


# Shared Space Café

 Portland Empowered's Shared Space Café is an equitable and inclusive community dialogue, deliberation, and engagement process developed for use in multicultural and multilingual settings

The Shared Space Café is a family dialogue and engagement model created by **Portland Empowered**, an initiative that is coordinated by the **Youth and Community Engagement team** based at the **University of Southern Maine's Cutler Institute** in Portland, Maine. Portland Empowered works to ensure that student, parent, and family voices—especially those that have been historically underrepresented—are reflected in the policies and practices of the city's school district. In 2018, the Maine School Boards Association awarded its Distinguished Service Award to Portland Empowered for “outstanding work in helping families engage in their children's education and for championing the role of parent and student voices in improving educational outcomes.”

*Parents and families need to be in contact with their children's school and to understand the school system in order to make an impact on education policies, practices, and decisions. Portland Empowered's Shared Space Cafés disrupt the usual power dynamic from one in which schools present one-way information to parents to one in which parents and schools are in dialogue about education and the changes required.*

*Portland Empowered*

During the development of the Shared Space Café process, Portland Empowered collaborated with dozens of family leaders from the city's diverse immigrant and refugee community to integrate a variety of engagement strategies specifically designed to minimize the unequal power dynamics that can result from a variety of cultural barriers, such as differences in language ability, education, income, or social status. For this reason, the Share Space Café model is well suited for use in schools and communities with racially, culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse populations of students and families.

## Portland Empowered Parent and Family Engagement Manifesto

In 2016, the Board of Education for Portland Public Schools approved a resolution to create a new committee tasked with reviewing and revising the school district's Parent Involvement Policy to make it more inclusive and equitable. Both the committee and its work were a direct response to Portland Empowered's **Parent and Family Engagement Manifesto**, a document that was developed through

the organization's Shared Space Café dialogue model.

More than a hundred parents and family members from historically underrepresented groups in the community contributed to the manifesto, which outlines a set of six recommendations for improving youth, family, and community engagement. At the time, more than 30 percent of the students in the Portland school district spoke a primary language other than English, and more than 60 home languages were spoken by the district's students and families.

The manifesto reads:

*As the parents, students, and community members who make up Portland Empowered, we invite Portland Public Schools to engage parents and communities in a way that:*

1. **Values face-to-face relationships.** *This means frequent opportunities for in-person communication (not just email and robocall outreach) between parents, teachers, board, and administrators. Strategies should involve the many parents who can serve as ambassadors with other parents in their communities.*
2. **Creates safe spaces where everyone is welcome and valued as an expert.** *Parents and families need to bring their experience and expertise as equal partners in students' education. We must seek active participation by all parents, especially those who face extra barriers. Real two-way communication requires extra effort to make sure people feel safe speaking up.*
3. **Requires parents, schools, and communities to work together to improve results.** *We need a shared understanding of "student success" that reflects the visions of parents and youth as well as educators. This means creating opportunities to explore together what is working or not working, and why.*
4. **Works hard to include the whole range of voices in decision-making processes.** *Parents should be aware of possible changes before final decisions are made at the school or district level. Opportunities for input should be widely shared. Schools should track how many parents are involved in decision-making, and consider who is not represented in discussions.*
5. **Is accessible to parent and community leaders from diverse backgrounds.** *We need to engage all types of families. Meetings and gatherings should be held in spaces, times, and formats that are accessible and friendly to parents. Parents and school personnel should have easy access to quality interpretation whenever needed.*
6. **Has sufficient resources devoted to it.** *Lack of funds is no excuse for leaving families out. We must work together to identify what it takes to do parent engagement right and find the necessary resources.*

# The Shared Space Café

Shared Space Cafés are typically 2–3 hour events that include 1–1.5 hours of small-group dialogue. The events are intentionally designed to (1) be accessible, welcoming, and inclusive to families from different language groups and cultural communities; (2) honor, value, and foreground parent perspectives, concerns, and priorities; (3) provide parents with leadership roles and opportunities to build skills and confidence; and (4) engage school administrators, educators, and staff in conversations that are either initiated by families on topics determined by families or by families working in partnership with educators. A detailed guide to planning and hosting a Shared Space Café is [available on the Portland Empowered website](#).

The Portland Empowered Guide to ...

# PLANNING AND HOSTING A SHARED SPACE CAFÉ



In 2019, Portland Empowered published *The Portland Empowered Guide to Planning and Hosting a Shared Space Café*, which describes the steps and strategies the organization uses to create inclusive and welcoming spaces for dialogue, listening, and decision-making between families and educators. According to the guide, “Shared Space Cafés bring together parents, teachers, and administrators in a safe and friendly atmosphere where barriers are broken down and student success can become the focus of open discussion. Shared Space Cafés disrupt the usual power dynamic from one in which schools present one-way information to parents to one in which parents and schools are in dialogue about education and the changes required.” Source: Portland Empowered.

