

COMMUNITY FORUM  
ON EDUCATION  
ILLINOIS PTA DISTRICT 37

***SUMMARY REPORT***

*Sponsored By*

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

**November 17, 1998**

Arlington Heights Hilton  
Arlington Heights, Illinois

HOST

Donna Anderson  
Illinois PTA District 37 Director  
Hoffman Estates, IL

RECORDER

Chantell Johnson  
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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***

Illinois PTA District 37 and the Center on Education Policy organized and hosted a community forum at the Arlington Heights Hilton on Tuesday, November 17, 1998. Invited to the forum were one-hundred and forty individuals representing a range of perspectives including parents, educators (public and private schools), home school parents school board members, PTA state board members/legislative chairmen/council presidents, librarians, medical field representatives, media, clergy, PTA members, and students. A total of sixty-seven persons (not including the ten forum recorders, and ten forum facilitators) participated in the evenings activities. This forum was the seventh in a series of ten community forums hosted across the state of Illinois.

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

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

Participants generated a “top ten list” on the purposes of public schools. Among the three most frequently stated purposes were the following: 1) to teach students fundamentals/basic skills, including social, moral, ethical, and survival skills; 2) to provide a quality education for all children; and, 3) to prepare students to be productive citizens, provide them with skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and enable economic stability.

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

Overall, participants felt that public schools were effective. While participants, in general, stated they felt public schools were effective, discussions varied as to the degree to which public schools were effective and the extent to which public schools could be enhanced and improved. Public schools were considered effective in the provision of services that are considered traditional for public schools. Public schools were considered less effective in the provision of services related to new or emerging student and community needs.

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

Participants’ discussions and recommendations regarding how to improve public schools were divided into those activities that would cost money and those that would not. Two cost issues that emerged through the discussion, by nearly half of the participants included increasing equity in school funding and decreasing school or class size while increasing the number of teachers.

The two most frequently stated responses as to how public schools could be improved without spending money were to increase efforts to hold teachers accountable and to build more partnerships within the community (with senior citizens, business, community organizations, etc.).

### ***Gallup Poll Results***

Similar to the positive discussion that ensued regarding the effectiveness of public schools, participants gave public schools an overall grade of above average (B). Overall, participants did not feel that their children were seriously challenged by issues such as drugs, alcohol, and teen pregnancy. Overall, participants were much more positive than the nation on all of the issues presented.

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

Overall, participants stated they felt that each of the forum activities were useful. Ninety-one percent of respondents felt the information was objective. Two-thirds of respondents felt they were better informed about the state of public schools after their participation in the forum, and all participants stated they would recommend the forum to a friend. Participants agreed that a forum such as this should be replicated across the nation.

## ***OVERVIEW OF PROCEEDINGS***

On Tuesday, November 17, 1998, Illinois PTA District 37 and the Center on Education Policy coordinated and hosted a Community Forum at the Arlington Heights Hilton. The forum began with registration at 5:00 p.m., followed by dinner at 5:30 p.m., with formal activities underway by 6:15 p.m. Approximately 140 individuals from a range of backgrounds were invited. While the goal was to achieve a turnout of 100 individuals, a total of 67 individuals participated (not including the ten recorders and ten facilitators). Participants included the following:

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent of Total*</b>	
Educators (public schools)	13	19%	
Educators (private schools)	3	4%	
Parents (public schools)	19	28%	
Parents (private schools)	2		3%
Home Schooler	3	4%	
Parent with no children	1	1%	
School Board Member	5	7%	
Librarian	2	3%	
Medical Field Representative	3	4%	
Business Persons	12	18%	
Student	1	1%	
Clergy	2	3%	
Media	1	1%	
<b>Total</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>100%</b>	

\*Due to rounding, the percentages do not sum exactly 100%.

Forum facilitators and recorders included the following:

<b>Facilitators</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent of Total*</b>
Teachers	2	10%
Local PTA volunteers	12	60%
PTA state board members	6	30%
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100%</b>

Participants included a representative sample of individuals from the community. Absent from the discussion were legislative representatives, who were unavailable due to a scheduling conflict.

The forum consisted of facilitated discussions in groups of approximately eight individuals around the following topics: 1) the purpose of public schools; 2) the effectiveness of public schools; and, 3) suggestions for improving the effectiveness of public schools. In addition, participants completed a survey about their perceptions of and satisfaction with public education in their area. The results of this survey were compared to nationwide results as reported by a Gallup Poll survey. The evening came to a close at 9:30 p.m. with each participant completing an evaluation form regarding the forum. What follows is a summary of these discussions with illustrative quotes directly from forum participants.

