

COMMUNITY FORUM
ON EDUCATION
ILLINOIS PTA DISTRICT 19

SUMMARY REPORT

Sponsored By

Illinois PTA, Center on Education Policy, and Joyce Foundation

November 16, 1998

Surmas Restaurant
Homewood, Illinois

HOST

Paula K. Purkhiser
Illinois PTA District 19 Director
Homewood, IL

RECORDER

Margaret O'Keefe
NCREL
Oak Brook, IL

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 Monday, November 16, 1998, the Illinois PTA and the Center on Education Policy hosted the fifth in a series of ten community forums at Surmas Restaurant in Homewood, Illinois. Paula Purkhiser and her committee from Illinois PTA District 19, organized this event.

The 27 participants engaged in five small group discussions around the following questions:

- 1) What is the purpose of public schools?
- 2) How effective do you think your public school is?
- 3) What are your recommendations to help improve your local schools?

In addition to the round table discussions, participants took part in a discussion, facilitated by Jack Jennings, Director of the Center on Education Policy, regarding the new 1997-98 education legislation in Illinois. Participants also completed a Gallup Poll survey regarding their views on local public schooling and its effectiveness. Local data was then compared with national data. In addition, all participants were asked to complete an evaluation on the effectiveness of the community forum. Results from the evening's discussion and surveys are reflected in the following report.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FORUM

Consensus about the purpose of public schools

The purpose of the public schools is to prepare students to become contributing members of society. Most participants thought that the purpose was to prepare students with skills for their future. The majority felt that public education should be the source for acquisition of the skills to be life-long learners, and that public education should expose students to ethnic, cultural, socio-economic, religious, and racial diversity.

Consensus about the effectiveness of public schools

Most participants felt that their schools were effective at the elementary level and slightly less effective at the high school level. The majority felt that students were engaged in learning and wanted to be in school. They felt that schools that have a diverse background and are connected to the community are the most effective. One participant noted that 70% of the students from local public schools go on to get a higher education. The group felt that schools were less effective in challenging students and staff to reach higher goals.

Consensus about recommendations to improve public schools

Finding new ways to more equitably fund public schools was an important recommendation from forum participants. In addition, most participants felt that reducing class size (a better student/teacher ratio in the elementary grades) and increased parent and community involvement were critical to enhancing local public education.

Results from forum evaluation

Participants generally felt that the forum was informative and useful. The majority felt that the forum was well organized and that the small table discussions were very beneficial. Most felt that the forum left them better informed about public education. All participants who filled out an evaluation form felt that this kind of forum would be a good thing to do in communities across the nation, and that these kinds of forums could lead to improvement in the public schools. The majority of participants felt that the best description of public schools before and after the forum was, "The public schools are better than generally pictured, but they have problems."

OVERVIEW OF PROCEEDINGS

On Monday, November 16 1998, Illinois PTA District 19 and the Center on Education Policy coordinated and hosted a Community Forum at Surmas Restaurant, in Homewood, Illinois. Invitations were extended to 340 community members, public and private school administrators and staff, parents of public and private school children, local businesses, and citizens. The goal was to bring together a diverse representation of the community to solicit the view of citizens, have a thoughtful exchange of ideas, and consensus building on the condition of public education in Illinois. Twenty-seven community individuals attended the meeting.

Of the 27 participants, 10 of them were school administrators from the surrounding school districts. Therefore, the representative sample from the community was not as diverse as desired. The participants included:

<u>Participants</u>	<u>Number</u>
School Administrators	10
Parents	7
Business	4
Teachers	2
Elected Officials	2
Home Schoolers	1
Clergy	1

Several PTA district volunteers, who helped with the forum, and PTA state board members also attended the forum.

The participants were placed in five groups for small group discussions. The different constituency groups present were divided among the groups to provide as much diversity as possible, within each group. After introductions and a welcome by Anna Weselak, Illinois PTA President, and Jack Jennings, Director for the Center on Education Policy and forum moderator, the small group discussions began.

Background and purpose of the forums

The Illinois PTA, along with the Center on Education Policy from Washington, D.C., and the Joyce Foundation from Oak Brook, Illinois, hosted 10 community forums throughout the state. In addition, literature on recent education legislation in Illinois was shared with the participants.

Jack Jennings state the Center on Education Policy, the Illinois PTA, and the Joyce Foundation are committed to bringing the most diverse group of constituents to the table. Efforts were made to include home schoolers, private and public school parents, teachers and administrators, clergy (those involved and not involved with providing education), students, business members, senior citizens, legislators and other elected officials. The objective is to ensure that both critics and supporters of public schooling have a voice in the forum discussion.

