

COMMUNITY FORUM
ON EDUCATION
ILLINOIS PTA DISTRICT 22

SUMMARY REPORT

Sponsored By

Illinois PTA, Center on Education Policy, and Joyce Foundation

November 13, 1998

Joliet Junior College
Joliet, Illinois

HOST

Sonja Kapusniak
Illinois PTA District 22 Director
Joliet, IL

RECORDER

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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 Friday, November 13, 1998, the Illinois PTA and the Center on Education Policy hosted the third in a series of 10 community education forums at Joliet Junior College. This event was organized by Illinois PTA District #22. Invitations were extended to more than 300 community members. The goal was to bring a diverse representation of the community, including public and private school teachers and administrators, home schoolers, parents, students, business members, clergy, senior citizens, and legislators and other elected officials to the table to discuss schooling in Illinois. While 45 people confirmed their participation at the forum, only 13 attended. Hence, the forum did not draw a representative sample from the community.

The 13 participants engaged in a roundtable discussion for three hours around the following questions: 1) What is the purpose of public schools?; 2) How effective do you think your local public school is?; and 3) What are your recommendations to help improve your local schools? Participants reviewed and discussed a brochure highlighting recent education legislation in Illinois. They also completed a Gallup Poll survey about their views on public schooling and its effectiveness. In addition, they completed an evaluation survey 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 purposes of public schools

The participants agreed that public schools have multiple purposes. Among them are to educate all children, help children develop their talents and reach their full potential, help children develop the skills and tools necessary to become positive adults, help children prepare for work, serve as good community citizens by meeting adults=education needs, welcome parents to share more in the school process, and encourage parents to share more in their child's education.

Consensus about the effectiveness of local public schools

Overall, participants said they felt good about their local public school. Some participants distinguished between the effectiveness of their local elementary and high school. Others said that the schools were doing the best they could with the resources they had.

Consensus about recommendations to help improve your local schools

Participants repeatedly stressed the importance of reduced class size, better management of resources, and restoration of extracurricular activities, such as music, drama, and art, to help improve their local schools. They also said schools should more actively seek parent and community involvement.

Results from the forum evaluation

All attendees who completed the evaluation form said they felt the forum would be a good thing to do in communities across the nation. Overall, they felt the forum was useful and that the information presented was objective. Ninety two percent said they would recommend the forum to others. (Only one person did not answer the question.)

OVERVIEW OF PROCEEDINGS

On Friday, November 13, 1998, the Illinois PTA and Center on Education Policy (CEP) sponsored its third community forum on education at Joliet Junior College in Joliet, Illinois. Illinois District #22 was responsible for organizing the forum. Dinner began at 6:00 p.m., followed by discussion from 7:00 to approximately 9:50 p.m. Although 45 people confirmed their attendance at the forum, only 13 attended.

They represented the following constituency groups:

Parent/PTA	- 5 (38%)	Elementary School Student	- 1 (8%)
Business	- 3 (23%)	Nurse	- 2 (8%)
Mayor	- 1 (8%)	Regional Superintendent	- 1 (8%)
Administrator	- 1 (8%)		

Several PTA district volunteers and state board members also attended the forum. Those who were not directly involved with Illinois PTA District #22 were given the option of participating in the discussion.

Due to the low turnout, the organizers did not place the participants in small discussion groups. Instead, they asked all participants to gather for a single roundtable discussion. After introductions and welcome by Anna Weselak, Illinois PTA President, and Jack Jennings, Center on Education Policy and forum facilitator, discussion ensued.

Background and purpose of the forums

The Illinois PTA and the Center on Education Policy are hosting 10 community forums throughout the state. Literature on recent education legislation in Illinois is shared and discussed with participants.

