

COMMUNITY FORUM  
ON EDUCATION  
ILLINOIS PTA DISTRICT 34

*SUMMARY REPORT*

Sponsored By

Illinois PTA, Center on Education Policy, and Joyce Foundation

**December 2, 1998**

Moraine Valley Community College  
Palos Hills, Illinois

HOST

Gerry Krakowsky  
Illinois PTA District 34 Director  
Chicago, 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 Wednesday, December 2, 1998, the Illinois PTA and the Center on Education Policy (CEP) hosted the ninth of ten community education forums in the state of Illinois. The forum was organized by Illinois PTA District #34 and was held at Moraine Valley Community College in Palos Hills, Illinois (a southwest suburb of Chicago). More than 75 people attended, including public school teachers and administrators, members of the clergy, homeschool, public and private school parents, students, senior citizens, local mayors, and representatives from the local media and business community. Several PTA volunteers members also attended the forum. Participants were divided into small groups of approximately eight to ten people to discuss the purposes of public schools, their effectiveness, and strategies for improving public schools. Consensus findings from each group were shared with the larger body. This report includes the results of the small group sessions, Gallup Poll survey, and forum evaluation survey.

## ***HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FORUM***

### ***Consensus about the purposes of public schools***

The participants shared several important ideas about the purposes of public schools. Among them were to teach children basic skills, such as reading and math, to teach responsibility, and to ensure that all children have an equal opportunity.

### ***Consensus about the effectiveness of public schools***

Overall, the participants felt their local public schools were effective. They said that the schools offer a wide variety of programs and activities and that they provide a good, basic education for all children, even though they serve many children with special needs. They also said that their local public schools could be more effective if they had more funding.

### ***Consensus about recommendations to improve the public schools***

The participants offered numerous recommendations on how to improve the public schools. Many of the ideas focused on increased training and retraining for teachers, increased parent and community involvement in schools, improved public opinion of public schools so as to generate greater support for the schools, and addressing local property taxes.

### ***Results from the forum evaluation***

Thirty-four attendees completed the forum evaluation survey. More than 87% said the forum was either moderately, somewhat, or very useful. Seventy three percent said they felt better informed after the forum. Ninety four percent said they would recommend the forum to others and felt it was a good thing to conduct across the country.

## ***OVERVIEW OF PROCEEDINGS***

The December 2, 1998 Palos Hills Community Education forum began with dinner. Following dinner, Anna Weselak, President of the Illinois PTA, officially opened the forum. She welcomed the participants and then introduced Jack Jennings, of the Center on Education Policy. Jennings shared some background information on his organization and the Illinois PTA, and said that the Joyce Foundation had provided funding to host a series of community education forums in the state. He said that both the CEP and the Illinois PTA are advocates for public education. "But that is not meant to influence tonight's discussion," he said. He explained that the purpose of the forums is to help bridge the gap between communities and their public schools by convening a diverse group of community stakeholders to talk about public schooling. He said that the Illinois PTA and CEP have made a deliberate effort to limit the number of public school administrators and teachers at the forum so that more people with alternative views could be included in the discussion.

Jackie Meadows, Legislative Chairman and District 34 Coordinator for the forum, estimated the following demographic make up of the participants:

Senior citizens - 10	Principals, Superintendents - 5
Public school parents - 10	Clergy - 4 (one is a principal at a Catholic School)
Students - 8	Business Persons - 4
Private school parents - 8	Media - 3
Public school teachers - 7	Mayors or village clerks - 2
Homeschoolers - 5	Village trustee - 1

Meadows noted that invitations had been sent to more than 170 individuals. No legislators attended the forum because they were in session, explained Meadows.

Jennings stressed that the goal of the roundtable sessions was to generate discussion among people with different views and to come to some consensus about the purposes of public education and the effectiveness of the local public schools, and to generate some recommendations for how to improve the local public schools.

The structure of the evening's forum was discussed. During the first 30 minutes, participants were to discuss the purposes of public schools and come to some consensus themes. The next 30 minutes would focus on how effective participants perceive their local public schools. Following this, there would be a short break. Jennings said he would then reconvene the group and share the results of the Gallup Poll survey (which participants had completed upon their arrival). The group's results would be compared with a national sample. Jennings would follow up with a discussion on Illinois education legislation and then ask the participants to return to their small groups for a final, one-hour discussion about how to improve the public schools. Each table would be asked to generate at least one cost and one no-cost recommendation.