According to Portland Empowered, Shared Space Cafés “reorient people towards a mutually reinforcing

space where everyone is equally equipped to give their input, ask questions, and contribute to the discussion.” In addition to using standard strategies for organizing and facilitating inclusive community dialogues (such as the [World Cafe’s Seven Design Principles](#)), the Shared Space Café model integrates several culturally responsive strategies into its design:

### **1. Trained and supported family leaders conduct personal outreach to participants**

Family leaders, not Portland Empowered staff, do most or all of the organizing, communications, and outreach work for a Shared Space Café. Well in advance of a Shared Space Café, parent leaders—typically family organizers that are fluent in their primary language and culture—personally call or text families. Ongoing relationship-building with families is another essential feature of the model that builds trust with a growing network of parents and family members over time. When relationships have not yet been established with families, or if other forms of outreach are not successful, parent organizers will often go door-to-door to introduce themselves to families in person, extend invitations to a Shared Space Café, and explain the purpose and goals of the discussion.

If evidence suggests that an outreach or communication strategy is not working for families, it is modified or abandoned. For example, email outreach is typically avoided because email communications were not effective in reaching the target population because many families did not have or use email accounts, did own computers or email-capable smartphones, or did not respond to email outreach due to literacy barriers or different cultural communication preferences.

Importantly, Portland Empowered developed a variety of support systems to ensure that parent and family leaders are successful. For example, staff members provide training in skills such as community organizing or facilitation, regularly convene family organizers to problem solve and strategize, and offer guidance and advice to help family leaders understand and navigate cultural customs they may be unfamiliar with.

Portland Empowered typically meets with family organizers and event planners on a weekly basis leading up to a Shared Space Café, and a uniform set of facilitation guides and other materials is used in the preparation process.

### **2. Accessibility considerations and accommodations are prioritized**

Organizers actively work to identify and eliminate barriers to participation in a Shared Space Café. Person-to-person outreach by a team of family organizers is the first accessibility strategy: it ensures that families know about the dialogue and have received a translated invitation. Although Portland Empowered follows a standard coordination protocol—e.g., event registrations are collected, reminders

are sent to participants during the week preceding a dialogue, etc.—the process always remains flexible, given that effective cross-cultural communication requires responsive organizing strategies that can adapt to unforeseen circumstances.

For the event itself, a variety of accommodations may be provided based on past experience, identified needs, or specific requests from families. For example, accommodations may include food for early evening discussions, arranged rides and carpooling for participants without transportation, or childcare for families with young children. All event materials are written in multiple languages, typically the five or more languages that are spoken by a majority of participating families. If a particular event cannot accommodate all the represented languages, additional dialogues may be scheduled.

Attention is also paid to small details that might not be considered when participants are fluent English speakers. For example, multiple signs in different languages may be posted to tell people where to park or enter the facility, and greeters may be stationed at the entrance to the parking lot or building to welcome people, answer questions, and offer directions. Portland Empowered typically provides stipends to family organizers to both value their time and expertise, and to reduce the likelihood that financial concerns become a barrier to taking on leadership roles. As accessibility barriers are identified and addressed, events become increasingly accessible to a larger and more diverse population of families over time.

### **3. Families define the problem and determine discussion topics**

One of the most important elements of a Shared Space Café is that parents and families frame the discussion. When educators unilaterally determine the topics used in a community dialogue, framing questions are far more likely to represent the priorities of the school system or the dominant culture. And how a given problem or question is framed can reinforce potentially problematic power dynamics by omitting certain topics from the discussion or restricting a discussion to topics that school leaders are concerned about or comfortable with. For example, a discussion question such as “How can we improve X program?” assumes that the existing program is the best use of school resources and staffing, and it effectively eliminates reconsideration of the program itself from the discussion. Yet what if the program or its leadership is the problem? What if the school’s resources would be better utilized in other ways?

In a Shared Space Café, questions are either determined by parents and families or they are co-created by family representatives working in collaboration with school leaders and educators. This partnership between families and educators also encourages transparency, which can reduce the skepticism or distrust that some family participants may experience if they assume there is a “hidden agenda” to the dialogue.