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

Participants were asked to discuss what they feel is the purpose of public schools. A variety of issues were discussed and considered, ranging from broad, global, conceptual issues such as to ensure democracy in our nation to more discrete issues such as the development of children's basic skills (e.g. math, reading, and writing).

Illustrating the issues that emerged from the groups are the following:

*“The purpose of education is to teach fundamental/basic skills including social, moral, ethical, and survival skills.”*

*“[Education serves to] prepare individuals for the world of work, the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and to be life-long learners.”*

*“[Education serves to] provide stability in a child’s life and teaches cultural diversity.”*

*“The purpose of public education is to provide quality education to all children meeting his/her unique needs without cost.”*

*“Public education should empower families as partners in learning and community education..”*

While the discussion touched on many issues, participants at each table were asked to agree on five main purposes. Participants within each of the groups struggled to reduce their list of multiple purposes to a handful. In some cases, participants were unable or even unwilling to compromise or lose some of the purposes on their list. Overall, this was a challenge for participants to articulate on which issues participants felt strongly.

By the close of the discussion, three purposes were commonly identified across each of the tables. The first included teaching children fundamental skills, including basic academic skills as well as social, moral and ethical survival skills. Toward that end, secondly, participants stated that public education should provide children with skills that will enable them to be productive, employable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and economically stable. The third commonly identified purpose of public education is that “all children receive a quality education.”

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

The second question posed to participants for discussion was whether or not public schools are effective. Overall, participants agreed that public schools were effective. The measures of effectiveness used was the extent to which public schools were successfully meeting the three main purposes, as discussed in the first forum activity described above.

In this discussion, most groups listed the ways in which they felt public schools were effective and the ways in which they felt public schools were not effective. With both sides of the issue on the table, facilitators then proceeded to build consensus. Overall, participants felt that public schools were effective in the areas that pertain to the traditional purpose of schools. As society evolves and changes, however, schools have taken on new roles and additional responsibilities. In these less traditional purposes some participants felt that public schools were less effective.

Participants stated that the “basic skills” taught in public schools such as math, reading, and writing among others was a concept that was evolving to include team building, critical thinking, problem solving, and analysis skills. In these new “basic skills,” public schools were regarded as less effective. Similarly, in discussing the issue of technological skills, participants felt that public schools were less effective in teaching skills that are applicable to the “outside world.”

There was some disagreement among groups about whether or not public schools were effective in promoting and encouraging parent and community involvement.

Participants were given a Gallup Poll survey to complete as part of the forum's activities. Participants' responses were tallied during the facilitated discussion sessions and were presented to the group toward the end of the evening.

Over 75% of participants gave public schools an overall grade of an "A" or "B". In addition, participants stated that they felt students were getting a better education today than they had when they were in school. Overall, participants were satisfied with their children's public education, more satisfied than respondents nationally.

Participants were also asked about their perceptions of public schools' emphasis on achievement and testing. Fifty percent of respondents felt that the emphasis that was being placed on achievement was appropriate, 40% of participants felt that the emphasis was too much, and the remaining felt that it was not enough.

Participants were asked to consider the level of severity, in local public schools, of several issues challenging students today including drugs, discipline, smoking, alcohol, teen pregnancy, fighting, and gangs. All of these issues were considered moderate problems rated between not very serious to fairly serious.

Across the Gallup Poll survey responses, participants at the forum were more positive about public education and considered the issues challenging students across the nation as less serious locally than the national average.

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

The third question posed to forum participants related to the changes that could be made to public schools to improve the effectiveness of public education. Participants were asked to consider a number of changes that would cost money and those that would not.

Among changes that participants suggested that would cost money were policy changes related to school funding and equity issues. Supporting this finding is one participant's comment, "Not all schools are financially advantaged. The state needs to provide fifty percent funding for all schools." Another participant stated that, "the state needs to improve equity of funding for public education across the state by leveling up." In addition to issues of equity, one participant indicated that the state should increase its overall financial support of public schools. On the other hand, one participant stated that "local government should get...out of local education."

In addition, participants discussed policy related to the length and structure of the school day. This issue was a popular one across each of the ten tables. Many participants agreed that the school day should be lengthened. In addition, some stated that they felt that teachers should work year-round.

Among the cost changes recommended were changes that relate to the physical capacity of the school building and the school's resources. Many participants agreed that schools should be smaller, classes should be smaller, and that schools should have more staff. In addition, participants agreed that schools needed to enhance and improve technology for both teachers and students.

On the no cost side of the discussion, participants across the ten groups agreed that schools should increase and expand their partnerships. Some of the suggestions offered were to "reach out to senior citizen groups;" "develop partnerships with local businesses;" and, "include community, schools, students, teachers, districts, and individuals to a great degree in all partnerships."