Jennings emphasized that the Center on Education Policy, Illinois PTA, and Joyce Foundation are committed to bringing the most diverse group of constituents to the table. Efforts are 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, and legislators and other elected officials. The objective is to ensure that both critics and supporters of public schooling have a voice in the forum discussions. “There are no speeches,” said Jennings. “Ideally, we want a mix of constituents at each [small group discussion] table to talk for three hours on three topics: What’s the purpose of public schools; How effective are they; and How can we make them more effective.” Jennings said that he has often found it difficult to get people in the building. “But once they’re here,” he said, “they’re engaged.” Jennings commended the work of Sonja Kapusniak, Illinois PTA District 22 Director, for her hard work to include a diverse representation at the forum.

The purpose of public schools

The participants were asked to think about the purposes of public schools. While many ideas were generated, participants frequently interjected broader concerns and complaints about public schooling. The participants said that the purpose of public schools is to give all citizens the opportunity to become educated, to provide the best, well-rounded education to youth, and to reach out to all community members and be a good citizen of the community. Participants stressed that the school facility should not be restricted to students but should be open to parents and other community members. One participant added that public schools should not just educate pupils, but also parents. One way to do this, she said, is to keep parents informed about matters that are going on in the school. “The public schools here seem to be more alienated from parents than the schools in my old district,” she said, “I’ve been here for two years and I don’t think the district welcomes parent involvement.” But other participants said they feel more welcome in their elementary schools than in their high schools.

Another participant said that he feels the purpose of public schools is to help kids become responsible adults who contribute to society. “The end all and be all of public education is to help kids get the tools they need to function as adults in a positive way,” he said.

One parent, who said she had tried private schooling in the past and is now trying public schooling, emphasized that children play a role in their own education. She said, “All my kids are different. I’m frustrated by things not being done [in the schools] because of lack of funds. But if kids don’t want to use the resources, it won’t make any difference how much money you put into schools.” This generated discussion about the need for parents to invest more time and care in their children’s education. It also generated discussion about fiscal inequalities among schools in the state.

The participants came to the following shared conclusions about the purposes of public schools. First and primarily, they said that public schools should educate all children in the community and be open to the community. They also said that public schools should help children develop their talents and reach their full potential; they should help children develop the skills and tools necessary to become positive adults; they should prepare children for the workforce; and they should both welcome and encourage parents to play a more active role in their children's school experience.

The effectiveness of local public schools

Jennings then directed the group to the second guiding question. He asked, "How effective do you think your local school is?" Several participants said they feel the schools are "by-and-large doing a good job." They feel that the schools are teaching children how to "read, write, and function." The single student in the group said, "I think some of my teachers are teaching me -- this year." One participant said that she feels the schools are becoming "the dumping ground" for educating children on every topic. "It seems that anything that should be repaired in our society gets into schools. Kids have to learn how to eat and whether it's good or bad to begin smoking," she said, "as a result, students don't have time to learn how to read, write, and do mathematics well. More importantly, teachers don't have the opportunity to help students develop an appreciation for learning."

A representative from the business community said she feels schools are doing a good job teaching students basic skills. However, she said she sees a missing link between school and preparing students for the workforce. "Somewhere along the line, something's been lost," she said, "maybe its morals or work ethic but they're not taught what's required in every day work life." Another parent interjected that instilling morals and a good work ethic are the joint responsibility of parents, society, and the schools. "Schools should not be left alone to invest students with these skills," she said.

An elected official said he feels his children received a good public education. He feels strongly that they were well-served academically and that they graduated with strong values and ethics. He added that schools need to be more accessible to the community. He paralleled the school with the park district. He said the school gymnasium and theater, for example, should be open to community groups for a fee.

Several participants said good schools are linked to the value of the homes in the community. It is important to maintain good schools, they said. They feel the superintendent is doing a good job with the resources he has. Overall, they feel that the districts' teachers are dedicated.

