

COMMUNITY FORUM
ON EDUCATION
ILLINOIS PTA DISTRICT 23 & 24

SUMMARY REPORT

Sponsored By

Illinois PTA, Center on Education Policy, and Joyce Foundation

December 3, 1998

Monastero's Ristorante

Chicago, Illinois

HOST

Alice Barr, Illinois PTA District 23 Director

Sue Anzaldua, Illinois PTA District 24 Director

Judi Keippel, Chicago Region President

Chicago, IL

RECORDER

Angela Rudolph

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

The Illinois PTA and the Center on Education Policy hosted the tenth in a series of ten community education forums at Montastero's Ristorante on Thursday, December 3, 1998. Illinois PTA Districts 23 and 24 organized this event. While more than one hundred fifty members of the community were invited to participate in this forum, only twenty-two participants attended.

Forum participants discussed the following questions in a roundtable discussion:

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

Participants also reviewed and discussed recent legislative changes in Illinois, completed a Gallup Poll questionnaire on their views of public schools and an evaluation survey of the community forum.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FORUM

Consensus regarding the purpose of public schools

While the participants had a variety of opinions on the purposes of public schools, most agreed that public schools are meant to:

1. Help children develop the skills and tools necessary to join the workforce or attend higher education.
2. Provide equal access to an education for all students.
3. Develop socialization and citizenship skills in children.

Consensus on the effectiveness of local public schools

Overall participants felt their public schools had varying degrees of effectiveness. They remarked that the effectiveness of schools is positively affected by increased parental and community involvement. Some noted that high schools were less effective than elementary schools.

Consensus on recommendations to help improve local schools

Reducing class size was overwhelmingly pointed to as a means to improve schools. Other recommendations included increasing parental involvement, better more relevant staff development for teachers and schools, and increased equitable funding for schools.

Results from the forum evaluation

Overall, forum participants found the forum useful and the information objective. Ninety percent said they would recommend the forum to others, and eighty-five percent of the participants responded that the forums would be a good thing to do in communities across the nation.

OVERVIEW OF PROCEEDINGS

On Thursday, December 3, 1998, the Illinois PTA and the Center on Education Policy (CEP) sponsored a community forum in Chicago, Illinois at Montastero's Ristorante. The forum was the tenth forum in a series of ten meetings. The meeting began with dinner at 5:00pm and was followed by a discussion from 6:10pm to 9:30pm. Illinois PTA Districts 23 and 24 were responsible for organizing the forum. While one hundred fifty people were invited to participate, only twenty-two attended.

The participants represented the following constituency groups:

Business/Non-Profit Organizations	-	8 (36%)
Private/Parochial Education	-	4 (18%)
Public Education	-	3 (14%)
Legislators	-	1 (5%)
Youth related	-	1 (5%)
Misc./PTA	-	5 (23%)

Note: It should be noted that invitees for the forums were identified from a master list of community and educational leaders throughout the state. A goal of one hundred participants was set for each education forum. Ten demographic categories were created to assist in creating a diverse discussion group. At least ten representatives from each group were contacted and invited to each forum. The demographic groups were business/organizations, clergy, media, private/parochial education, legislators, law enforcement, youth related organizations, PTA, and elected officials. Meeting information was also spread throughout the districts via “word of mouth”. Suggestions for meeting invitees were welcomed by each district director. The invitation process entailed the mailing of introductory letters detailing background information on the forums and their purpose, followed by a phone call from PTA volunteers extending another invitation of attendance and answering any questions invitees might have regarding the forums and their purpose.

Anna Weselak, Illinois PTA President, opened the discussion with a welcome to the forum and introductions of the PTA volunteers in attendance and forum facilitator, Jack Jennings, Director of the Center on Education Policy.

Background and purpose of the forums

Jack Jennings opened the discussion with a brief outline on the background and purpose of the forums. Through a grant from the Joyce Foundation, the Center on Education Policy and the Illinois PTA are hosting the educational forums throughout the state. The purpose of the forums is to bring a diverse group of people together and have a discussion on public schools, the effectiveness of public education, and how it can be made better. The ideal makeup of the forums would include different point of views, where all opinions are listened to and respected. Jennings further stated that there are few opportunities for such a dialogue, and this discussion would assist policy makers in putting substance behind the rhetoric. Jennings also took this time to point out this forum was the last in the series, and they would not have been successful with out the hard work and assistance of the Illinois PTA.

