

COMMUNITY FORUM
ON EDUCATION
ILLINOIS PTA DISTRICT 32

SUMMARY REPORT

Sponsored By

Illinois PTA, Center on Education Policy, and Joyce Foundation

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Lexington Senior Center

Lombard, Illinois

HOST

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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

The forum participants in this forum were more satisfied with their public schools than the average population. However, they have high standards and want their public schools to be better. They want their children to be prepared for the changes in the global economy and are concerned that they may not be well prepared to meet these challenges if the schools continue doing as they have been.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FORUM

Consensus about recommendations to help improve your local schools

The participants were unhappy with the current school financing structure and want their schools to be upgraded, but they were unsure about how to address those needs. They do not feel that schools are “parent-friendly” places and would like to get them more involved. They also want schools to reach out to their community, not only parents, so that the community feels responsible for the schools and is a more active participant in the problems and potential solutions. Finally, there was some concern from the forum participants that schools are not structured to reflect today’s society and a full year schedule should be adopted.

Results from the forum evaluation

The participants who responded were unanimous in their belief that forums like these were a good thing to do in communities across the nation and 96% of the participants who responded to the evaluation would recommend the forum to others. Ninety-six percent of the participants felt that the forum was either somewhat or very useful. Eighty-three percent believed that such forums could lead to an improvement in the public schools.

OVERVIEW OF PROCEEDINGS

On Tuesday evening, December 1, 1998, the Illinois PTA and the Center on Education Policy (CEP) sponsored their eighth community forum on education at the Lexington Senior Center in Lombard, Illinois. Illinois District #32 was responsible for organizing the forum. The discussion began at approximately 7:20 and closed at approximately 9:20. Over 140 invitations were sent out to various community members, in addition to other hand-delivered invitations. Along with the invitation, a ten question Gallup Poll on opinions about public education was sent to the invitees, and the participants were asked to return their questionnaire prior to the start of the forum. Despite the invitations made, there were only 28 participants present at the event, which does not accurately reflect the diversity of the community. Of those in attendance, the following constituency groups were represented:

PTA/CEP/District Assistants or Committee	- 14 (34%)
Business	- 5 (12%)
Parents - Private	- 1 (2.4%)
Parents - Public	- 7 (17%)
Admin./School Boards	- 2 (5%)
Civic Groups	- 1 (2.4%)
Seniors	- 5 (12%)
Educators	- 3 (7%)
Municipal	- 3 (7%)

There were no proponents of homeschoolers attending, very few private or parochial school attendees, and no members of clergy, students, or law enforcement personnel.

The forum was moderated by Jack Jennings of the Center on Education Policy (CEP). Volunteers from the Illinois PTA facilitated the discussion and District/Committee participants took notes on each table's proceedings. The facilities were set up in five tables of five to six participants, a recorder and a facilitator.

Illinois PTA President Anna Weselak and Jack Jennings (CEP) welcomed the group and introduced Millie Reinschmidt, who organized the event, as well as other Illinois PTA members who assisted in organizing the event and were serving as facilitators for the forum. Jennings described the purpose of the forum as a way for a group of people with different experiences and viewpoints to get together to exchange ideas about public education. He said that the forum was part of a series of ten around the state, as well as around the country, and that they had been well received by the attendees as a means to identify strengths and weaknesses of the public school system.

The format was explained as a series of discussions on the questions of why we have public schools, how public schools are doing, and what can be done to improve public education. Jennings said that during the forum they would also discuss the participants' results in the PDK/Gallop Poll as compared to the national results, as well as recent changes in Illinois law on education issues.

The Purpose of Public Schools

Each of the tables were charged to discuss the question of the purpose of public education, solicit ideas, and then reach a consensus on three or four major purposes. Although the discussion was low key, it was also active, and all participants were able to contribute their ideas.

All five tables agreed that one of the purposes of public education was to create life-long learners with a love of learning. One senior described this as "preparing students to go out in the work world with the ability to reason and think." Other participants also reflected that the ability to use public education as a means to lay the groundwork for life after high school was of paramount importance. Some tables also indicated that schools should be fostering critical thinking, problem solving, and reasoning skills. Perhaps as a component of the above, two of the five tables emphasized teaching the basic curriculum, including reading, writing, math, geography, and the sciences.

Closely related to this idea, four of the five tables believed that a major purpose of schools is to create effective, contributing members of society who can adapt to a changing, global society. The concern about the ability to deal with changes of a global society found its way through the entire evening's discussions. One father who has children in the public schools said that we need to keep asking questions about whether our schools are changing as our society is changing.

