



SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES WORKING TOGETHER

HELPING ARKANSAS STUDENTS SUCCEED

*2003 Summary of Statewide
Study Circles Discussions*



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Prepared By

Mark L. McManus, *Research Specialist*

Patricia C. Davis, *Research Specialist*

Dianne P. Metzler, *Associate Research Specialist**

Janice A. Cook, *Associate Research Specialist*

Heather Best, *Research Associate*



Prepared For
Arkansas School Boards Association
Arkansas Study Circles Project

RESEARCH GROUP

Institute for Economic Advancement
College of Business Administration
University of Arkansas at Little Rock
2801 South University Avenue
Little Rock, AR 72204-1099

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*Principal author

Executive Summary

The research results are intended to provide Arkansas School Boards Association (ASBA) officials and policymakers with input from local school district stakeholders on issues related to helping students succeed in public schools. This report, prepared by the Institute for Economic Advancement (IEA) at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR), summarizes information collected from nine school districts throughout the state of Arkansas. This information was gathered during October, November, and December 2002 in a series of weekly study circles organized by the Arkansas School Boards Association, Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families, Study Resource Center, Arkansas PTA, and Entergy. The intent of the study circles was to address the question “*What can the local community do to help students succeed in school?*” A diverse mix of parents, students, teachers, administrators, community leaders, and local citizens attended the month-long public forums to address a set slate of issues presented by facilitators trained under the guidance of the Arkansas Study Circles Project (through the ASBA Educational Foundation).

The common themes that emerged from the study circles include the following:

- ◆ FINANCIAL
- ◆ ACCOUNTABILITY
- ◆ DIVERSITY
- ◆ MOTIVATION
- ◆ PARTICIPATION
- ◆ DISCIPLINE
- ◆ UNIFORMITY
- ◆ MENTORING
- ◆ SUPPORT
- ◆ INFORMATION

Introduction

According to Sally Campbell, Deputy Director of the Study Circles Resource Center (based in Pomfret, Connecticut), “Study circles is the generic name given to small, deliberative discussion groups that typically form because people have a shared concern about a social

or political issue. Study circles generally consist of a small group of people (i.e., 5 to 12 people) who come together in a democratic interaction to look at an issue from a variety of points of view.”¹ Given the fact that Arkansas public school administrators and policymakers historically face challenges related to educational issues (e.g., equitable funding levels, teacher salaries, student performance, etc.) that has fostered the development of shared concerns among our state’s citizenry related to education. Therefore, study circles were organized, facilitated, and conducted to provide input from area school districts and patrons. Public agreement on solutions to problems is not the goal of study circles; rather potential outcomes emerge through the discussion process.

This summary report of study circles findings is based on information obtained from nine school systems in Arkansas (Rogers, Waldron, Pine Bluff, Springdale, Mena, Marianna, Bryant, Paragould, and Beebe). The premise of a study circle included bringing together a small diverse group of individuals for four, two-hour sessions. Groups considered issues from many points of view and helped group members find common themes.

This round of study circles began with an introductory meeting intended to give members a chance to become acquainted and share feelings from their school experiences. Subsequent study circles were designed to allow facilitators to introduce discussions pertaining to the Rose Standards² (general expectations for what Arkansas schools should be able to provide every student in every school across the state), and what the community can offer the educational system. The desired end result of this round of study circles was to assist communities toward action on the issue of Helping Arkansas Students Succeed. Study circles were held on a weekly basis with each participating school district holding between one and six groups per week. Participants, numbering from three to fifteen per circle, were guided through a standard discussion guide, developed under the guidance of the Study Circles Resource Center, by trained study circles facilitators. The primary objective of this report is to provide the ASBA with information from the perspective of local stakeholders pertaining to Helping Arkansas Students Succeed for distribution to state decision makers during the 84th Arkansas General Assembly.

Methodology

Individual study circles facilitators conducted the weekly meetings while trained note takers summarized participant input. This information was emailed to IEA for the purposes of summarizing the participant information. It should be noted that participant numbers fluctuated on a weekly basis and some groups were collapsed into others within same school districts as time progressed.

Research Limitations

Due to time and budgetary constraints, some research limitations were inherent within this project. Ideally study circle input from all 310 school districts would be the preference for this project. However, given the scope of this project, the research approach taken represents the most timely and economically feasible alternative given project timeline and budget constraints. Participating school districts represent a diverse group in terms of geographic location within the state and population density (i.e., rural, suburban, metropolitan) within the communities served.