Other no cost recommendations included enhancing the school's communication especially communication geared toward improving parent involvement. In addition, participants also discussed issues and recommendations related to teacher accountability and performance-based contracts as examples of no cost approaches to improving public education.

Overall, 99% of participants stated that the forum was useful. Each of the specific forum activities was rated as somewhat or very useful by at least 85% of respondents. In addition, 98% found the facilitated discussions at their table useful. All participants stated they would recommend the forum to a friend.

Sixty percent of respondents indicated that they felt better informed about the state of public schools as a result of the forum. In addition, over ninety percent (92.9%) recommend that a forum of this nature be replicated across the nation. Nearly as many participants (92.7%) indicated that this kind of a forum has the potential to lead to improvement in public schools.

### ***SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS***

Overall, participants were positive about public schools. The purpose of public schools, as indicated by participants, is to provide all students an education, at no cost, that facilitated the development of basic skills and prepares students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Toward that end public schools were considered effective. In areas related to the evolution of the purpose of public schools, participants were less likely to rate public schools as effective. Recommendations for public school improvement ranged from state policy issues to changing the structure of the school day and smaller class size.

According to the participants' evaluations, the forum was well received and effective. Participants stated that it is an activity that should be replicated across the nation.

As the evening drew to a close, there was little discussion of definitive next steps. Participants did indicate, however, their interest in receiving copies of the results of the forum, the summary report of the finding of the series of forums, and information on next steps as they develop.

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%	33%
B	36%	42%
C	31%	19%
D	9%	4.5%
Fail	5%	1.5%
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%	40%
Not Enough	28%	6%
About the Right Amount	48%	52%
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%	45%
Oppose	45%	55%
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%	45%
Already meets needs	39%	48%
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%	70%
Fairly important	27%	25%
Not at all important	8%	3%
No Difference/Don't Know	2%	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%	67%
Worse	48%	30%
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%	66%
No	27%	28%
Don't Know	11%	4.5%

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%	21%	52%	24%	1.5%
B. DISCIPLINE	50%	26%	17%	3%	27%	43%	30%	0%
C. SMOKING	50%	26%	15%	3%	22%	39%	31%	6%
D. ALCOHOL	44%	28%	18%	4%	19%	55%	21%	3%
E. TEENAGE PREGNANCY	43%	28%	19%	4%	9%	27%	58%	6%
G. FIGHTING	37%	27%	26%	5%	21%	34%	45%	0%
H. GANGS	37%	20%	28%	11%	13%	48%	36%	3%

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%	25%
Too Small	15%	0%
About the Right Size	49%	75%
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%	39%	4%	57%
B. SELECTION & HIRING ADMINISTRATORS AND PRINCIPALS	55%	9%	30%	24%	16%	58%
-7-						
C. CURRICULUM, SUBJECTS OFFERED	53%	10%	32%	43%	11%	46%



D. TEACHER AND ADMINISTRATOR SALARIES	48%	14%	32%	21%	16%	63%
E. SELECTION OF BOOKS AND INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS	46%	13%	37%	27%	15%	58%

(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	32%	45%	20%	2%	
2. Activities that dealt with Purposes	27%	62%	11%		
3. Activities that dealt with Effectiveness	25%	64%	4%	4%	4%
4. Activities that dealt with Changes Needed	34%	54%	11%		
5. Discussion at Tables	79%	19%	2%		
6. Large Group Discussion	21%	41%	20%	9%	
7. Overall evaluation of the Forum	41%	43%	14%	2%	
	<b>1 Good</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5 Poor</b>
8. Organization of the Forum	68%	29%	3%		
9. Facilities	66%	21%	13%		
10. Use of time	59%	34%	7%		

11. The information presented was:                      Objective – 91%                      Both Biased & Effective – 5%

12. The moderator was:	Effective – 95%	Ineffective – 0
13. Would you recommend this forum to others:	Yes – 100%	No – 0
14. Has this forum resulted in a change of your attitude about public schools?	Yes – 34%	No – 63%
If yes, which of the following best describes that change?		
I feel better about the schools – 36%		
15. Has the forum left you better informed about the state of the public schools?	Yes – 61%	No – 32%
16. Do you think that this kind of forum would be a good thing to do in communities across the nation?	Yes – 93%	No – 2%
17. Do you think that these kinds of forums could lead to an improvement in the public schools?	Yes – 84%	No – 4%

	A Good job as they are	B Better than pictured, but still have problems	C Failing and alternatives must be found
18. Which of the following best describes your position <u>before</u> the forum?	25%	61%	7%
19. Which of the following best describes your position <u>after</u> the forum?	21%	68%	5%