The majority of the tables also believed that schools should educate all children to maximize their full potential. The participants recognized that this was difficult given the large variety of students with which schools are presented. As an example, one parent said that there were sixteen different languages being spoken at her child's school. Other participants also indicated a frustration with how the needs of English as a Second Language (ESL) students are being met. Some attendees proposed that every child should have an Individualized Education Plan prepared to best meet his/her education needs.

Throughout the discussion of purposes, the participants also expressed concern that there is not enough emphasis on values in public education. Seniors, in particular believed that one of the purposes of education is to continue our culture, and that teaching values and beliefs are strongly mixed in reaching that goal. Perhaps as a reflection of the ESL discussion, others also agreed that schools needed to teach children to be open-minded and non-biased.

The Effectiveness of Public Schools

Less consensus could be gained on the effectiveness of public schools, but three of the five tables believed that schools were doing a good job despite all that is expected of them. The participants agreed that schools were most effective when operating in a climate of openness and warmth. However, this discussion also naturally led to more discussion on the criticisms of schools' effectiveness than the strengths. There was a strong expression by some participants that kids who are "losing out" in the education process are the "borderliners." As one business participant said, "Nobody's reaching out to the average Joe." Others felt that there were too many kids who did not feel engaged in the learning process and just put their time in until it was time to graduate.

Three of the five tables believed that whether or not schools were effective was largely affected by teacher skills. Many participants believed that lack of student engagement was found where poor teachers were found. This idea led to a discussion of test scores. One parent said that she thought many teachers just "taught to the test" and did not take their jobs more seriously than that. Many participants were critical of "testing for testing's sake" and that test scores need to be taken into perspective. One senior, who was a former teacher, said that she did not think that testing was a good measure of a student's ability. The criticism of testing also resonated in the concern that schools were not teaching critical thinking or life management skills very well. "There's not a lot of preparation for career and life demands," one participant said. In addition, the participants also expressed concern that schools were not effectively teaching math, written language, geography, and civics skills, in addition to practical life skills, such as managing money.

Two of the five tables and many of the participants believed that schools required a strong commitment from all stakeholders involved to be effective. This discussion was generally focused on the idea that family life has changed and that parents – and the community – are not as involved in the public schools as they should be. When one parent expressed the opinion that other parents should be more involved, one teacher said, "How can we get them involved if we can't even get them out to vote." Some of the seniors believed that teachers used to be "backed up" by parents more in the past, but that now teachers were having to deal with criticism by both students and parents. Frustration was also expressed on the flip side that schools were not as attentive to changing family situations, especially divorce.

Gallup Poll survey results

Jennings followed up the discussion with the comparison of the group's Gallup Poll results against the national results. The Lombard group as a whole was more satisfied with public education, but not overwhelmingly. While nationally 10% of the respondents would grade the quality of public schools an "A", and 36% would grade it a "B", only 4.5% of the Lombard group would give their schools an "A", but 64% would give a "B" – almost twice as high as the national average. He indicated that the forums were generally finding the suburban participants to be more satisfied with their schools than the urban attendees. A fairly equal number between the national poll and the Lombard participants, 31% to 27%, graded the schools a "C". Fourteen percent of the national respondents would give their schools a "D" or "F", and 4.5% of the local respondents would even give a "D" and none gave their schools a failing mark.

Echoing the criticism made of testing in the small group discussions, a full 50% of the local respondents believed there was too much emphasis on testing as compared to 20% of the national average. Only 25% of the Lombard respondents (as compared to 48% of the national average) believed the emphasis was about right. Approximately 25% of both groups felt there needed to be more testing.

Answers to other questions mirrored the group's expressions that public schools were effective, but could be improved. Only 23% of the local group, versus 51% of the national group, was in favor of a voucher system. More felt their community's school curriculum needed to be changed to meet today's needs (74% local against 54% national), but that extracurricular activities were very important to a young person's education (83% local versus 63% national). Almost twice as many local respondents than the national respondents (80% local to 41% national) felt that students today were receiving a better education than they received. The local respondents were more satisfied with the size of their schools than the national response, with 67% of the Lombard respondents indicating that the schools were "about the right size" in comparison to 49% in the national poll, but about the same number felt they were "too big."

Seventy-one percent of the local respondents, compared to 62% national respondents, believed that community schools were taking the necessary steps to promote understanding and tolerance of racial and ethnic backgrounds.