### **The purpose of public schools**

In the small groups, people openly discussed their views and criticisms of the public schools. Participants said one central purpose of public schools is to teach basic skills such as reading and mathematics. Another participant said, "The important thing for schools to do is help kids see the threads that link life-long learning." Another common purpose discussed was public schools' capacity to produce productive citizens, students who could learn individually, work cooperatively, and think globally. But one person who homeschools his child expressed his frustration with the public schools. He said, "I realize the public schools are for many publics. They must meet the needs of many people. For me and my family, as Christians, I don't think the public schools foster the values we believe in."

In the large group, the following purposes of public schools were shared: 1) to teach basic skills such as reading and mathematics; 2) to teach responsibility (i.e., good morals and values); 3) to provide all kids with an equal opportunity to learn; 4) to produce good citizens in a democratic society; 5) to teach problem-solving skills; 6) to teach social skills; 7) to prepare students for the future; 8) to foster in students a love of learning; 9) to provide a safe environment; and 10) to recognize diversity.

### **The effectiveness of public schools**

The participants said that, overall, they feel their local public schools are effective. Two strengths, in particular, stand out. First, they said the schools offer a wide variety of programs and activities. Second, they said the schools provide a good basic education for all children, even though they serve many with special needs. They also said that the local public schools could be more effective if they had more funding. They emphasized that schools must employ good teachers, those who are happy to teach. Finally, the participants said there are many factors beyond the schools' control, such as funding, discipline, mandates, parent involvement, and student population.

This led to a greater discussion and a list of criticisms of the public schools. Two of the ten roundtable discussion groups agreed that a lack of support from families contributes to schools' ineffectiveness, and that schools are ineffective at teaching some students to become productive members of society. Another criticism was the neglect of gifted students. Some felt that gifted students are being slighted by a lack of funding.

### **Gallup Poll Survey Results**

After a short break, the participants reconvened to hear the results of the Gallup Poll survey and how their responses compared with the national average. Jennings noted that the percentages do not always equal 100 percent due to participants not filling in all answers and averaging by the tally team.

The following trends were noted. First, more than 75% of forum respondents said they would give the public schools in their community an A or B. In the national sample, less than 50% said they would give their local public schools such grades. Second, like the national sample, about 50% of respondents said public schools place "the right amount of emphasis" on achievement testing. Third, 67% of forum respondents said they would oppose a voucher plan. Jennings said this contrasts with the national sample. There is growing sentiment across the nation in support of vouchers. Fifty-one percent of the national sample said they would favor a voucher plan. Fourth, and similar to the national sample, more than two-thirds of all respondents said they consider extracurricular activities to be "very important" in a young person's education. Fifth, Jennings noted that in the Illinois forums, people do not rank drugs, discipline, and smoking as very serious problems in their schools. Nationally they do, however, rank them as serious problems. (See Appendices for a complete report of the Gallup Poll survey results.)

### **Recommendations for improving public schools**

Jennings reviewed the Illinois education legislation pamphlet and encouraged the participants to return to their small groups to discuss recommendations for improving the public schools. He said the groups could reference any of the legislation items or develop their own recommendations. Each group was asked to come up with at least one cost and one no-cost recommendation to improve the public schools.

The small groups developed numerous recommendations. Among the cost items shared were: change the way schools are funded; improve teacher skills through training, team teaching, and an intra-district exchange program; provide equitable funding for all school teacher salaries in the state; and fund all mandates, including special education, at 100%. As one participant put it: "Funding is the most important change that needs to be made." Additional recommendations included extending the school year to 210 days; continuing infrastructure upgrades in the schools; reducing the property tax burden; reducing class size; and providing free pre-school and all-day kindergarten for students.

Among the no-cost items, the groups shared the following recommendations: increase parent and community involvement; better articulate the shared goals of the elementary and high schools so that staff can "consolidate their efforts;" help students in high school more thoughtfully consider their choice to enter a work training program or attend college; begin developing students' critical thinking skills at an earlier age; extend the "No Pass-No Play" rule to the elementary school level; eliminate grades and grade levels; change the time, and length of time, in schools; urge state legislators to spend at least one week in classrooms; reduce the amount of testing and stabilize the test program; and work to improve the public's opinion of public schools.

After hearing the recommendations, the large group engaged in a lengthy discussion about property taxes and the advantages and disadvantages of various plans to reduce the property tax burden. This was clearly a topic of shared interest and concern for the participants.