The purpose of public schools

Participants were asked to reach consensus on the purpose of public education. Most seemed to agree that the job of the public schools is to prepare students to become contributing members of society: to be thinking, educated voters, and to provide job preparedness so the individuals can be self-sufficient and independent citizens. As one participant put it, "The goal is to develop good citizens." Another participant stated that public schools are the cornerstone of democracy because this is where individuals learn to express themselves. This helps provide them with equal opportunity and to become adults who can make informed decisions. By doing this for individuals, public schools shape the future by providing the basis for economic prosperity for the local community and the nation. One administrator stated that because the future will be so different from the present, it is important to teach and allow children to think for themselves, in addition to teaching the basics, or the 3 R's.

Others felt that public schools should provide children with a sense of values; the public schools should provide the basis for individuals to become life-long learners, and the public schools also need to provide children with the social interaction necessary to become well-rounded, tolerant adults. One participant mentioned a sign outside a local school that reads, "School it a great place to meet other kids." Many felt that public schools should expose children to ethnic, cultural, socio-economic, religious and racial diversity, and prepare them for tomorrow's world.

Many parents and community members mentioned that public schools should provide a high quality education to all children, rich or poor, that all children have equal rights to an education, and that public schools should provide the best education possible to help all students reach their maximum potential. One parent felt that the public schools are dumping grounds because they have to take all kids.

The effectiveness of public schools

Participants rated the effectiveness of their local public schools as average to slightly above average. One participant commented that considering all of the challenges and lack of funds available to elementary schools, they seem to be doing well. Special education within the public school was described as good. Public high schools in the area were described as slightly less effective than the elementary schools. Effectiveness seems to be diminished because of the lack of funds, the need for additional teacher training and computers, and the high mobility of the student population. One observation was made that children graduating from the local public grade schools then go on to attend private high schools. Most felt that despite the challenges of today, (diverse student population, growing need for technological training) needs are still being met. The local public schools seem to have a large amount of parent involvement. They felt that to have effective schools the community must supply strong support. Some felt that local schools were not working to connect with the community. It was noted that 80% of prisoners in jail today are school dropouts and have not received their high school diplomas.

The majority felt that the public schools were most effective at meeting the needs of a variety of students (diverse backgrounds) with a wide variety of programs. An administrator noted that 70% of the children go on to higher education once they leave the local public schools. The same administrator felt that public schools were less effective at challenging students and staff to reach higher goals. Others felt there was a disparity of effectiveness among schools in the same district. The local schools were not effective in "raising the bar" or increasing expectations for parents, students, and teachers. However, they felt that the local schools had many dedicated, student focused staff members that teach many diverse programs to educate and nurture many different student needs. Parents care about, and put faith in their school, but they don't challenge or push for higher standards. Educators in the schools seem to be more critical than the parents regarding effectiveness.

One group felt that schools are effective if they have: 1) high expectations, 2) continuing staff development, 3) strong, consistent student management programs, 4) adequate funding, and 5) parental involvement/family support.

Parent involvement and support of the schools appeared to be a common element consistently cited as critical for effective schools. Local schools seem to be effective even with the inconsistency of parental involvement and support. There were mixed feelings on whether parents should be involved in curriculum choices, with some feeling it was important, while others felt it should be left up to the professionals. School board members are community representatives and represent one way that community concerns are considered and heard.

Recommendations for improving public schools

Participants were asked to discuss and list recommendations that would improve local schools. There were asked to list both suggestions that would and would not cost money.

No-cost or low-cost suggestions included: increased parental involvement (including volunteers in the classroom) and parent education, increased flexibility in the school day schedule to allow for team teaching and collaboration, encouraging teachers to take risks and try new teaching techniques, consolidating school district superintendents, require training for school board members, more rigorous teacher training programs, and eliminating student state testing.

Two groups felt that school boards should not be "political" and that they should be appointed rather than elected, or

have requirements for those going through the election process. One parent felt that IGAP and Prairie testing was a waste of educational time, money, and effort. He felt, however, that exit criteria was necessary for high school graduation. Another parent felt that school computer labs should be opened to the public after school hours for use by students, as well as the community-at-large.

Public school improvement suggestions that would involve cost included: the equitable funding for all districts, the over reliance on property taxes was cited and the suggestion was made that schools should be funded through state income tax leading to the elimination of property tax, “Fair Funding” should be instituted. One parent thought that public school choice would eliminate ineffective schools. Additional suggestions included abolishing teacher tenure, instituting year round schooling, requiring school uniforms, and community service in high school. Some felt that continuous certification and re-certification of teachers would help keep educators current. High schools should enforce a no pass/no play rule for student athletes. It was felt that the increased effective use of technology would help build equity in public education.

High cost recommendations also included the reduction of class size in grades K-6 and the improvement of access to technology. The importance of increased time for staff development, through reorganizing the school calendar and/or school day, was also discussed.