When asked to reflect on a list of social problems being faced by schools today, fewer local participants believed that the problems were “very” serious, but many more judged the problems to be “fairly” serious. On the issues of drugs, discipline, smoking, and alcohol, only 13-18% of the local respondents felt the problems were “very” serious, as compared to 50% of the national respondents. The “fairly” serious national respondents dropped to 25%, but the local respondents jumped to 61-64% on the survey. Teen pregnancy, fighting, and gangs were seen as “not very” serious problems by 50-59% of the local respondents, as compared to 19-28% of the national poll.

Finally the Lombard respondents felt fairly satisfied with their voice on most areas of school administration with responses ranging from 57-61% indicating that their say was “about right” on the issues of allocation of school funds, selection and hiring of administrators/principals, and curriculum/subjects offered. Sixty-one percent of the respondents felt they had the right amount of say on teacher and administrator salaries, and 65% felt their say was “about right” on the issue of selection of books and instructional materials. This compares to approximately 30% “about right” across the board on the national responses, with 50% or greater of the national respondents indicating that they would like “more” say on these issues.

Recommendations for improving public schools

Jennings then introduced the final discussion question by summarizing a pamphlet the participants received on recent education legislation passed by the Illinois legislature. The legislation, which dealt with a variety of issues, including raising the minimum per pupil spending average to diminish the disparity between the wealthier and poorer property tax districts, graduation requirements and teacher tenure and accreditation, was suggested as a jumping off point for the tables to come up with changes that could make schools more effective. The charge for the final task was to generate discussion, then come to a consensus on a no-cost change that could be made and a change that would cost money to make schools more effective.

As in the case of other forums, it was difficult for participants to reach a consensus on how to improve schools. The legislation pamphlet did start conversation in the form of criticism by several participants. One said the legislation was “a band-aid” and didn’t address the more serious problems public schools faced. More than one participant felt that children and schools needed to be a “national priority.” Many of the participants were unhappy with the property tax funding format, but discussion of the issue led to many expressions of frustration about not being able to “come up with a better mousetrap.”

Another source of frustration was parent involvement in schools. One former teacher said that she wished that “there could be classes on parenting.” Many of the parents, however, did not believe that schools were very “parent friendly” and wanted to be in the classroom more to both help and evaluate how the schools were doing. This also led to a discussion of effective and non-effective teachers, and further expressions of frustration with what many parents believe is “life tenure.” Some participants stated that school districts should “offer early retirement” packages to get rid of some of the bad teachers. Many believed that tenure should be phased out and restructured.

On the “cost” side, many wanted physical improvements for the schools with labs for all, more counselors, and small class sizes. Some participants expressed the need for IEP for all students. Extending the school year also received strong support by the participants.

On the “no-cost” side, community participation and parent involvement had the greatest consensus to improve the schools. The participants felt that there were more resources in the community that could be used to improve schools, but there needed to be more awareness in the community that schools need their help. Some parents in the group wanted teachers to be more “child-oriented” than “subject-oriented.”

There were a total of 27 responses to the survey, which meant that nearly all of the participants responded. Some evaluations were not filled out completely, or more than one answer was given. Respondents were generally extremely enthusiastic about the forum, with 96% grading the activities with a “1” or “2”; that is, “very useful” or “somewhat useful.” Seventy-seven percent of the respondents felt the discussion at the tables was “very useful.” Fifty-four percent found the organization of the forum “good” and an additional 38% found it more than adequate. The only areas which received less useful or poor responses was the Large Group discussion, which had 22% of those responding that they were not as useful, and 23% of the respondents felt that the Gallup Poll questions were either useful or less than useful.

A large majority of the respondents (84%) did not believe that the forum resulted in a change of their attitude about public schools. Some commented on their forms that they felt they had a good attitude about their schools going into the forum. Of the 16% who did, their attitude changed, 75% felt better about the schools.

Before the forum, 92% of the respondents thought schools were better than generally pictured, but still had problems (also reflecting the responses to the Gallup Poll). Four percent thought they did a good job as they were, and an equal 4% thought they were failing. At the close of the forum the 92% figure did not change, but those who thought the schools were doing a good job jumped to 8% and no respondents thought they were failing.

The group was nearly unanimous in its support for the objectiveness of the information (96%) and effectiveness of the moderator (100%). All of the respondents believed that continuing the forums in other communities would be a good thing to do and 96% would recommend the forum to others. Eighty-three percent felt that the forums could lead to an improvement in public schools.