The purpose of public schools

The first activity asked the participants to think about and come to a consensus, as a table, on the purposes of public schools. Participants had a number of opinions and complaints regarding public schools. Most remarked that public schools should prepare students to join the workforce or higher education. One participant remarked, “Schools should prepare students for the world of work, all kinds. It should strengthen their critical thinking skills, so they can create work or become entrepreneurs.” A few participants also stated students should be encouraged to become “life-long learners”. Participants also mentioned equal access to education and citizenship as purposes of public schools. Forum participants concluded that public schools must provide every child with an equitable opportunity to develop to their full potential.

Every round table agreed that citizenship is a purpose of public schools. A teacher stated, “Citizenship is an integral part of public education. Unless it’s reinforced, kids don’t know the Pledge of Allegiance, the Star Spangled Banner.” Another participant remarked, “Schools should help children become responsible citizens and thoughtful participants.”

The effectiveness of public schools

After a brief break, participants engaged in a discussion on how effective or ineffective are the public schools? Participants remarked that some schools were not doing a good job. A member of the business community remarked, "Schools within the city are uneven. The products of some schools are good, but others nearby are poor. There is incredible unevenness." Another participant remarked that schools ". . . are producing a student force and teachers who focus only on performing and test taking. Learning, knowledge is no longer a concern."

A number of the participants had difficulty in assigning a grade to their schools and felt a grade would be more accurate if applied to elementary and high schools separately. It should be noted that elementary schools were overwhelmingly viewed as more effective than the high schools in the participants' neighborhoods. One parent remarked she felt unwelcome in her child's high school but received a positive reception at the local elementary school. Some participants noted that schools would improve with increased and more equitable funding. A home schooler in the group also noted, "Public schools can't maximize every child's potential. Some children are able to thrive in public schools, and there are some that can't. Resources dictate a parent's alternative, and some are taking their children out [of public schools] because they think they can do better."

Gallup Poll survey results

Jack Jennings asked the group to turn its attention to the tallied results of the Gallup Poll. 11% of forum participants said they would give their local school an "A" to denote the quality of their work, but 52% of the forum said they would give their school a "C" or "D". In the national sample only 40% gave their local schools a "C" or "D". There was also a marked disparity on opinions regarding the emphasis on testing. On the national level 48% of respondents felt there was "about the right amount" of emphasis placed on achievement testing in public schools, while only 20% felt there was too much of an emphasis. 53% of the forum participants answered too much emphasis is placed on achievement testing in the public schools, 5% felt there was not enough emphasis on testing, and 32% felt the focus was "about the right amount". Forum participants overwhelmingly opposed the use of government funds to pay all or part of the tuition of a school-age child to a non-public or church-related school (74%). The national sample shows that 51% would favor such a proposal, with 45% in opposition.

Forum participants had decidedly different opinions on the serious problems in public schools. Nationally only 37% of respondents believe gangs are a very serious problem in public schools, but 58% of forum participants believe gangs are a very serious problem. 50% of the nation believes smoking is a serious problem in public schools, while only 26% of forum participants believe so. Drugs were viewed by forum participants as a less serious problem than the nation -- 52% of the nation believes it is a very serious problem and 28% thinks it is a fairly serious problem; 32% of forum participants believe it is a serious problem and 53% think it is a fairly serious problem.

53% of the participants said their public schools are too big, 16% believe their schools are too small, and 26%, believes their school is just the right size. In contrast 49% of the nation believes schools are "about the right size", and 30% thinks school are too big.

Forum participants felt that parents of public school children have about the "right amount of say" on allocation of school funds (58%), selection and hiring of administrators and principals (47%), curriculum (42%), teacher and administrator salaries (58%), and selection of books and instructional materials (63%). The Gallup Poll data shows that national respondents desire more to say on these topics (57%, 55%, 53% 48%, 46%, respectively).

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

The forum's final activity asked participants to discuss what improvements they would make to their 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. The reduction of class size was the leading cost recommendation given. When participants were pressed to narrow their funded recommendations to one, all of the round table groups selected it as the number one recommendation to improve schools. A participant remarked, "The smaller the class size the better the learning." Early intervention or increased funding for preschool or head start programs was another leading cost recommendation.

The restructuring of teacher training and teacher certification, increased parental involvement, and a revision of school/teacher staff development training were the no-cost recommendations given by forum participants. Professional development and parental involvement were the leading no-cost recommendations given. One participant remarked, "Staff development needs to be relevant to the schools. You don't need to have more of it, but it does need to be quality." Others commented that teachers should also take advantage of team teaching and mentoring.

