 12-161 per event)
- We interviewed the two lead organizers from each local planning team



METHOD & MATERIALS

Communities self-selected to participate in the project through a mini-grant application process, and two organizers from each team attended a group-based training. Local teams planned and carried out a community conversation with technical assistance from the research team. The first round of community conversations took place between July and November 2015, and two members of the research team attended each event. I provided copies of all transcribed data and survey results to organizers following each conversation. The organizers use this data to identify at least one promising idea to implement prior to their second community conversation 12-18 months later. Additionally, I conducted interviews with two lead organizers from each community.

We collected and analyzed several data sources to answer our research questions: including (a) in-depth interviews with two organizers from each community, (b) research teamer reflections from observing each event, (c) table host notes from small- and large-group conversations, (d) anonymous end-of event and follow-up surveys, and (e) permanent products from each event.

QUALITATIVE
Constant comparative analysis

QUANTITATIVE
Descriptive statistics (i.e., frequencies, means, and standard deviations)

CONCLUSION

- Although considerable consistency was found among the motivations and areas of individualization across events, the manner of implementation reflected the unique strengths, resources, and culture of each community.
- All communities emphasized the importance of including individuals with diverse strengths, abilities, roles, and experiences in event planning and implementation to enhance the richness and quality of the conversation.
- Feedback from attendees both immediately after the event and approximately six weeks later affirmed the social validity of this approach to community dialogue.

FUTURE RESEARCH

- Follow-along studies could provide important insight into how communities navigate long-term change efforts and the successes and struggles they face.
- Studies applying the community conversation approach to other transition topics such as interagency collaboration could contribute to the development of new interventions to improve post-school outcomes for youth with disabilities.
- Future studies measuring pre- and post-event employment outcomes for both the community and individual residents are needed to rigorously evaluate the community conversation approach and its outcomes.

RESULTS

WHAT MOTIVATED EACH COMMUNITY?



HOW DID PLANNING TEAMS PERSONALIZE THEIR EVENTS?