Study Circle Themes

FINANCIAL - It was commonly acknowledged that schools have the burden of providing every child with the best possible education on a constrained budget. Study circles participants offered varying views on how to obtain additional funding and ideas pertaining to how the funding should be allocated. A viewpoint that surfaced during several of the group meetings was that area businesses should make substantial contributions to the educational system. Additionally, the idea of using a monetary reward for exceptional teaching was a common point. Participants also noted that a uniform pay scale should be enacted throughout the state for all teachers.

ACCOUNTABILITY - Participants view a major problem as a lack of accountability. This outlook encompassed responsibility on the part of school administrators, teachers, students, parents, and the community at large to create a superior educational environment. It was noted that students should be responsible for setting and meeting educational goals for themselves. Study circles group members expressed the view that parents, teachers,

and students should all be culpable for addressing truancy in the school system. Furthermore, study circles participants suggested that school administrators should take a more active role in lowering dropout rates.

DIVERSITY - Participants felt an obligation exists for students, school officials, and teachers to learn about and develop a value for different cultures. Participants suggested that a more diverse teaching staff could ease cultural differences. On a community level it was suggested that churches could assist schools with understanding Hispanic issues. The need for additional personnel in English as a Second Language (ESL) and the urgency to create a bilingual school system was a common theme. Participants noted that diversity among students necessitates that not only cultural, but also skill and interest levels must be taken into account when counseling children on career and educational paths. This included special efforts to reach out to students who have no plans to attend a college or university beyond high school with guidance for alternative training sources. It was also noted that there is a perceived need for more variety and diversity in teaching styles because students exhibit a wide variety of learning styles and abilities (i.e., gifted, average, special needs, etc.). Participants indicated a need for testing that is sensitive to the cultural diversity across the state.

MOTIVATION - The issue of motivation was evident on numerous subjects. Participants were of the opinion that incentives could be offered to students for superior academic and athletic achievements and that teachers should be rewarded for exceptional performance, not only monetarily, but also with professional development opportunities. Group members suggested that student achievement could be highlighted at local businesses.

PARTICIPATION - Issues of participation were evident in participants' views for parents and the local community population. Several ideas were expressed during the study circles for improving parental participation in their children's education. Participants were of the opinion that a school that welcomed parents (through special events, parent conferences, more day-to-day involvement) would increase parental interest in their child's educational progress and overall behavior and attitude toward school and the teachers. It was the opinion of participants that parents must be strongly encouraged to

participate in PTA meetings. Additionally, ideas were voiced to bring more community involvement in the local schools. Ideas that emerged included using a shadowing program to allow local businesses to give students a sense of real job experiences and the skills that are needed for a particular job and local industry on-the-job training.

SAFETY - Participants brought up the issue of safety in the school system numerous times. Teachers and students have the right to a safe learning and work environment. Many members were of the opinion that a lack of discipline has led to a lack of respect for school officials thus damaging the overall environment of the school and lessening students' ability to learn.

UNIFORMITY - A prevalent view among study circles participants was that schools are not equally treated or funded. Small schools are viewed as being at a disadvantage in both a monetary and in a dearth of opportunities available to both students and teachers. In addition, participants noted that it would be advantageous for all Arkansas schools to offer a uniform curriculum that would negate difficulties students have when transferring between schools in state. It was also brought up that uniform course offerings would lessen differences in student preparedness for educational opportunities beyond high school.

MENTORING - The issue of mentoring occurred in study circles across the state. Several options and goals fell under this topic. Participants were of the opinion that new teachers should be mentored by more experienced teachers to ease their transition into their own classroom setting. Additionally, the idea of creating a mentoring program in which parents, teachers, and older students would serve as mentors to younger students or students who are showing signs of falling behind was commonly mentioned by participants. A slight variation on the mentoring theme was expressed as obtaining tutor training and partnering with local community colleges, universities, and libraries.

SUPPORT - A strongly voiced opinion was the need for parental support. This theme was expressed as a lack of support for both the single parent households and the more traditional two-parent homes. The need for educational support and opportunities for parents was a strongly held opinion by group members. It was also noted that parenting classes could be of benefit to some

parents as well as educating parents on sources of available assistance.

INFORMATION - Participants indicated that there is a need for more information regarding their educational system. It was suggested that the use of parent and community surveys would provide much needed information on improving individual educational systems. Additionally, members indicated that a continuing use of study circles could open lines of communication between the community and the school system.

