PANEL FIVE: The Neurodiversity Movement (2010-present)

FAMILY DISCUSSION GUIDE

Overview: This panel explores the neurodiversity movement, self-advocacy, evolving language around disability, and shifting philosophies about the goals of services. Students will grapple with complex questions about identity, acceptance, and what it means to value diversity.

FOR YOUNGER CHILDREN (Ages 5-10):

1. **Understanding neurodiversity:**
    - "The panel says everyone's brain works differently. What's special about how your brain works?"
    - "We all have different strengths and different things we find hard. What are yours?"
2. **Talking about respect:**
    - "The panel says people should get to decide how they're described. Why is that important?"
    - "If someone says 'I prefer to be called autistic' or 'I prefer person with autism,' what should we do?" (Use what they prefer!)
3. **Understanding acceptance:**
    - "What's the difference between awareness (knowing about something) and acceptance (welcoming and including)?"
    - "How can we show acceptance to friends who are different from us?"

FOR TWEENS/TEENS (Ages 11-17):

1. **Discuss the neurodiversity framework:**
    - "The panel describes neurodiversity as natural variation, not defects. How does thinking about differences this way change things?"
    - "Can you think of examples where accommodating differences benefits everyone, not just people with disabilities?"
2. **Explore language and identity:**
    - "Some people prefer 'person with a disability' while others prefer 'disabled person.' Why might this choice matter to someone?"
    - "Have you ever wanted control over how people describe you? How did it feel when people used wrong descriptions?"
3. **Understand self-advocacy:**
    - "The phrase 'nothing about us without us' means people with disabilities should be part of decisions affecting them. Why is that important?"

  - "Where else should this principle apply? Who else should be included in decisions about their lives?"

4. **Consider social media's role:**
   - "How did social media change the disability rights movement? What made it possible for people with disabilities to speak directly to large audiences?"
   - "What are benefits and risks of online activism?"

FOR FAMILIES WITH PERSONAL CONNECTIONS:

If your family has a child with a disability or receives services, this panel may raise complex feelings and questions.

Conversation Starters:

- "The panel talks about neurodiversity-informed approaches that respect how children naturally are while still providing support. How does this balance feel for our family? Do our services achieve it?"
- "The panel mentions that some autistic adults criticize therapies they received as children. This can be hard for parents to hear. How do we balance what professionals recommend, what we think is best, and what our child might prefer?"
- "Person-first vs. identity-first language is complex. What language does our family use? Has our child expressed preferences (if old enough)? Are we open to that evolving?"

For Families of Autistic Children:

- "The shift from 'autism awareness' to 'autism acceptance' reflects autistic adults' voices. What does acceptance mean for our family? How do we celebrate our child while also addressing real challenges?"
- "Many autistic adults advocate strongly for their community. How can we connect our child with autistic role models and mentors?"

For Families Using Services:

- "The panel asks whether therapy goals focus on 'appearing normal' or 'supporting well-being.' Look at our child's current therapy goals. What do they prioritize? Do we agree with that?"
- "How well do our services listen to our priorities? Do we feel like partners in decision-making?"

For Families Navigating Identity:

- "If our child is old enough to have opinions, have we asked how they want to be described? What they think about their disability?"
- "How do we honor our child's identity while also connecting them with disability community and culture?"

INTERGENERATIONAL CONVERSATIONS:

Ask older family members:

- "How has language about disability changed in your lifetime?"
- "What messages did you hear about disability when you were young? How do those compare to messages today?"
- "What progress have you seen? What still needs to change?"