

COMMUNITY FORUM
ON EDUCATION
ILLINOIS PTA DISTRICT 16

SUMMARY REPORT

Sponsored By

Illinois PTA, Center on Education Policy, and Joyce Foundation

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Therapy Center
Carterville, Illinois

HOST

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REPORTER

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This forum was organized under the auspices of the Illinois PTA and the Center on Education Policy. The North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) provided staff support to record the proceedings.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On October 20, 1998, community members met in Carterville to discuss public education at the first of ten educational forums sponsored by the Illinois PTA, in cooperation with the Center on Education Policy. The forum was organized by Deborah David, Illinois PTA District 16 Director and her committee.

The thirty-nine participants attending the forum, represented a number of roles, including parents, educators, businesses, homeschoolers, and clergy. The participants' views were similar to those found in the national Gallup Poll, with significant differences on only parts of a few questions, involving emphasis on testing, allocation of funds, and seriousness of various problems in the public schools (i.e. fighting, teen pregnancy).

The general consensus was that there were dual purposes of public schools. First, schools should prepare students for self-sufficiency and develop their full potential for future careers or jobs. Secondly, schools should teach basic skills like reading, math, and writing. No specific consensus was reached regarding the effectiveness of public schools. The tables were split evenly, half indicating that the schools were effective, and half indicating that the schools were ineffective. Finally, the participants suggested non-monetary changes including increasing both discipline and character education, and parental involvement. Monetary changes including reducing class size and improving teacher training and retraining. Participants concluded that character education (which would directly impact discipline) and parental involvement, should be left to local control, while reduction of class size and teacher training/retraining should be handled at the state level. Overall, participants indicated that the forum was worthwhile, and that they left the forum more informed about the state of public education.

OVERVIEW OF PROCEEDINGS

An education forum was held on Tuesday, October 20, 1998, at the Therapy Center in Carterville, IL. The PTA volunteers were composed of fourteen non-educators and three educators. They helped facilitate roundtable discussions, and record and tally results.

Following dinner, Anna Weselak, Illinois PTA President, officially opened the forum. She welcomed the participants and then introduced Jack Jennings, Director of the Center on Education Policy. Jennings shared some background information on his organization and the Illinois PTA. He said that both the Center on Education Policy and the Illinois PTA are advocates for public education. "But that is not meant to influence tonight's discussion," he said. He explained that the purpose of the forums is to help bridge the gap between communities and their public schools by convening a diverse group of community stakeholders to talk about public schooling. He said that the Illinois PTA and CEP have made a deliberate effort to limit the number of public school administrators and teachers at the forum so that more people with alternative views could be included in the discussion.

Prospective participants were first contacted by phone. Those who were interested were then mailed a letter of invitation, which included the Gallup Poll survey and a brochure outlining recent Illinois legislation pertaining to public schools. Over 100 invitations were mailed, and thirty-nine participants attended, representing businesses, clergy, private schools, public schools, homes schools, colleges and universities, and parents.

Participant Demographics

Non-educator participants	19 (49%)
<u>Educator participants</u>	<u>20 (51%)</u>
Number of public school teachers or administrators	10 (26%)
Number of junior college and university educators	5 (13%)
Number of private school educators	1 (3%)
Number of public school parents	7 (18%)
Number of home school parents	2 (5%)
Number of private school parents	1 (3%)
Number of business people	7 (18%)
Number of clergy	5 (13%)
Number of local PTA members	1 (3%)

Percentages do not equal 100% due to rounding

Seven tables were set up around the room. Each table had approximately six participants, a facilitator, and a recorder. Three questions were discussed at each table: “What are the purposes of public schools?,” “How effective are the public schools?,” and “What changes need to be made to make public schools better?”.

