



NCPIE UPDATE

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John Landesman, Coordinator of Montgomery County Public Schools **Study Circles Program**, was the guest speaker at the December NCPIE meeting. Below is the article he wrote for the NCPIE Update.

Using Study Circles to Engage Racially Diverse Parents, Staff, and Students in Dialogue and Problem Solving

Engaging families from all racial and ethnic backgrounds is challenging in diverse schools. Cultural differences, language barriers, and stereotypes often add to the difficulty of getting input and involvement from all stakeholders. To address these challenges, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) developed a program called Study Circles which combines vigorous outreach, facilitated dialogue, and collaborative action.

Over the past five years, more than 1700 parents, staff, and students have participated in the dialogues to develop trust, learn about each others cultures, talk honestly about their different experiences and views, find common ground on the racial and ethnic barriers to student achievement and parent involvement, and create action steps that the group or school can take to overcome the prioritized barriers.



“The parents who were involved in the study circle aren’t the usual parents that are involved in everything”, explained one principal who had a study circle at his school. “This is a different group of parents. And we really became a close group.” “The experience has made a significant difference in the understanding of how a variety of stakeholders view the school and staff”, explained another principal. “I have established relationships with individuals that will help me provide a more inclusive school environment.”

In addition to the specific action plans that are developed in every study circle, participants are personally changed by the experience in ways that positively impact the communication and learning environment at the school. When asked what she got out of participating in the six-session study circle at her school, one teacher said, “I didn’t understand why one of the parents was always upset or always pushing or always being a certain way towards the teachers. Then I heard her talking about her childhood and what her experiences were. That was a huge ah-ha for me. Where she was coming from

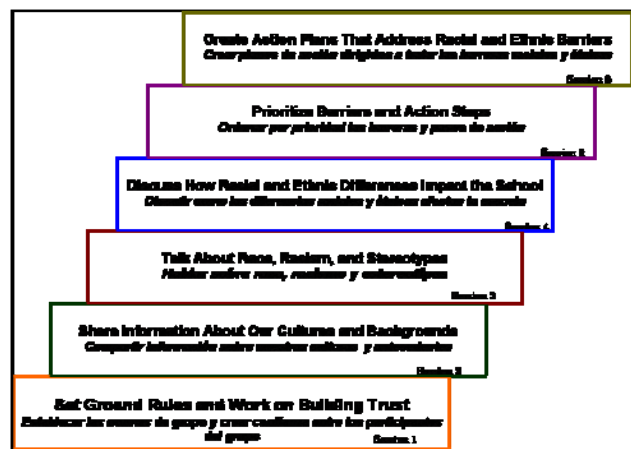
made so much more sense to me...” A parent in a different study circle explained, “I learned not to be intimidated by people who seem important to me—like teachers, or people who use big words because they went to college. “I learned that my opinion was just as important as theirs, and they wanted to listen to it.”

Information and Resources

- The MCPS Study Circles Website includes program information, outreach materials, and evaluations -- <http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/studycircles/>
- Short Video that explains the process (in English with Spanish subtitles) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K73vOx-pPo4>
- Student Voices video -- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yPNUAOP2s5w>
- Everyday Demo is a national organizations that provide free materials and technical assistance <http://www.everyday-democracy.org>

A Study Circle:

- About 15 participants who make up the racial/ethnic diversity of the school.
- The group meets for 6 weekly two-hour sessions or one full day.
- Two facilitators ensure that everyone has a chance to talk, and that the conversation is productive.
- Discussion questions draw on everyone’s experiences—parents, staff, and students are equally important.



Moving beyond dialogue:

In the last two sessions, participants create action plans to address racial and ethnic barriers. The Action Phase begins at the conclusion of the study circle. The Action Phase may include:

- Holding an Action Forum with the whole school community
- Action teams working on specific strategies
- Presentation to Instructional Leadership Team
- Inclusion of action plans into School Improvement Plan

Evaluation

A two-year evaluation was completed in December 2007. A full report is available at http://montgomeryschoolsmd.org/uploadedFiles/departments/studycircles/aboutus/Study_Circles_Final_Eval_Mar10.pdf. Below are some of the findings:

Participation:

- 29% African American
- 6.8% Asian American
- 27.5% Hispanic
- 31% White
- 6% other

- The participants represented 57 countries and spoke 24 different languages. For many parents who participated, this was their first involvement with their child's school.

Parents

- 69% increased their understanding of the school system
- 70% increased their participation with the school
- 88% increased their connections with staff or other parents

Staff

- 85% of staff increased understanding of others' attitudes and beliefs
- Two thirds of the principals reported changing or adding to their parent outreach strategies, which resulted in greater parent involvement

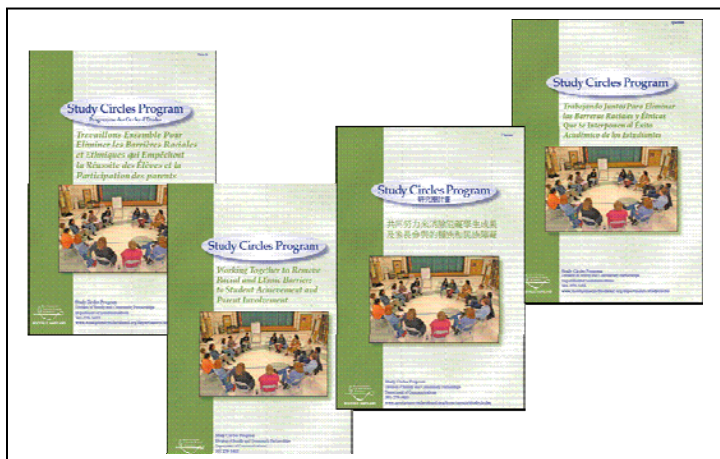
Recruitment

- An information meeting is held for each school that is holding a study circle. The school advertises the information meeting to the whole school community at Back to School Night, in the school newsletter, through PTA list serves, and with flyers like the ones to the right.
- Targeted recruitment to engage parents who do not usually attend school meetings is also needed. The principal sends a personal letter to 50 to 70 parents to invite them to attend the information meeting. AmeriCorps members from the Study Circles Program follow up with personal phone calls to the same list of parents in whatever languages are needed.
- At the meeting, parents will be given information about the program, take part in a sample study circle, and then fill out a registration form if they want to participate in the actual study circle.



Addressing Language Barriers

- Many study circles are bilingual. This is a great way to encourage communication between parents and teachers who speak different languages.



- MCPS has also organized successful Spanish-language study circles focused on creating a group of Latino parents working together to increase parent involvement.

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