Concluding comments

Before adjourning the forum, Jennings outlined many of the common themes that arose throughout the meeting. Increased class size and increased attention to children were discussed often in each of the guiding questions addressed at the forum. An open discussion on how public schools can be improved began and the focus turned to teachers and teacher pay. One participant remarked that teachers need to be paid more, and what they are worth. Another participant commented, "Pay should be increased to professional levels and teachers need to stop thinking of themselves as hourly employees." In response to this comment another participant stated, "Giving people more money will not assure increased performance." Jack Jennings took a moment to thank Anna Weselak and the PTA state officers who worked and traveled to all ten of the Illinois education forums.

Forum Evaluation Summary

The responses to the forum evaluation were generally positive. Forum participants found the forum useful and the information objective. Ninety percent said they would recommend the forum to others, and eighty-five percent of the participants responded that the forums would be a good thing to do in communities across the nation. Only two respondents (9.5%) felt the forum had changed their attitudes regarding public schools. 52% of the respondents remarked that the forums left them better informed than they were before they attended.

SUMMARY

The following consensus themes emerged from the December 3, 1998 education forum.

What is the purpose of public schools?

- Help children develop the skills and tools necessary to join the workforce or attend higher education.
- Provide equal access to an education for all students
- Develop socialization and citizenship skills in children.

How effective is your local school?

Participants felt their public schools had varying degrees of effectiveness. They remarked that the effectiveness of schools is positively affected by increased parental and community involvement. It was noted that high schools were less effective than elementary schools.

What recommendations do you have for improving your local school?

Cost recommendations included class size reduction and more equitable school funding. No-cost recommendations included increasing parental involvement and better more relevant staff development for teachers and 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%	11%
B	36%	32%
C	31%	42%
D	9%	10%
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%	47%
Not Enough	28%	5%
About the Right Amount	48%	37%
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%	26%
Oppose	45%	74%
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%	68%
Already meets needs	39%	21%
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%	79%
Fairly important	27%	21%
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%	37%
Worse	48%	47%
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%	68%
No	27%	21%
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%	32%	53%	16%	0%
B. DISCIPLINE	50%	26%	17%	3%	42%	26%	32%	0%
C. SMOKING	50%	26%	15%	3%	32%	32%	26%	5%
D. ALCOHOL	44%	28%	18%	4%	32%	32%	32%	5%
E. TEENAGE PREGNANCY	43%	28%	19%	4%	32%	37%	26%	5%
G. FIGHTING	37%	27%	26%	5%	26%	32%	37%	5%
H. GANGS	37%	20%	28%	11%	53%	26%	21%	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%	42%
Too Small	15%	16%
About the Right Size	49%	37%
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%	32%	5%	58%
B. SELECTION & HIRING ADMINISTRATORS AND PRINCIPALS	55%	9%	30%	26%	21%	47%

C. CURRICULUM,

SUBJECTS OFFERED	53%	10%	32%	42%	16%	37%
D. TEACHER AND ADMINISTRATOR SALARIES	48%	14%	32%	16%	21%	58%
E. SELECTION OF BOOKS AND INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS	46%	13%	37%	11%	21%	63%

(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	14%	38%	29%	5%	5%
2. Activities that dealt with Purposes	43%	33%	19%	5%	
3. Activities that dealt with Effectiveness	43%	33%	14%	5%	5%
4. Activities that dealt with Changes Needed	52%	24%	14%	5%	
5. Discussion at Tables	67%	19%	5%		5%
6. Large Group Discussion	19%	57%	5%	5%	
7. Overall evaluation of the Forum	43%	38%	9%		5%
	1 Good	2	3	4	5 Poor
8. Organization of the Forum	48%	33%	9%		5%
9. Facilities	57%	29%	5%		5%
10. Use of time	43%	43%	5%	5%	

12. The moderator was: Effective – 95% Ineffective – 0

13. Would you recommend this forum to others: Yes – 91% No – 5%

14. Has this forum resulted in a change of your attitude about public schools? Yes – 10% No – 81%

If yes, which of the following best describes that change?
I feel better about the schools – 10%

15. Has the forum left you better informed about the state of the public schools? Yes – 53% No – 33%

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 – 76% No – 5%

	A Good job as they are	B Better than pictured, but still have problems	C Failing and alternatives must be found
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18. Which of the following best describes your position before the forum? 0% 67% 24%

19. Which of the following best describes your position after the forum? 0% 71% 14%