Gallup Poll survey results

Jennings asked the group to turn its attention to the tallied results of the Gallup Poll Survey. (See Appendices for complete results). On par with the nation, 10% of the participants said they would give their local schools an "A" for quality of performance. But 70% of the forum participants said they would give their local schools a "C" or "D". In the national sample, only 45% gave their local schools a "C", "D", or "F". Like the nation, 50% of the forum attendees said "about the right amount" of emphasis is placed on achievement testing in public schools. Ninety percent of all participants said they would oppose a proposal to allow the government to pay for all or part of a student's tuition to non-public schools. The remaining 10% said they did not know. The national sample shows that 45% would oppose such a proposal; 51% would favor it; and 4% don't know. Like the nation, 40% of all participants said they believe their children are receiving a better education than they did. Fifty percent believe their children are receiving a worse education.

The group engaged in discussion about the seriousness of drugs, discipline, smoking, alcohol, teenage pregnancy, fighting, and gangs in their local schools. They said that the results of the forum poll might not be capturing the seriousness of the issues. Some suggested that the results may reflect how serious schools take these issues and how effective their strategies are at controlling them. Others said that the public simply has a naive view of the seriousness of these issues.

Seventy percent of the participants said they feel parents should have more say in the selection and hiring of administrators and principals. Only 55% of the nation feels this way. It is important to reiterate that the forum participants do not reflect a representative sample of the community.

Jennings led the group in a review and discussion of the highlights of recent education legislation in Illinois. A pamphlet was shared with participants.

Recommendations for improving public schools

Participants were then asked to discuss the final guiding question: What recommendations would you make to improve your local schools? Participants were asked to think of three or four recommendations that would cost money, and three or four that would not cost money. Repeatedly, participants stressed the need to reduce class sizes, restore extracurricular activities, and renovate school buildings. These were among the leading cost recommendations. In addition, participants said administrators should look for more effective ways to manage resources. One participant said teachers should be re-certified on an annual basis and re-tested every five years. Others agreed that certification is an important component for strengthening public schools. Another said that schools should be equipped with computers and other services so that students can do their homework at school. "Not every home has a computer," the participant stated.

On the no-cost side, attendees overwhelmingly said that schools should work to increase parent and community involvement. "Parents should be made to feel more welcome," they said. "A simple 'Hello, glad to see you're here, and thank you,' would go a long way," said one parent. One participant added that schools should not be reluctant to accept parents' donations of software, books, or time. Another said that we, as a society, should be willing to enforce the same rules we apply to students on ourselves. He said that students recognize the double standard of the "No pass-No play" rule, for example. He said it's hard to tell students that they cannot play sports because they have not met the grade requirement when professional athletes receive a slap on the wrist for much more serious violations, such as drug abuse.

Concluding comments

Before adjourning the forum, Jennings asked if any participant wished to share concluding comments. One said it's important to remember that formal schooling does not constitute sufficient education. "Education is a partnership between parents, other adults, schools, and children," she said. "We, as parents, must fulfill our commitment."

Forum Evaluation Results

Approximately 92% of forum participants completed all parts of the evaluation form before leaving the forum. The response was generally positive (see Evaluation Results under Appendices). All the activities were judged to be somewhat useful. Approximately 62% of the respondents found the discussion at the table to be very useful.

The participants overwhelmingly found the information presented to be objective and over 84% said the forum left them better informed about the state of public schools. Ninety two percent said they would recommend the forum to others. Ninety two percent also said it would be good to host the forum in other communities across the nation.

The respondents were evenly divided about whether the forum had changed their attitude toward the public schools. Half said "yes" and half said "no." Over 84% said they feel "the public schools are better than generally pictured, but they have problems."

Additional comments were included on the evaluation forms. Several focused on the need to have more diverse representation at the forum.

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

While no formal next steps were suggested, the majority of participants applauded the idea to have students develop and take a survey about what they want in public schools. One participant shared that in a district where this had taken place, the students presented their findings before the Board, city officials, and PTA.