ADDITIONAL THEMES that were frequently noted among the study circles included: the need for smaller classes, more state funding, higher teacher salaries, additional funding for the arts, more before and after school care, the need for a strict dress code, more counselors, and improving the school climate, making it enjoyable for students and teachers.

Educational Goals

Participants in the various study circles implied that school systems should take a holistic approach when addressing the needs of Arkansas children. This approach would include meeting not only the educational needs, but also assuring that each child is healthy and has the nutritional support necessary for proper growth. Additionally participants suggested drug and pregnancy prevention should be afforded each student. Participants indicated it is the school's responsibility to prepare today's children for tomorrow's workplace while instilling a sense of community and providing a foundation of values.

A Vision for the Future

Subsequent meetings of study circles participants asked for an idealized vision from participants regarding *a state where all students succeed* and *a school where all students succeed*. The following are highlights for the most commonly noted ideas.

Picture a state where all children succeed

- ◆ Less crime.
- ◆ Lower unemployment rate.
- ◆ Higher quality workforce.
- ◆ Greater number of new businesses entering state.
- ◆ Higher per capita income.
- ◆ Lower taxes.

Picture a school where all students succeed

- ◆ Open-effective communication between students and school officials.
- ◆ Significant increase in parental participation and support.
- ◆ Multiple financial resources for more effective funding of schools.
- ◆ Community involvement and commitment to addressing school's needs.

Action Forums

The Action Forum was designed to allow study circles within districts to come together and develop a plan of action. Action Forums addressed the question of "What specific actions do we want to take?" Participants answered this question through a series of action statements: state actions, community actions, school actions, community and school actions, and action on your own. The following are common action plans indicated by study circles members:

STATE ACTIONS

- More tutoring for students.
- More support for parents.
- Increase school funding.
- Require more counselors.
- Higher teacher salaries.
- Fewer standardized tests.
- Uniform statewide curriculum.
- New school facilities.
- Mandatory English as a Second Language training.
- Train teachers in cultural diversity.
- Teen pregnancy prevention programs.

COMMUNITY ACTIONS

- Survey communities for needs and wants.
- Mentoring programs (students and parents).
- Business contributions (time and money).
- Internship opportunities.
- Study circles groups.
- Adult education classes.

SCHOOL ACTIONS

- Highly skilled teachers and administrators.
- Motivate students to succeed.
- More communication between school and community.

Help students learn to interact appropriately with each other.

- Increase number of art/music classes.
- Expect accountability from teachers.
- Involve parents in their children's school lives.
- Create a homework helpline.
- Recognize children with exemplary school records.
- Improve quality of after school programs.
- Individual skills plan for each student.
- More block-time for teaching the basics.
- Establish a dress code.

COMMUNITY AND SCHOOLS ACTIONS

- Financial support from community businesses.
- Form parent/teacher/community partnerships.
- Form parent advisory council to the superintendent and the school board.
- Drug prevention program.

ACTIONS ON YOUR OWN

- Be more visible at the school.
- Join the PTA.
- Encourage children to succeed.
- Communicate with other parents.
- Attend parent/teacher conferences.
- Volunteer at your child's school.

Conclusion

Study circles participants shared a common desire for all Arkansas students to have the opportunity to partake of an educational system that would enhance their lives, both now and in the future. The ideas and possible solutions offered were as diverse as the participants of the study circles groups. This summary report serves to highlight the common themes that emerged from the study circles discussions. The need for school officials, parents, and the community as a whole to come together to find the unique solutions for each school system has been initiated with the completion of this first round of study circles to *Help Arkansas Students Succeed* .

(Endnotes)

1

Campbell, Sally, Deputy Director Study Circles Resource Center, Deliberative Dialogue: Engaging the Public in Public Education Policy, Regional Policy Analysts Networkshop (conference abstract presented in Austin, Texas), October 10-11, 1996.

2

In 1989, the Kentucky Supreme Court ruled that an adequate educational system would provide children with the resources necessary to achieve seven critical capacities. These capacities are referred to as the Rose Standards.