The purpose of public schools

A general consensus was reached regarding the purposes of public schools, but a variety of secondary purposes were also suggested. Five of seven groups agreed that the primary purpose of schools was to prepare students for self-sufficiency and develop their full potential for future careers or jobs. Four groups also listed teaching basic educational skills, like reading, math, and writing, as a primary purpose. Three groups, of the seven, suggested that the purpose of public schools included teaching positive social skills, and values. When these three purposes were presented to the entire forum, the only disagreement involved the definition of “values” and the problems involved with identifying specific values to be taught in the public schools.

Secondary purposes of public schools were also suggested by various tables. These included maximizing the child’s potential, creating an environment to develop individuality, and nurturing the partnership between parents, teachers, and administrators.

The effectiveness of public schools

There was a great disagreement in regard to the effectiveness of the public schools. Three of the seven tables believed that public schools were indeed effective, three believed they were not effective, and one presented both points of view. Two major reasons were cited for the lack of effectiveness in public schools: lack of parent involvement and grades being given away rather than earned. Individuals who believed that public schools are effective suggested that schools are doing well as can be expected with the resources available, schools are preparing curriculum that facilitates the school to work connection, and that there are many wonderful teachers in the public schools. Overall, the only consensus that could be reached was that the effectiveness varies greatly from district to district, based on administration, teachers, leadership, and parent involvement.

Groups were also split over how to measure the effectiveness of public schools. Three tables suggested using test scores, while two suggested looking at the graduation and/or drop-out rates. Others suggested more subjective measures including whether or not leaders are being created, students are confident and have good self-esteem, and high-school seniors can read and write. No consensus was reached regarding a means of evaluating the effectiveness of the public schools.

Overall, the local Gallup Poll results were similar to those found nationwide, with a few notable exceptions. Some differences in the poll were noted on questions two and ten. Question two involved the emphasis placed on testing, and questions ten elicited different responses in the areas of allocation of funds, selection and hiring of administrators/principals, and teacher/administrator salaries.

By far, the majority of disagreements was in questions number eight, and involved the perception of the seriousness of various public school problems, including drugs, discipline, smoking, alcohol, teen pregnancy, and gangs. The local participants believed that virtually all of the items were of some importance, with the only exception being fighting. However, the range of seriousness varied greatly from the national responses. When the very serious and fairly serious percentages are viewed together, the major discrepancies come in the areas of alcohol, teen pregnancy, and gangs. Locally, both alcohol and teen pregnancy are viewed as more serious, with percentages of 90 and 69, as opposed to the national levels of 72% and 57%. Teen pregnancy, though, was believed to be a more serious problem on the national level than on the local level, with percentages of 71 nationally and 57 locally. While it is true that there were notable differences in three out of the ten questions, overall, the results of the local poll can be considered similar to those collected nationally. Two of the questions with discrepancies were multi-part answers, which did show some similarities along with the noted differences. Overall, when the results are viewed holistically, the local and national responses were quite similar.

Recommendations for improving public schools

Tables were asked to decide on one change that cost money and one change that did not cost money. Each table listed numerous changes in both categories.

Non-monetary changes included eliminating tenure and continuing certification put into effect with the new state legislation, eliminating state standards and tests and moving toward more local control, increasing child accountability, mandating parent involvement, and including some type of character education in the schools.

Monetary changes included increased staff development and teacher training, increased discipline (i.e., dress codes, increased staff), better pay for teachers, and smaller class sizes. Most common answers were smaller class sizes, increased or improved teacher training, character education/discipline, and increased parent involvement. Discussion arose, once again, involving the inclusion of character education in public schools. Further explanation indicated that while formal programs were available, the group's suggestions was meant to include character education as part of everyday school life and not as part of the curriculum. Respondents want children held accountable for their actions and mutual respect encourages among students and teachers.

Concluding comments

Overall, participants concluded that the primary purpose of the public schools is two-fold. Initially the purpose is to teach basic educational skills, but as the grade level progresses, the purpose shifts to preparing students for self-sufficiency and full potential for future careers and jobs. There were a variety of differing opinions as to whether or not the public schools are effective in these purposes. The consensus was that the effectiveness varies greatly from district to district. Finally, the forum participants indicated that changes should indeed occur. They indicated that both character education and discipline and parental involvement should be left to local control. However, teacher training/re-training and reduction of class size should be considered at the state level.