After nearly three hours of discussion, the following consensus themes emerged among the 13 participants:

- *What is the purpose of public schools?*
To educate all children in the community and be open to the community; to help children develop their talents and reach their full potential; to help children develop the skills and tools necessary to become positive adults; to prepare children for the workforce; and to welcome and encourage parents to play a more active role in their children's school experience.
- *How effective is your local school?*
By-and-large, schools are doing a good job with the resources they have.
- *What recommendations do you have for improving your local school?*
Cost recommendations include reducing class sizes, better managing existing resources, restoring extracurricular activities, and renovating school buildings. No-cost recommendations include increasing parent and community involvement in schools.

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%	10%
B	36%	20%
C	31%	50%
D	9%	20%
Fail	5%	
Don't Know	9%	

2. In your opinion, is there too much emphasis on achievement testing in 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%	10%
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 all or part of the tuition. Would you favor or oppose this proposal in your state?

	<u>National</u>	<u>Local</u>
Favor	51%	
Oppose	45%	90%
Don't Know	4%	10%

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%	70%
Already meets needs	39%	30%
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%	80%
Fairly important	27%	20%
Not at all important	8%	
Don't Know	2%	

6. As you look on your own elementary and high school education, is it your impression that children today 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%	

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%	30%
No	27%	60%
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>			
	<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%	20%	60%	20%	
B. DISCIPLINE	50%	26%	17%	3%	20%	40%	30%	
C. SMOKING	50%	26%	15%	3%	10%	60%	30%	
D. ALCOHOL	44%	28%	18%	4%	20%	40%	40%	
E. TEENAGE PREGNANCY	43%	28%	19%	4%	10%	50%	20%	
G. FIGHTING	37%	27%	26%	5%	20%	30%	50%	
H. GANGS	37%	20%	28%	11%	20%	30%	50%	

9. In your opinion, are 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%	30%
Too small	15%	30%
About the right size	49%	40%
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 in the 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%	70%		30%

B. SELECTION & HIRING ADMINISTRATORS AND PRINCIPALS	55%	9%	30%	70%	30%
C. CURRICULUM, SUBJECTS OFFERED	53%	10%	32%	60%	40%
D. TEACHER AND ADMINISTRATOR SALARIES	48%	14%	32%	40%	60%
E. SELECTION OF BOOKS AND INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS	46%	13%	37%	60%	40%

(Responses do not total 100% because of those answering “Don’t Know.”)

FORUM EVALUATION RESULTS

	1 Very Useful	2	3	4	5 Not Useful
1. PDK/Gallup Poll Questions	15%	54%	23%		
2. Activities that dealt with Purposes	39%	23%	38%		
3. Activities that dealt with Effectiveness	39%	15%	46%		
4. Activities that dealt with Changes Needed	54%	15%	31%		
5. Discussion at Tables	62%	23%	15%		
6. Large Group Discussion	54%	23%	8%		
7. Overall evaluation of the Forum	46%	31%	15%		
	1 Good	2	3	4	5 Poor
8. Organization of the Forum	46%	31%	15%	8%	
9. Facilities	62%	38%			
10. Use of time	46%	38%	8%		

11. The information presented was: Objective – 100% Biased -- 0
 12. The moderator was: Effective -- 100% Ineffective -- 0
 13. Would you recommend the forum to others? Yes -- 92% No -- 0
 14. Has this forum resulted in a change of your attitude toward the public schools? Yes – 46% No – 46%
 If “Yes,” which of the following best describes that change?
 I feel better about the public schools -- 46%

15. Has the forum left you better informed about the state of the public schools?
 Yes -- 85% No -- 8% Somewhat -- 0
 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 Possibly -- 0
 17. Do you think that these kinds of forums could lead to improvement in the public schools?
 Yes -- 85% 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?	15%	62%	15%
19. Which of the following best describes your position <u>after</u> the forum?		85%	8%

20. What suggestions do you have for strengthening future forums?
 Reach out to a broader spectrum of the community.
 It's such an intangible getting participants.
 Notify people in the community more in advance of forum.
 Better effort to have more schools districts represented.
 Reach out to more community leaders to participate.
 More emphasis on diversity of attendees do to more time for structure.