*Allowing families to define the problem and the terms of the discussion not only ensures that family priorities won't be overlooked, ignored, minimized, or dismissed, but that cultural blind spots will not unduly drive the agenda or inadvertently marginalize the concerns of linguistically and culturally diverse family members. For example, a middle school in Portland Public Schools was hosting a Shared Space Café on the school's Habits of Work and Learning (or "HOWLS"), but it quickly became clear that the term was not easy to translate, and the basic concept was difficult for some families to understand, so organizers developed reframed discussion questions that focused on the purpose and objectives of the Habits, rather than on the concept and acronym. The reframed questions, which were produced by parents working collaborative with educators, resulted in a much more productive conversation for everyone involved.*

*Portland Empowered*

#### **4. The concept of "expertise" is redefined and participants contributions are equally valued**

In most educator-family interactions, there is an implied and unacknowledged inequality of power: it is assumed that educators are "experts" in education, while parents and family members are "non-experts." In a Shared Space Café, the definition of expertise is explicitly redefined to include the diverse expertise—of their child's needs or their language and culture, for example—that families bring to the table. All forms of expertise are recognized and valued, not just professional expertise.

In addition, every participant is treated equally in a Shared Space Café. Administrators, public officials, elected representatives, and others who may be accustomed to setting the agenda or speaking at a podium are treated like any other participant. Typically, organizers of a Shared Space Café will avoid using raised stages, lecture-style presentations, microphones, and other features of traditional community events that may reinforce unequal power dynamics.

#### **5. Small-group conversations are conducted in multiple languages**

In community dialogues, participants may be randomly assigned to small-group conversations or the discussions will be organized by topic, among other approaches. In a Shared Space Café, however, small-group discussions are often organized by language ability and cultural background, and translation is provided in English for the English speakers.

The approach provides several benefits: conversations are conducted in the languages that are families are most comfortable speaking, small-group participants are likely to share common cultural experiences and concerns, and the atmosphere is often less intimidating for participants who may be



disinclined to speak up in different context. Seating and table arrangements for small-group discussions are also intentional: chairs are arranged in circles or around tables so that all participants are facing one another for the duration of the conversation. This face-to-face format encourages intentional listening, respectful behavior, and interactive discussion.

While the Shared Space Café model can flexibly accommodate both small and large numbers of participants, organizers try to limit the size of discussion groups to 5–10 people (although particular circumstances, such as a limited number of translators, may necessitate larger groups). In a 1–1.5 hour dialogue, smaller discussion groups give each participant more time to speak, which encourages deeper and more thoughtful exchanges. Smaller groups also tend to be more welcoming to participants who might be less confident speaking up in a larger group.

## **6. Translation is provided for English-speaking educators and participants**

One of the essential features of a Shared Space Café is that translation of small-group discussions is provided in English for the English-speaking participants. In most multilingual dialogues in the United States, translation is provided to non-English speakers in their primary language—an often unconsidered default decision that can reinforce potentially problematic power dynamics.

In most Shared Space Cafés, school leaders, educators, and staff are typically included in the small-group discussions. And when translation is provided for them in English, rather than for the families, a small but important shift in social dynamics occurs: the English speakers and members of the dominant culture become participants in a conversation in which they may struggle to follow the conversation, for example, or make sense of certain cultural references.

Because fluency in a particular language or culture is a form of power, and the absence of that fluency can be disempowering, Shared Space Cafés provide a forum in which culturally marginalized or underrepresented groups can express themselves in the language that is most comfortable for them, and that they can, therefore, use to more clearly and precisely articulate their needs, concerns, or preferences. In schools, for example, many discussions feature educational jargon and references that family members may not understand. By flipping the usual translation format, a Shared Space Café—by design—creates a conversational setting that requires educators to speak in terms that are both translatable and understandable to families.

## **7. Parents and family members either facilitate or co-facilitate the discussions**

In a community dialogue, facilitators structure and guide conversations, which places them in a position of relative power: they can determine what does or doesn't get discussed, for example, or



they can react positively to certain comments while ignoring or minimizing others. In a Shared Space Café, parents and family members either facilitate or co-facilitate all of the discussions, which helps to reduce the influence of cultural blind spots, implicit bias, privilege, and other factors can unconsciously influence both the content and outcomes of a dialogue in ways that could devalue family concerns or contributions.

Initially, Portland Empowered was reluctant to provide facilitator “training” to parent and family organizers because they wanted to avoid imposing a particular cultural model on the dialogues by determining how the conversations should be structured. Over time, however, Portland Empowered realized that a basic introduction to “universal” facilitation techniques not only helped family organizers be more confident and successful as facilitators, but the resulting conversations appeared to be even more valuable and engaging for family members.

---

## Acknowledgments

Organizing Engagement thanks Pious Ali and Emily Theilmann for their contributions to developing and improving this introduction.

## Creative Commons



This work by Organizing Engagement is licensed under a **Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License**. When excerpting, adapting, or republishing content from this resource, users should cite the source texts and confirm that all quotations and excerpts are accurately presented.