

COMMUNITY FORUM  
ON EDUCATION  
ILLINOIS PTA DISTRICT 8

*SUMMARY REPORT*

*Sponsored By*

Illinois PTA, Center on Education Policy, and Joyce Foundation

November 12, 1998  
First Christian Church  
Quincy, Illinois

HOST

Jayne Brown  
Illinois PTA District 8 Director  
Quincy, IL

REPORTER

Amy D. Broemmel  
Carbondale, 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***

On November 12, 1998, community members met in Quincy to discuss public education at the second of ten educational forums sponsored by the Illinois PTA, in cooperation with the Center on Education Policy. The forum was organized by Jayne Brown, Illinois PTA District 8 Director and her committee.

The sixty-eight participants attending the forum, represented a number of roles, including parents, educators, pre-service educators, businesses, homeschoolers, school board members, media, community services, and clergy. The participants' views were similar to those found in the national Gallup Poll, but there were significant differences on a few questions, involving the overall evaluation of public schools, problems in the schools, and the amount of say parents should have regarding administrative decisions within the schools.

The general consensus was that there were dual purposes of public schools. First, schools should serve as an equalizer, by providing quality education to all students. Secondly, schools should develop students into responsible citizens who are able to interact in a variety of situations. The Quincy community felt that in general, the public schools were effective. Seven of ten discussion group tables indicated that the schools were effective, given certain conditions, while only one table indicated that the schools were ineffective. Two tables said the question could not be answered with a simple, "Yes" or "No." Finally, the participants suggested non-monetary changes including increasing both parental and community involvement, and monetary changes including reducing class size and improving teacher training and retraining. Overall, participants indicated that the forum was worthwhile, and that they left the forum more informed about the state of public education.

## ***OVERVIEW OF PROCEEDINGS***

An education forum was held on Thursday, November 12, 1998, at the First Christian Church in Quincy, IL. The PTA volunteers were composed of sixteen non-educators and one educator. They helped register participants, facilitate roundtable discussions, and record and tally results.

Following dinner, Anna Weselak, Illinois PTA President, officially opened the forum. She welcomed the participants and then introduced Jack Jennings, Director of the Center on Education Policy. Jennings shared some background information on his organization and the Illinois PTA. He said that both the Center on Education Policy 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.

Prospective participants were first identified in one of two ways. Everyone who served on the Education to Careers Advisory Board was invited, in addition, letters were mailed to area PTA presidents asking for names of people who fit into each of the following categories: parents, teachers, clergy, homeschoolers, business, private school staff, private school parents, and local government. After combining these two sources, 149 names were obtained. Of those, 110 said that they were interested. Those who were interested were then mailed a letter of invitation, which included the Gallup Poll survey and a brochure outlining recent Illinois legislation pertaining to public schools. Sixty-eight participants attended, representing parents, educators, pre-service education students, businesses, homeschoolers, school board members, media, community services, and clergy.

### **Participant Demographics**

Non-educator participants	50 (74%)
<u>Educator participants</u>	<u>18 (26%)</u>
Number of public school teachers	7 (10%)
Number of administrators (local & state level)	11 (16%)
Number of school board members	2 ( 3%)
Number of media representatives	2 ( 3%)
Number of public school parents and PTA members	13 (19%)
Number of pre-service students	7 (10%)
Number of private and home school parents	9 (13%)
Number of community members	16 (24%)
Number of clergy	1 ( 1%)

Percentages do not equal 100% due to rounding

Ten tables were set up around the room. Each table had approximately six participants, a facilitator, and a recorder. Three questions were discussed at each table: “What are the purposes of public schools?,” “How effective are the public schools?,” and “What changes need to be made to make public schools better?”.

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

A general consensus was reached regarding the purposes of public schools, but a variety of secondary purposes were also suggested. Seven of ten groups agreed that the primary purpose of schools was to provide an equal education to all students. Six groups also listed helping children become well-rounded, contributing citizens as a primary purpose. Four groups, of the ten, suggested that the purpose of public schools included teaching positive social skills, and values, and three groups suggested creating life-long learners as a purpose.

A number of other purposes of public schools were suggested by various tables. These included preparing students to keep up with and adapt to changing technology, providing various opportunities for students, providing safe environments, and encouraging cooperation between the schools, parents, and community.

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

There was general agreement in regard to the effectiveness of the public schools. Seven of the ten tables believed that public schools were indeed effective, one believed they were not effective, and two stressed that this question could not be answered with a simple “Yes” or “No.” Most of the groups that indicated schools were effective noted that they were performing to the best of their ability, but that there was still room for improvement. The group that indicated schools were ineffective, agreed that the schools were not as effective as they could be, but stressed that the average students are often overlooked because of the perceived needs of those students who are considered gifted or at-risk. Lack of finances was also cited as a contributor to the ineffectiveness of public schools.