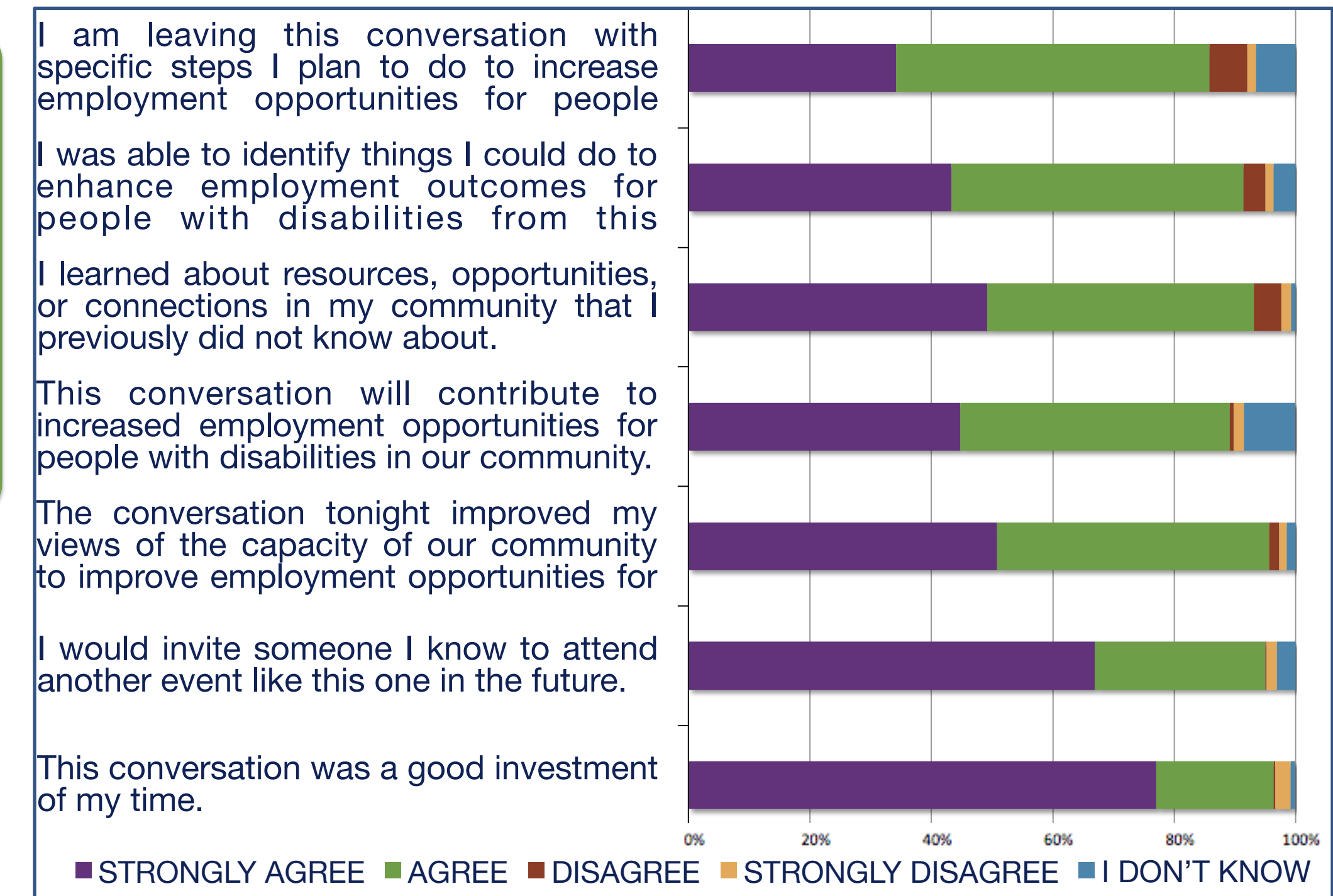


WHAT FACTORS INFLUENCED THE RICHNESS AND QUALITY?

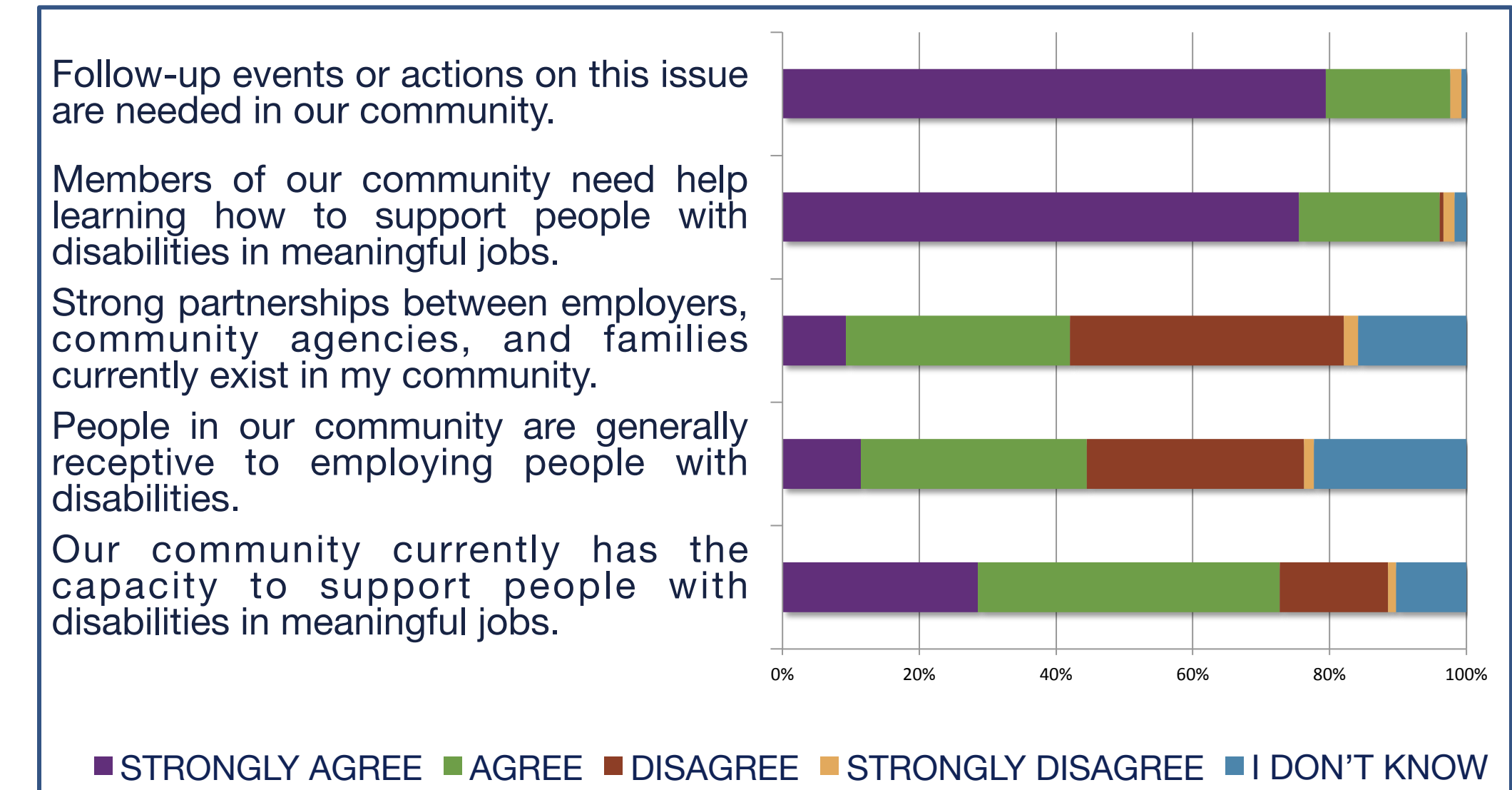
Effective Planning Team	Planning team included committed individuals with diverse strengths and roles, and began their efforts early in the planning process
Involvement of people with disabilities	People with disabilities were involved in the planning and implementation of the event
Compelling atmosphere	The event space, energy, and organization contributed to a welcoming and positive atmosphere
Mix of Attendees	Attendees represented a diverse mix of stakeholders, perspectives, and experiences
Prepared table facilitators	Table hosts understood their role and effectively facilitated rich conversations
Clear structure	The management, facilitation, and pacing of the event contributed to an organized conversation
Targeted Technical Assistance	Planning teams received trainings, resources, and technical assistance from the research team

