

**COMMUNITY FORUM  
ON EDUCATION  
ILLINOIS PTA DISTRICT 20 & 25  
SUMMARY REPORT**

***Sponsored By***

**Illinois PTA, Center on Education Policy, and Joyce Foundation**

**November 17, 1998**

**Ramada Inn, South Lake Shore Drive**

**Chicago, Illinois**

HOST

Mary Sherrod. Illinois PTA District 20 Director

Isabella Wailer. Illinois PTA District 25 Director

Judi Keippel. Chicago Region President

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RECORDER

Nancy Fulford

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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

An Illinois PTA Education Community Forum, held on Tuesday, November 17, 1998 at the Ramada Inn on South Lake Shore Drive in Chicago, was one of two such forums held in the city of Chicago and the sixth in the series of forums. All in all, ten community forums were held in the State of Illinois in the fall of 1998, sponsored by the Illinois PTA and the Center on Education Policy, to solicit the views of citizens on the condition of public education and to assess whether new state legislation will lead to an improvement in schools. Chief organizers of this meeting were Mary Sherrod of District #20, Isabella Wailer of District #25, and Judy Keippel, Chicago Region President.

One hundred and one invitations to the forum were issued to a diverse group of the community including business and organizations, clergy, media, private and public educators, legislators, and other community citizens. The forty participants engaged in roundtable discussions, group reporting, and commenting for four hours. The group was primarily African-American or White females, although it included male participants and one Hispanic female. The group was diverse enough and comfortable enough with the format and issues to provide a very lively and stimulating discussion.

The discussion centered on reaching consensus on three guiding questions:

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

Participants also reviewed highlights of recent Illinois legislation, completed a Gallup Poll questionnaire and compared their results to the nation's, and evaluated the forum. Results of the discussion and surveys are included in the following report.

## **HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FORUM**

### Consensus about the purposes of public schools

The participants agreed that there are three main purposes of public schools: 1) to provide a free education for every child regardless of income or social status: 2) to prepare children to become useful and productive members of society so that they will become good citizens: and 3) to produce students who are self-sufficient, ready for either employment or higher education.

### Consensus about the effectiveness of local public schools

The group was only somewhat satisfied or rather negative about the effectiveness of the public schools. They felt that schools were not effective because students are not prepared for a productive life and not effective in preparing students for civic values. There is also a lack of parental involvement. It was felt that the schools are making an effort to improve basic reading and math skills. The overall grade for schools was a C+ and that effectiveness must be defined school by school.

### Consensus about recommendations to help improve local schools

In general, it was consensus that reducing class size, improving teacher training and retraining, opening up buildings more to parents and community, and empowering parents would help improve local schools. These things would help as they would assist in dealing with problems of identifying and working with more difficult kids, teacher burn-out, and changes in home environments which have been difficult for the schools to deal with.

Overall, participants felt the forum was very useful and that the information was informative and objective. They appreciated the chance to voice their opinions and to hear those of others, but would have liked more time for

discussion, especially in the large group. Eighty-five percent felt that more forums like this should be held around the country in the future to involve more people, but it should be advertised more or recruited more widely. More parents need to be involved. They felt follow-up was critical. Results of the forums should be disseminated widely for change and impact.

## **OVERVIEW OF PROCEEDINGS**

The meeting began at 10 a.m., included a lunch, and ended at approximately 1:30 p.m. The 40 participants who attended represented the following constituency groups:

Business/Community	-8
Public Education	-3
Retired Citizen	-4
IASA	-1
PTA Participants/Volunteers	-22
Staff	-2

Small group discussion was conducted in five round table centers. After introductions and welcome by Anna Weselak, Illinois PTA President, and Jack Jennings, Center on Education Policy and forum facilitator, participants completed the Gallup Poll questionnaire and began discussions at the round table centers. The discussion was aimed at reaching consensus on three guiding questions:

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

After the small table discussions, the group came together as a whole to listen to results of their answers to the Gallup Poll, to report their results of reaching consensus to the three questions, and to have a general discussion on their feelings about the issues. Results of the survey and discussion will be described later in this overview.

### **Background and purpose of the forums**

The Illinois PTA and the Center on Education Policy joined to host 10 community forums in different areas of the state. Literature on recent education legislation in Illinois was shared and discussed with participants.

The Center on Education Policy, the Illinois PTA, and the Joyce Foundation were 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, students, business members, senior citizens, legislators and other public officials. The objective was to ensure that both critics and supporters of public schooling have a voice in the forum discussion.