Discussion did not focus on how to measure the effectiveness of the public schools. Only two of ten groups addressed the issue in the answers presented to the large group. Both of these groups suggested looking at the drop-out or graduation rate for high schools.

### **Gallup Poll survey results**

Overall, the local Gallup Poll results were similar to those found nationwide, with a few notable exceptions. Differences in the poll were noted on questions one, six, eight, and ten. Questions one and six focused on the quality of public schools. The people of this community were generally more satisfied with their schools than the nationwide sample. Sixty-nine percent graded their schools “A” or “B,” compared with the national percentage of 46%. They also believed that children today are getting a better education than they did.

Other disagreements involved the perception of problems in the schools. Only alcohol was considered more problematic than the national sample, with 97% of participants rating it “Very” or “Fairly” serious. The other discrepancies involved a smaller perception of problems locally than nationally. Thirty-two percent thought that discipline was not a very big problem, compared with only 17% nationwide. Fighting and gangs were also not perceived as serious in this community, as indicated by ratings of 50% and 66% in the “Not Very Serious” category, respectively. This differs greatly from the national percentages of 28% and 26%. The final discrepancy involved the amount of say parents should have in administrative decisions such as allocation of school funds, curriculum issues, and teacher and administrator salaries. Approximately 50% of respondents believed the amount of say they had was “Just Right,” much higher than the national figures.

While it is true that there were notable differences in four out of the ten questions, overall, the results of the local poll can be considered similar to those collected nationally. One of the questions with discrepancies had multi-part answers, which did show some similarities along with the noted differences. Overall, when the results are viewed holistically, the local respondents are a little more satisfied with their schools, but many responses were similar to those recorded nationally. A full report of both the national and local results are included in the appendices.

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

Tables were asked to decide on one change that cost money and one change that did not cost money. Each table listed numerous changes in both categories.

Non-monetary changes included giving teachers more curricular authority, increasing parent involvement (in and out of the classroom), developing partnerships with businesses, teaching responsibility, values, and ethics, making attempts to change public attitudes, keeping control at the local level. and eliminating the majority of state mandates.

Monetary changes included increasing time for teachers to collaborate during the school day, individualizing education, lowering class sizes, providing more school funding, developing an informational system to inform the community about educational issues, more intensive teacher training and retraining, providing more money to attract better teachers, updating technology, providing developmental guidance counseling for non-academic oriented students, and developing parent education programs.

Discussion arose surrounding the suggestion that students should be required to take a class focusing on life skills and career choices. Many argued that parents should be teaching these life skills, but one community member spoke up, saying, “The effective family structure is failing.” Other participants agreed, suggesting the school often serves as a surrogate parent to many children, and that, “somebody has to do it.” A school administrator stated that schools need to, “...support the family--whatever they look like.” After much more discussion, a small majority decided that such a class would be beneficial, depending on the definition of “life skills.” Participants generally agreed that the two most important non-monetary changes that should be made are increasing community and parent involvement in the public schools.

A general consensus was also reached in the monetary category, indicating that reducing class size and increasing funding for better teacher training and retraining should be the focus of reform efforts.

Overall, participants concluded that the primary purpose of the public schools to educate all youth. Most of the participants believed that the public schools are effective in this purpose. Finally, the forum participants indicated that changes should indeed occur. They indicated that both parental and community involvement could be improved at little cost. However, teacher training and retraining and reduction of class size are also essential, and will require proper funding.

Approximately 94% of the forum participants completed the evaluation form before leaving the forum. The response was overwhelmingly positive. Virtually all of the activities were judged to be somewhat useful, but the discussion at the tables appeared to be the most useful, by far. Over 90% of the respondents believed that the forum was well organized and time was used wisely. Sixty-three respondents stated that they would recommend the forum to others.

Although, overall, the participants believed that the forum left them more informed about the state of public schools, most did not change their opinions of the public schools. However, twelve people indicated that they left feeling better about the public schools. The majority of respondents (76%) believed that, “The public schools are better than generally pictured, but they do have problems,” after attending the forum.

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

Many participants indicated that they would like to see similar forums focusing on the Quincy schools, specifically. A committee is being formed to meet with Senator Donahue and Representative Art Tenhouse to present the results directly to them. An article was also written and printed in the Quincy Herald-Whig, the local newspaper, and there were two televised news reports on the forum, itself.