Many participants added comments to their evaluation forms. Most of the comments praised the forum and emphasized the need for additional forums. Improvements for future forums were to increase the diversity of the participants. Suggestions for follow up activities were to publish the results, hold town or community meetings to discuss the results, and make sure that the governor, legislature, and education personnel received a copy of the forum reports. Other comments were to meet again to process the results and apply them locally.

SUMMARY

The discussion of the major questions led to the following consensus:

- *What is the purpose of public school?*

To create life-long learners, with a love of learning who will be effective contributing members of society, with critical thinking, reasoning, and problem solving skills and who can also adapt to a changing, global society and maximize their full potential. The public schools should also teach basic curriculum and values, and meet the needs of English as a Second Language (ESL) students. The schools should better access available community resources.

- *How effective is your local school?*

While some schools are doing a great job with their students with all that is expected of them, there is room for improvement. There needs to be a strong commitment from all stakeholders for schools to be effective. Teacher skills, or the lack thereof, impact the effectiveness of schools. Test scores need to be taken in perspective.

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%	4.5%
B	36%	64%
C	31%	27%
D	9%	4.5%
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%	50%
Not Enough	28%	25%
About the Right Amount	48%	25%
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%	23%
Oppose	45%	77%
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%	74%
Already meets needs	39%	26%
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%	83%
Fairly important	27%	17%
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%	80%
Worse	48%	20%
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%	71%
No	27%	29%
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%	13%	61%	26%	0%
B. DISCIPLINE	50%	26%	17%	3%	14%	64%	18%	0%
C. SMOKING	50%	26%	15%	3%	18%	64%	18%	0%
D. ALCOHOL	44%	28%	18%	4%	24%	62%	14%	0%
E. TEENAGE PREGNANCY	43%	28%	19%	4%	0%	41%	55%	4%
G. FIGHTING	37%	27%	26%	5%	5%	36%	59%	0%
H. GANGS	37%	20%	28%	11%	5%	45%	50%	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%	29%
Too Small	15%	4%
About the Right Size	49%	67%
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%	43%	0%	57%
B. SELECTION & HIRING ADMINISTRATORS AND PRINCIPALS	55%	9%	30%	35%	4%	61%

C. CURRICULUM, SUBJECTS OFFERED	53%	10%	32%	57%	4%	61%
D. TEACHER AND ADMINISTRATOR SALARIES	48%	14%	32%	35%	4%	61%
E. SELECTION OF BOOKS AND INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS	46%	13%	37%	31%	4%	65%

(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	23%	54%	15%	8%	
2. Activities that dealt with Purposes	33%	59%	7%		
3. Activities that dealt with Effectiveness	37%	37%	26%		
4. Activities that dealt with Changes Needed	44%	48%	7%		
5. Discussion at Tables	77%	19%	4%		
6. Large Group Discussion	26%	41%	22%		
7. Overall evaluation of the Forum	46%	50%	4%		
	1 Good	2	3	4	5 Poor
8. Organization of the Forum	54%	38%	8%		
9. Facilities	63%	33%	4%		
10. Use of time	44%	41%	15%		

11. The information presented was:	Objective – 96%	Both Biased & Effective – 4%	
12. The moderator was:	Effective – 100%	Ineffective – 0	
13. Would you recommend this forum to others:	Yes – 96%	No – 4%	
14. Has this forum resulted in a change of your attitude about public schools?	Yes – 16%	No – 84%	
If yes, which of the following best describes that change?			
I feel better about the schools – 75%			
I feel better & worse about the schools – 25%			
15. Has the forum left you better informed about the state of the public schools?	Yes – 62%	No – 38%	
16. Do you think that this kind of forum would be a good thing to do in communities across the nation?	Yes – 100%	No – 0	
17. Do you think that these kinds of forums could lead to an improvement in the public schools?	Yes – 83%	No – 4%	Don't Know – 13%
	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?	4%	92%	4%
19. Which of the following best describes your position <u>after</u> the forum?	8%	92%	0%
20. Suggestions for strengthening future forums?			
• Consider present format.			
• Honesty by participants at all levels.			
• Follow up on more than our group in an area; a little more diversity in the geographic locations people are come from; good forum.			
• Have them at schools as part of other events which are previously scheduled (piggyback with teacher days, curriculum nights, etc.)			
• Perhaps you could present summaries of the suggestions to everyone at the conclusion of the meeting (summaries could then be taken home).			
• This needs to be locally and frequently!			
• More time – I enjoyed it (too short); more people.			
• Better large group discussion format and longer; less time to eat, more time to talk.			
• You should invite legislators in to listen in.			