(i) sufficient oral and written communication skills to enable students to function in a complex and rapidly changing civilization;

(ii) sufficient knowledge of economic, social, and political systems to enable the students to make informed choices;

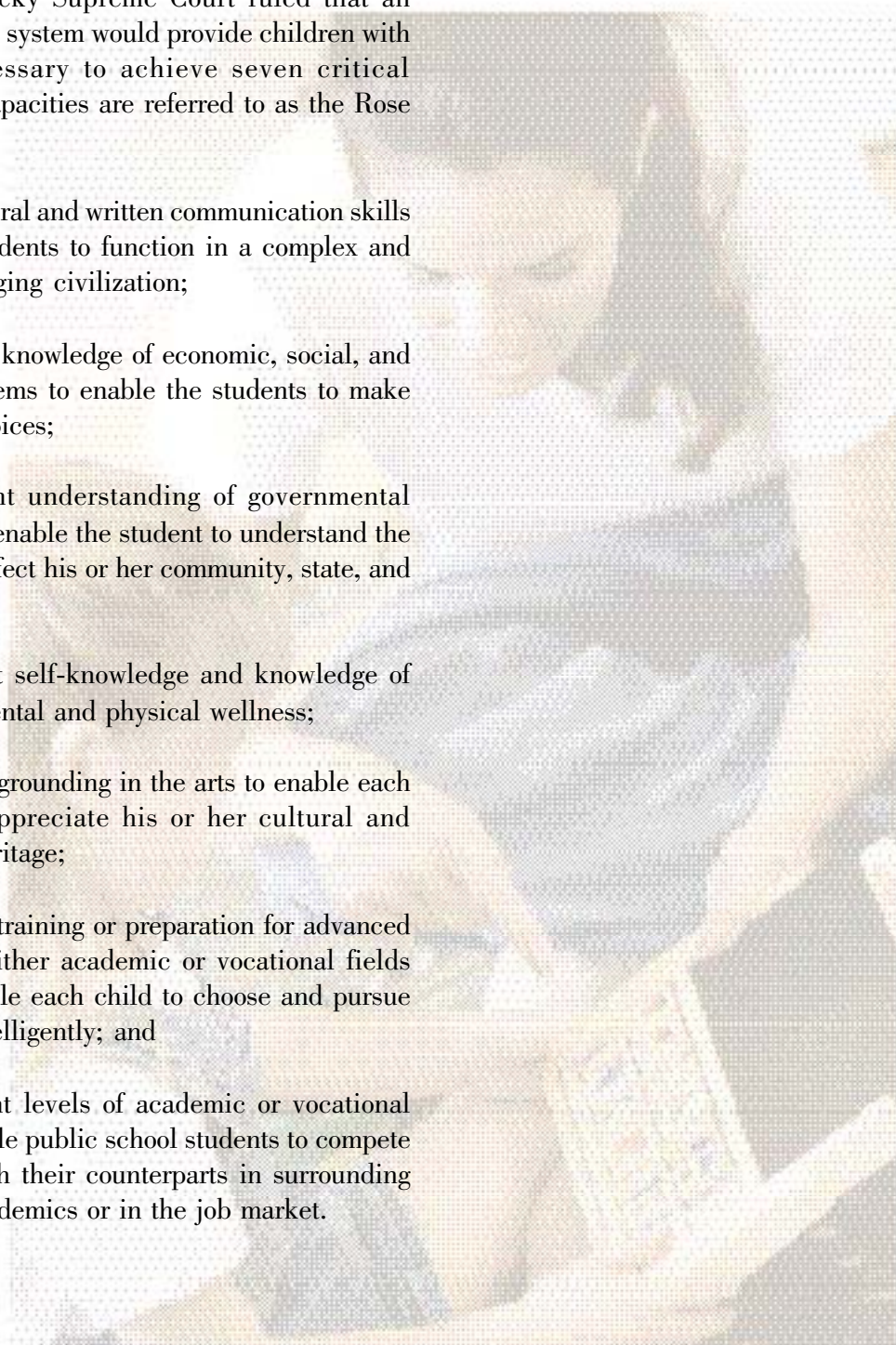
(iii) sufficient understanding of governmental processes to enable the student to understand the issues that effect his or her community, state, and nation;

(iv) sufficient self-knowledge and knowledge of his or her mental and physical wellness;

(v) sufficient grounding in the arts to enable each student to appreciate his or her cultural and historical heritage;

(vi) sufficient training or preparation for advanced training in either academic or vocational fields so as to enable each child to choose and pursue life work intelligently; and

(vii) sufficient levels of academic or vocational skills to enable public school students to compete favorably with their counterparts in surrounding states, in academics or in the job market.





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