(1) Brighton, (2) Gerst, (3) Gibblett, (4) Kipp, (5) Macory (6) Monteeagle, (7) Norton

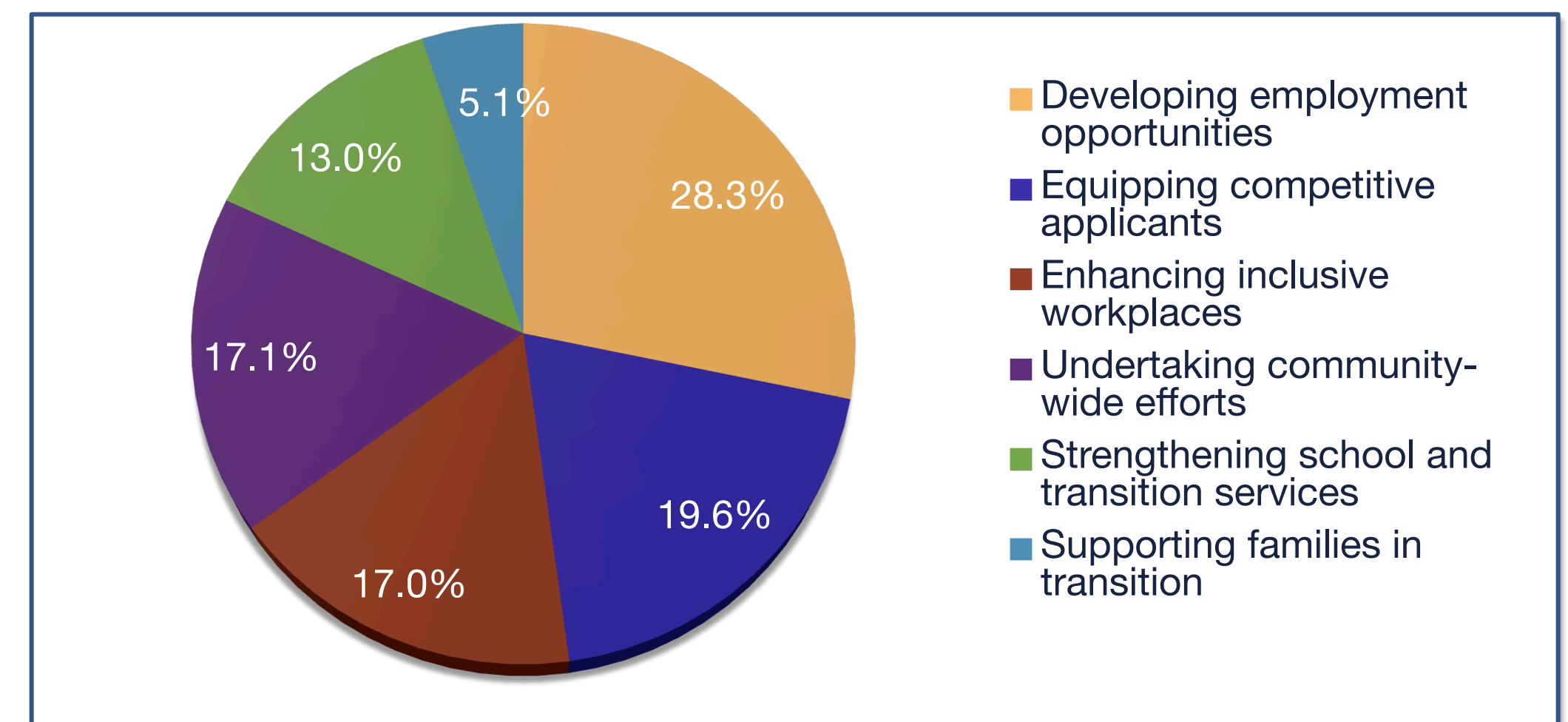
VIEWS OF EVENT



VIEWS OF COMMUNITY



COMMUNITY-GENERATED STRATEGIES (BY THEME)



REFERENCES

TennesseeWorks is a collaboration supported in part by the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (Grant# 90DN0294, Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, ACL, HHS)
Carter, E. W., Owens, L., Swedeen, B., Trainor, A. A., Thompson, C., Ditchman, N., & Cole, O. (2009). Conversations that matter: Engaging communities to expand employment opportunities for youth with disabilities. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 41, 38-46.
Trainor, A. T., Carter, E. W., Swedeen, B., & Pickett, K. (2012). Community conversations: An approach for expanding and connecting opportunities for employment for adolescents with disabilities. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, 35, 50-60.