Concluding comments

Jack Jennings, forum moderator, asked participants for summary comments regarding the forum findings. Participants’ comments were generally favorable to public education, and many felt that strong parent and community involvement was essential to improving the effectiveness of public education. The general consensus seems to indicate that local public education is meeting public expectations for most students, but needs to continue to work toward higher standards for both students and teachers and make quality education equitable for all students.

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

The following general consensus’s was expressed during the forum regarding local public education:

What is the purpose of public schools?

The purpose of the public schools is to prepare students to become contributing members of society. Most participants thought that its purpose was to prepare students with skills for their future. The majority felt that public education should be the source for acquisition of the skills to be life-long learners and that public education should expose students to ethnic, cultural, socio-economic, religious, and racial diversity.

How effective is your local school?

Most participant’s felt that their schools were effective at the elementary level and slightly less effective at the high school level. The majority felt that students were learning and want to be in school. They felt that schools that have a diverse background and are connected to the community are effective. The group felt that schools were least effective in challenging students and staff to reach higher goals.

What recommendations were given to improve local public schools?

Finding different ways to more equitably fund the public schools was an important recommendation from forum participants. In addition, they felt that reducing class size (a better student/teacher ratio in the elementary grades) and increased parent and community involvement were critical to enhancing local public education.

No formal next steps were suggested, although most participants felt that this type of forum was useful in building awareness and continuing a constructive dialogue around public education.

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%	21%
B	36%	39%
C	31%	29%
D	9%	11%
Fail	5%	
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%	36%
Not Enough	28%	14%
About the Right Amount	48%	50%
Don't Know	4%	

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%	21%
Oppose	45%	79%
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%	57%
Already meets needs	39%	36%
Don't Know	7%	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%	82%
Fairly important	27%	14%
Not at all important	8%	4%
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%	61%
Worse	48%	32%
No difference/Don't know	11%	7%

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%	71%
No	27%	22%
Don't Know	11%	7%

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%	32%	54%	14%	
B. DISCIPLINE	50%	26%	17%	3%	29%	50%	21%	
C. SMOKING	50%	26%	15%	3%	11%	64%	21%	4%
D. ALCOHOL	44%	28%	18%	4%	25%	60%	11%	4%
E. TEENAGE PREGNANCY	43%	28%	19%	4%	21%	50%	25%	4%
G. FIGHTING	37%	27%	26%	5%	28%	43%	25%	4%
H. GANGS	37%	20%	28%	11%	25%	50%	21%	4%

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%	43%
Too Small	15%	
About the Right Size	49%	57%
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%	39%	14%	47%
B. SELECTION & HIRING ADMINISTRATORS AND PRINCIPALS	55%	9%	30%	25%	14%	61%
			-6-			
C. CURRICULUM, SUBJECTS OFFERED	53%	10%	32%	32%	14%	54%

D. TEACHER AND ADMINISTRATOR SALARIES	48%	14%	32%	29%	21%	50%
E. SELECTION OF BOOKS AND INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS	46%	13%	37%	29%	18%	53%

(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	25%	50%	21%		
2. Activities that dealt with Purposes	42%	50%	8%		
3. Activities that dealt with Effectiveness	38%	38%	12%	8%	4%
4. Activities that dealt with Changes Needed	42%	42%	16%		
5. Discussion at Tables	78%	20%	2%		
6. Large Group Discussion	29%	29%	21%	4%	
7. Overall evaluation of the Forum	29%	63%	8%		
	1 Good	2	3	4	5 Poor
8. Organization of the Forum	67%	29%	4%		
9. Facilities	58%	29%	13%		
10. Use of time	50%	33%	13%	4%	

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| 11. The information presented was: | Objective – 86% | Both Biased & Effective – 4% |
| 12. The moderator was: | Effective – 100% | Ineffective – 0 |

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| 13. Would you recommend this forum to others: | Yes – 96% | No – 0 |
| 14. Has this forum resulted in a change of your attitude about public schools? | Yes – 25% | No – 71% |

If yes, which of the following best describes that change?
I feel better about the schools – 29%

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|---|-----------|----------|
| 15. Has the forum left you better informed about the state of the public schools? | Yes – 67% | No – 29% |
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| 16. Do you think that this kind of forum would be a good thing to do in communities across the nation? | Yes – 92% | No – 0 |
| 17. Do you think that these kinds of forums could lead to an improvement in the public schools? | Yes – 92% | No – 0 |

A	B	C
Good job as they are	Better than pictured, but still have problems	Failing and alternatives must be found

- | | | | |
|--|-----|-----|----|
| 18. Which of the following best describes your position <u>before</u> the forum? | 13% | 79% | 4% |
| 19. Which of the following best describes your position <u>after</u> the forum? | 4% | 88% | 4% |