Approximately 88% of the forum participants completed the evaluation form before leaving. The response was overwhelmingly positive. Virtually all of the activities were judged to be somewhat useful, but the discussion at the tables appeared to be the most useful, by far. Over 80% of the evaluators believed that the forum was well organized and time was used wisely. Thirty-four of thirty-five respondents stated that they would recommend the forum to others.

Although, overall, the participants believed that the forum left them more informed about the state of public schools, most did not change their opinions of the public schools. However, of the eight that did change their opinions, seven left feeling better about the public schools. The majority of respondents (80%) believed that, “The public schools are better than generally pictures, but they do have problems.”

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

Although the participants represented a wide variety of viewpoints, they were able to arrive at a general consensus on each of the three major questions. First, they agreed that the purposes of public schools involve both teaching basic educational skills and developing self-sufficient young adults. The views of the effectiveness of schools varied widely, but the participants did conclude that the variation from district to district occurs for a number of reasons, including funding, administration, and teachers. Finally, the forum participants concluded that changes need to be made. They indicated that both character education and discipline, and parental involvement should be left to local control, while teacher training/retraining, and reduction in class size should be considered at the state level.

The participants overwhelmingly agreed that this type of educational forum was beneficial, and indicated that they hoped the information would be made public.

1. Students are often given the grades A, B, C, D and Fail to denote the quality of their work. Suppose the public schools themselves, in your community, were graded in the same way. What grade would you give the public schools in your community?

	<u>National</u>	<u>Local</u>
A	10%	18%
B	36%	34%
C	31%	39%
D	9%	8%
Fail	5%	1%
Don't Know	9%	

2. In your opinion, is there too much emphasis on achievement testing the public schools in this community, not enough emphasis on testing, or about the right amount?

	<u>National</u>	<u>Local</u>
Too Much	20%	37%
Not Enough	28%	30%
About the Right Amount	48%	32%
Don't Know	4%	1%

3. A proposal has been made that would allow parents to send their school-age children to any public, private, or church-related school they choose. For those parents choosing non-public schools, the government would pay part of the tuition. Would you favor or oppose this proposal in your state?

	<u>National</u>	<u>Local</u>
Favor	51%	59%
Oppose	45%	41%
Don't Know	4%	

4. Do you think the school curriculum in your community needs to be changed to meet today's needs, or do you think it already meets today's needs?

	<u>National</u>	<u>Local</u>
Needs to be changed	54%	58%
Already meets needs	39%	41%
Don't Know	7%	

5. I'd like your opinion about extracurricular activities, such as school band, sports, dramatics, and the school newspaper. How important are these to a young person's education – very important, fairly important, not too important, or not at all important?

	<u>National</u>	<u>Local</u>
Very important	63%	51%
Fairly important	27%	34%
Not at all important	8%	15%
No Difference/Don't Know	2%	

6. As you look on your own elementary and high school education, is it your impression today that children get a better, or worse, education than you did?

	<u>National</u>	<u>Local</u>
Better	41%	47%
Worse	48%	52%
No difference/Don't know	11%	1%

7. In your opinion, are the public schools in your community taking the necessary steps to promote understanding and tolerance among students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds or not?

	<u>National</u>	<u>Local</u>
Yes	62%	68%
No	27%	31%
Don't Know	11%	1%

8. How serious a problem would you say each of the following is in public schools in your community? Would you say a very serious problem, fairly serious, not very serious, or not at all serious?