Jennings attempted to summarize the small groups' recommendations. He said that repeatedly, the small groups' cost recommendations had centered around increasing training and retraining opportunities for teachers, and addressing the property tax issue. The most frequently stated no-cost items tended to focus on ways to increase parent and community involvement and the public's opinion of public schools. Participants felt improving public opinion would help generate support for public schools.

### **Forum Evaluation Summary**

Thirty-four attendees completed the forum evaluation survey. More than 87% found the forum either moderately, somewhat, or very useful. However, close to 12% ranked the use of time as almost poor. Eighty-eight percent said the information presented was objective. Nearly three out of four said they felt better informed after the forum and nearly 94% said they would recommend the forum to others. Ninety-four percent said they felt the forum was a good thing to conduct across the country.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Jennings thanked the participants for their time. He said they had gotten to the heart of the matter. “This group is strongly in favor of changing the financing structure and looking at how dollars get distributed. Many groups don’t address this,” he said. Jennings introduced Sharon Voliva, Legislative Chair for the Illinois PTA. Voliva urged the participants to speak with their local administrators about replicating this kind of forum in their own districts. “Your administrators need to hear what you think about schools and how to improve them,” she said. Both Jennings and Voliva stressed the importance of including supporters and critics of public education in the discussion.

## 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%	16%
B	36%	61%
C	31%	18%
D	9%	16%
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%	37%
Not Enough	28%	6%
About the Right Amount	48%	57%
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%	33%
Oppose	45%	63%
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%	41%
Already meets needs	39%	57%
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%	71%
Fairly important	27%	25%
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%	69%
Worse	48%	22%
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%	69%
No	27%	25%
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>VERY</u>	<u>NOT AT ALL</u>	<u>VERY</u>	<u>FAIRLY</u>	<u>VERY</u>	<u>NOT AT ALL</u>
A. DRUGS	52%	28%	13%	3%	16%	37%	37%	4%
B. DISCIPLINE	50%	26%	17%	3%	10%	35%	41%	10%
C. SMOKING	50%	26%	15%	3%	27%	43%	26%	2%
D. ALCOHOL	44%	28%	18%	4%	24%	39%	31%	2%
E. TEENAGE PREGNANCY	43%	28%	19%	4%	12%	25%	49%	10%
G. FIGHTING	37%	27%	26%	5%	2%	35%	51%	8%
H. GANGS	37%	20%	28%	11%	6%	29%	49%	12%

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%	18%
Too Small	15%	8%
About the Right Size	49%	71%
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%	10%	43%
B. SELECTION & HIRING ADMINISTRATORS AND PRINCIPALS	55%	9%	30%	31%	12%	53%

C. CURRICULUM, SUBJECTS OFFERED	53%	10%	32%	33%	12%	51%
D. TEACHER AND ADMINISTRATOR SALARIES	48%	14%	32%	29%	14%	53%
E. SELECTION OF BOOKS AND INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS	46%	13%	37%	25%	16%	55%

(Responses do not total 100% because of those not answering all questions or answering “Don’t know.”)

### **FORUM EVALUATION RESULTS**

	<b>1 Very Useful</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5 Not Useful</b>
1. PDK/Gallup Poll Questions	41%	26%	21%	3%	
2. Activities that dealt with Purposes	50%	41%	3%	3%	
3. Activities that dealt with Effectiveness	47%	32%	9%	9%	
4. Activities that dealt with Changes Needed	59%	26%	9%	3%	
5. Discussion at Tables	79%	15%	6%		
6. Large Group Discussion	56%	21%	15%	3%	
7. Overall evaluation of the Forum	53%	38%	3%		
	<b>1 Good</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5 Poor</b>
8. Organization of the Forum	74%	23%	3%		
9. Facilities	82%	15%	3%		
10. Use of time	59%	26%	3%	12%	



11. The information presented was:	Objective – 88%	Both Biased & Effective – 6%
12. The moderator was:	Effective – 97%	Ineffective – 0
13. Would you recommend this forum to others:	Yes – 94%	No – 3%
14. Has this forum resulted in a change of your attitude about public schools?	Yes – 27%	No – 68%

If yes, which of the following best describes that change?

I feel better about the schools – 24%

15. Has the forum left you better informed about the state of the public schools?	Yes – 74%	No – 23%
16. Do you think that this kind of forum would be a good thing to do in communities across the nation?	Yes – 94%	No – 3%
17. Do you think that these kinds of forums could lead to an improvement in the public schools?	Yes – 88%	No – 3%

	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 <u>before</u> the forum?	21%	74%	3%
19. Which of the following best describes your position <u>after</u> the forum?	26%	68%	3%