## Responses of Participants to Gallup Poll questions

### Results from the forum evaluation

1. This group's opinions about the public schools were considerably different than the national poll. There were no A's given to grade the school. more D's and F's. Therefore, they were more skeptical about schools.
2. The group felt that schools are testing too much-by almost twice (40%) the national average.
3. The group was not in favor of vouchers (65%). On the national level there is a gradual sentiment towards favoring vouchers. This group wanted to solve problems within the public schools.
4. Seventy-five percent thought that curriculum changes need to be made-much more so than the national group.
5. Eighty-five percent thought that extracurricular activities were very important; again a much higher emphasis than the national average.
6. Participants felt that students were getting a poorer education today than they did: again much more so than the national group.
7. The group was less pleased with the steps being taken to promote tolerance and understanding among students (55%).
8. This group was more concerned with some problems than the national—drugs, discipline—and thought the very serious concerns were teen pregnancy and gangs.
9. The group thought schools were too big.
10. The group also felt that parents should have more to say about schools, but not necessarily so much about salaries and selection of materials.

Overall, the group was clearly skeptical about schools and felt that there were very big curriculum problems. They clearly want more say in school decisions and not to abandon them. A complete listing of percentages and comparison to the national sample is included in the Appendix of this report.

### The purpose of public schools

Participants were asked to think about the purpose of public schools. The consensus of the groups, as reported in the Executive Summary of this report, were: 1) to provide a free education for every child regardless of income or social status; 2) to prepare children to become useful and productive members of society so that they will become good citizens; and 3) to produce students who are self-sufficient and ready for either employment or higher education.

### The effectiveness of the schools

The group consensus reported was that schools are not effective because students are not prepared for a productive life; they are not effective in preparing students for civic values. There is not enough parental involvement. It was generally felt, however, that schools are making an effort to improve reading and math skills. Schools were graded a C+ overall, but each school really needs to be graded individually.

### Recommendations for improving public schools

Participants were asked to try to group their responses into low or no cost and those that cost. However, those that were first listed as low or no cost were later considered to probably cost more than first thought.

The most common answers to those things that would increase effectiveness at low or no cost were: open buildings more to parents and community; increase parent empowerment; increase critical thinking skills in the curriculum; increase the thirst for knowledge in students; and reorganize classrooms to promote learning. Others listed were: explore testing alternatives; increase library services; work for finance-equity reform; and train teachers in social service skills.

Those things listed to make more effective schools which would cost more money were: reduce class size; improve teacher training and retraining/teacher development time: provide mandatory tutoring after school and on Saturday: and renovate buildings.

### Discussion and comments of participants

After the reporting, Jack Jennings called for an open discussion of the issues and encouraged individual comments from the group.

**On** the public schools and state of the situation—"Public is a dirty word now -- public schools, public libraries and all -- with the politicians and in Washington. We need to wake them up, these sleeping giants. like we did in the last election." Another said. "Legislators need to look at THESE schools." "If it can be taught. we CAN learn. Put the money into the schools we have." "Parents need to be aware of changes made BEFORE they are made in schools." A grandmother added, "They don't care anymore if Johnny is going to school -they see a lot of kids walking the streets and they don't care. And today with Local School Councils, you don't hear much about PTAs anymore." "There's a lot of kids that don't fit into the culture. When there is less and less to offer people, you have gangs. You don't have anything to offer or promise them."

**On** class size, **materials, and resources for the public schools, people added other comments.** "If you are going to have classrooms with critical thinking, we need to lower class size. And we need to spend more time." "Take money being talked about for private schools (vouchers) and put it into the public schools for books, supplies, etc."

**On the subject of principals some vehement remarks were made.** "There's not a shortage of teachers-a shortage of principals who are innovative and creative." And another added, "Principals are taking up space. don't get along with their staff, aren't innovative or creative."

Some comments about teachers **and** teaching—"We need to look at how teachers are prepared-teachers need to have the flexibility and know how to teach a diversity of students." "Make teachers accountable. If their students aren't learning, get rid of them." Another added, "Some of these teachers need to retire-we need to move into a new millennium. If we are going to have productive members of society, we need to change the curriculum." "Teachers need to be more RESPONSIBLE, be able to deliver it to the child who needs it to become a productive member of society." But a teacher responded, "How can I teach in 4-6 weeks what they should have learned in 10 months!" And on teachers and the climate -"Teachers need to have rapport with parents and principals-not all the friction and bad morale."