	<u>NATIONAL</u>				<u>LOCAL</u>			
	<u>VERY</u>	<u>FAIRLY</u>	<u>NOT VERY</u>	<u>NOT AT ALL</u>	<u>VERY</u>	<u>FAIRLY</u>	<u>NOT VERY</u>	<u>NOT AT ALL</u>
A. DRUGS	52%	28%	13%	3%	33%	46%	21%	0%
B. DISCIPLINE	50%	26%	17%	3%	44%	38%	18%	0%
C. SMOKING	50%	26%	15%	3%	31%	36%	33%	0%
D. ALCOHOL	44%	28%	18%	4%	44%	46%	10%	0%
E. TEENAGE PREGNANCY	43%	28%	19%	4%	26%	31%	43%	0%
G. FIGHTING	37%	27%	26%	5%	44%	26%	28%	2%
H. GANGS	37%	20%	28%	11%	31%	38%	31%	0%

9. In your opinion, are the public schools in your community too big, too small, or about the right size in terms of the number of students.

	<u>National</u>	<u>Local</u>
Too Big	30%	26%
Too Small	15%	15%
About the Right Size	49%	59%
Don't Know	6%	

10. Do you feel that parents of public school children should have more say, or do they have about the right amount of say about the following areas of public schools?

	<u>NATIONAL</u>			<u>LOCAL</u>		
	<u>MORE</u>	<u>LESS</u>	<u>ABOUT RIGHT</u>	<u>MORE</u>	<u>LESS</u>	<u>ABOUT RIGHT</u>
A. ALLOCATION OF SCHOOL FUNDS	57%	8%	29%	49%	9%	41%
B. SELECTION & HIRING ADMINISTRATORS AND PRINCIPALS	55%	9%	30%	49%	20%	30%
-6-						
C. CURRICULUM, SUBJECTS OFFERED	53%	10%	32%	57%	1%	41%

D. TEACHER AND ADMINISTRATOR SALARIES	48%	14%	32%	40%	8%	51%
E. SELECTION OF BOOKS AND INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS	46%	13%	37%	51%	5%	43%

(Responses do not total 100% because of those not answering all questions or answering “Don’t know.”)

FORUM EVALUATION RESULTS

	1 Very Useful	2	3	4	5 Not Useful
1. PDK/Gallup Poll Questions	18%	23%	44%	15%	
2. Activities that dealt with Purposes	47%	41%	3%	9%	
3. Activities that dealt with Effectiveness	38%	47%	6%	9%	
4. Activities that dealt with Changes Needed	38%	50%		9%	3%
5. Discussion at Tables	70%	20%	7%		3%
6. Large Group Discussion	29%	41%	21%	3%	6%
7. Overall evaluation of the Forum	49%	37%	11%	3%	
	1 Good	2	3	4	5 Poor
8. Organization of the Forum	86%	11%		3%	
9. Facilities	91%	6%		3%	
10. Use of time	83%	14%		3%	

12. The moderator was:	Effective – 97%	Ineffective – 3%	
13. Would you recommend this forum to others:	Yes – 97%	No – 3%	
14. Has this forum resulted in a change of your attitude about public schools?	Yes – 23%	No – 77%	
If yes, which of the following best describes that change?			
	I feel better about the schools – 88%		
	I feel better & worse about the schools – 12%		
15. Has the forum left you better informed about the state of the public schools?	Yes – 71%	No – 23%	Somewhat - 3%
16. Do you think that this kind of forum would be a good thing to do in communities across the nation?	Yes – 97%	No – 0	Possibly - 3%
17. Do you think that these kinds of forums could lead to an improvement in the public schools?	Yes – 91%	No – 6%	If they take the recommendations - 3%
	A Good job as they are	B Better than pictured, still have problems	C Failing and alternatives must be found
18. Which of the following best describes your position <u>before</u> the forum?	3%	66%	31%
19. Which of the following best describes your position <u>after</u> the forum?	3%	80%	17%
20. Suggestions for strengthening future forums?			
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broader range of participants. • Invite more senior citizens. • Time. • Continue as is. • Present ideas to legislators. • The table recorder was great. • Very interesting. • Very good. • Should be more of these activities. • Think you did a great job. • Some questions were to vague. • Make it open to the public. • Regular working people (fewer educators) 		