Although the participants represented a wide range of viewpoints, they were able to arrive at a general consensus on each of the three major questions. First, they agreed that the purpose of public schools is primarily to provide an equal education for all students. The majority of groups indicated that the schools were effective, considering what resources they had with which to work. Finally, the forum participants concluded that changes need to be made. They indicated that both community and parental involvement could be increased at little to no cost, while improving teacher training and retraining, and reduction of class size would require proper funding. The participants overwhelmingly agreed that this type of educational forum was beneficial, and indicated that they hoped the information would be made available to the public.

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%	6%
B	36%	63%
C	31%	27%
D	9%	2%
Fail	5%	0
Don't Know	9%	2%

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%	22%
Not Enough	28%	22%
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%	50%
Oppose	45%	50%
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%	57%
Already meets needs	39%	40%
Don't Know	7%	3%

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%	53%
Fairly important	27%	37%
Not at all important	8%	10%
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%	55%
Worse	48%	40%
No difference/Don't know	11%	5%

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%	62%
No	27%	33%
Don't Know	11%	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%	25%	58%	16%	0%
B. DISCIPLINE	50%	26%	17%	3%	26%	42%	32%	0%
C. SMOKING	50%	26%	15%	3%	38%	48%	12%	1%
D. ALCOHOL	44%	28%	18%	4%	55%	42%	1%	0%
E. TEENAGE PREGNANCY	43%	28%	19%	4%	30%	47%	23%	0%
G. FIGHTING	37%	27%	26%	5%	9%	40%	50%	1%
H. GANGS	37%	20%	28%	11%	5%	22%	66%	5%

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%	35%
Too Small	15%	7%
About the Right Size	49%	57%
Don't Know	6%	1%

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%	35%	12%	52%
B. SELECTION & HIRING ADMINISTRATORS AND PRINCIPALS	55%	9%	30%	25%	17%	55%
C. CURRICULUM, SUBJECTS OFFERED	53%	10%	32%	33%	8%	58%

D. TEACHER AND ADMINISTRATOR SALARIES	48%	14%	32%	17%	28%	53%
E. SELECTION OF BOOKS AND INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS	46%	13%	37%	27%	22%	48%

(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	10%	47%	31%	6%	1%
2. Activities that dealt with Purposes	25%	55%	17%		
3. Activities that dealt with Effectiveness	30%	48%	16%	3%	1%
4. Activities that dealt with Changes Needed	45%	47%	8%		
5. Discussion at Tables	70%	23%	6%		
6. Large Group Discussion	17%	39%	36%	5%	
7. Overall evaluation of the Forum	36%	56%	6%		
	<b>1 Good</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5 Poor</b>
8. Organization of the Forum	72%	23%			
9. Facilities	67%	28%	1%		
10. Use of time	53%	44%	6%		

11. The information presented was: -7- Objective – 88% Both Biased & Effective – 5%



12. The moderator was:	Effective – 53%	Ineffective – 1%		
13. Would you recommend this forum to others:	Yes – 98%	No – 0		
14. Has this forum resulted in a change of your attitude about public schools?	Yes – 25%	No – 75%		
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 – 59%	No – 36%		
16. Do you think that this kind of forum would be a good thing to do in communities across the nation?	Yes – 95%	No – 1%		
17. Do you think that these kinds of forums could lead to an improvement in the public schools?	Yes – 91%	No – 0	Maybe - 6%	Don't Know – 1%
	A Good job as they are	B Better than pictured, still have problems	C Failing and alternatives must be found	
18. Which of the following best describes your position <u>before</u> the forum?	16%	75%	6%	
19. Which of the following best describes your position <u>after</u> the forum?	9%	81%	6%	

20. Suggestions for strengthening future forums?

- Make sure action follows output of discussion.
- One missing element of our community was parents of low achievers.
- Let the forums do stronger double duty as forums for our local community to clarify and come up with some possible beginning solutions to actually implement.
- More diversity in the group invited.
- Allow more time for discussion.
- Ask questions allowing for a scale or range of answers rather than yes/no.
- This was very interesting and productive.
- Public school systems can meet every need in a community—they must do what they were designed to do: educate in academics.
- Talk is one thing, change is another.
- More questions—less time per question.
- Format is effective.
- Noise level should be better.
- Better cross-section of community, including minorities, students, recent graduates-college bound and those going directly into the work force.
- Time to articulate small discussion group conclusions better for large group.
- Make it a requirement prior to teacher/parent conference.
- More time and thought provoking questions.
- Earlier starting time.