## ***Forum Evaluation Summary***

Overall, the participants felt the forum was very useful (47.6%) or somewhat useful (33.3%), and that the information was useful and objective (90%). The table discussion was rated as very useful (71.4%) and comments added that they would have liked more time for large group discussion. Eighty-five percent felt that more forums like this should be held around the country and that they would recommend it to others. Comments strongly suggested that more and more diverse people should be involved, especially parents. It was strongly suggested that the forum should be advertised or people recruited more widely. The participants rated the moderator as effective (100%).

While most participants did not feel that the forum changed their attitude (67%), 61% say they left better informed. An amazing number (71.4%) said that they felt that these kinds of forums could lead to improvement in the public schools. Comments strongly urged that there should be follow-up in order to implement or push for change. The report and findings should be widely disseminated and given to politicians and legislators as well as parents, schools, and the community.

**PDK/GALLUP POLL QUESTIONS**

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%	0%
B	36%	40%
C	31%	25%
D	9%	20%
Fail	5%	10%
Don't Know	9%	5%

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%	40%
Not Enough	28%	30%
About the Right Amount	48%	25%
Don't Know	4%	5%

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%	35%
Oppose	45%	65%
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%	75%
Already meets needs	39%	25%
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%	85%
Fairly important	27%	15%
Not at all important	8%	
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%	40%
Worse	48%	50%
No difference/Don't know	11%	10%

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%	35%
No	27%	55%
Don't Know	11%	

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>			
Very	Fairly	Not Very	Not at all	Very	Fairly	Not Very	Not at All
52%	28%	13%	3%	0%	60%	25%	10%
50%	26%	17%	3%	55%	25%	5%	0%
50%	26%	15%	3%	35%	40%	15%	0%
44%	28%	18%	4%	40%	30%	20%	0%
43%	28%	19%	4%	50%	25%	15%	0%
37%	27%	26%	5%	60%	20%	5%	0%
37%	20%	28%	11%	65%	15%	10%	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%	40%
Too Small	15%	30%
About the Right Size	49%	30%
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>			
	More	Less	About Right		More	Less	About Right	
A.Allocation of School Funds	57%	8%	29%		55%	10%	20%	
B.Selection and Hiring of Administrators And Principals	55%	9%	30%		45%	15%	30%	
C.Curriculum, Subjects Offered	53%	10%	32%		55%	10%	25%	

D. Teacher and Administrator Salaries	48%	14%	32%			30%	25%	35%	
E. Selection of Books And Instructional Materials	46%	13%	37%			45%	15%	35%	

(Responses do not total 100% because of those not answering all questions or answering "Don't know.")

## FORUM EVALUATION RESULTS

	1 Very Useful	2 Somewhat	3 Moderately	4 Less than Moderately	5 Not Useful
<b>1. PDK/Gallup Poll Questions</b>	29%	43%	14%	5%	5%
<b>2. Activities that dealt with Purposes</b>	48%	33%	19%		
<b>3. Activities that dealt with Effectiveness</b>	52%	33%	19%	5%	
<b>4. Activities that dealt with Changes Needed</b>	57%	24%	19%	5%	
<b>5. Discussion at Tables</b>	71%	19%	10%		
<b>6. Large Group Discussion</b>	43%	14%	19%	5%	
<b>7. Overall evaluation of the Forum</b>	48%	33%	9%	5%	5%
	1 Good	2 Less than Good	3 Mediocre	4 Almost Poor	5 Poor
<b>8. Organization of the Forum</b>	43%	33%	19%	5%	
<b>9. Facilities</b>	52%	38%	10%		
<b>10. Use of time</b>	48%	24%	14%	5%	

11. The information presented was: Objective: 91% Both Biased and Effective: 0%

12. The moderator was: Effective — 100% ineffective — 0

13. Would you recommend this forum to others: Yes — 86% No — 5%

14. Has this forum resulted in a change of your attitude about public schools? Yes — 29% No — 67%

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

15. Has the forum left you better informed about the state of the public schools? Yes — 62% No — 29%

16. Do you think that this kind of forum would be a good thing to do in communities across the nation? Yes — 86% No — 5%

17. Do you think that these kinds of forums could lead to an improvement in the public schools? Yes — 71% No — 14%

18. Which of the following best describes your position before the forum?

Good job as they are: 0%  
Better than pictured but still have problems: 43%  
Failing and alternatives must be found: 43%

19. Which of the following best describes your position after the forum?

Good job as they are: 5%

Better than pictured but still have problems: 52%

Failing and alternatives must be found: 33%