

Study Circles Program

*Working Together to Remove
Racial and Ethnic Barriers
to Student Achievement and
Parent Involvement*



Study Circles Program

Division of Family and Community Partnerships

Department of Communications

301-279-3455

www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/studycircles



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*Racial and ethnic differences
sometimes get in the way of
student achievement and parent
involvement in the Montgomery
County Public Schools.*



They affect—

- the way students learn,
- the way teachers teach,
- the way we communicate with each other, and
- the way we view our schools.



“I think it made teachers who participated and the parents more aware of racial issues that we didn't know we had. It set us on the path to deal with those issues.” —Study circle participant

The Montgomery County Public Schools Study Circles Program

helps schools address these challenges by bringing parents, teachers, and students together from different backgrounds. Trained facilitators help participants build relationships, develop a better understanding of the challenges, and plan action steps to help all students succeed.

Vision:

A school system where all students succeed, regardless of racial and ethnic background.

Goal:

To remove racial and ethnic barriers to student achievement in the Montgomery County Public Schools.



“The parents who were involved in the study circle aren’t the usual parents that are involved in everything. This is a different group of parents. And we really became a close group.”

—Study circle participant

Objectives of the study circle:

- To build a unified group of diverse parents, teachers, and students that understands the challenges and benefits of a diverse school.
- To create personal and group action steps that address racial and ethnic barriers to student achievement.
- To encourage an environment in which racial and ethnic issues are discussed openly and productively.



Session 1

Set ground rules and work on building trust

Session 2

Share information about our cultures and backgrounds

Session 3

Talk about race, racism, and stereotypes

Session 4

Discuss how racial and ethnic differences impact the school

Session 5

Prioritize barriers and brainstorm action steps

Session 6

Create action plans that address racial and ethnic barriers

A study circle—

- is a small group of about 15 parents and teachers (and students where appropriate) from all racial and ethnic backgrounds;
- meets for six 2-hour sessions (weekly and in the evening);
- is led by two trained facilitators who ensure that everyone has a chance to talk, and that the conversation is productive;
- draws on everyone’s experiences equally and;
- helps the group to
 - share personal stories
 - look at a problem from many points of view,
 - explore possible solutions, and
 - make plans for action and change.

Where will it lead?

- Parents will have more information to better help their children.
- Teachers will have a greater understanding of cultural differences and the effect of race and culture on teaching and learning.
- The school will have a unified group of diverse parents and teachers who understand the challenges and needs of a diverse school, and action teams working to address issues raised in the study circles.



STUDY CIRCLES LEAD TO DIFFERENT LEVELS OF CHANGE. The following are outcomes that have come from different study circles:

Awareness

Pre- and post-surveys show that teachers better understand the impact of race on school success after participating in a study circle.

Relationships

Three parents knew each other from attending the same meetings. At those meetings, however, they never talked more than to say hello and usually sat with parents from their own racial and ethnic backgrounds. After participating in the study circle together, the three now consider each other friends and are working together for the school.

Personal Action

Having gained a new understanding of what is expected of parents, one parent started a monthly meeting for other Spanish-speaking parents. The parents meet at the school to help each other navigate the school system.

Group Action

The school's PTA was floundering and parent involvement was minimal. Study circle participants worked together to recruit and plan the final PTA meeting of the year. Sixty-five parents (many of whom did not speak English) attended the meeting. The original participants facilitated small-group discussions in which parents came up with ideas for new programs and discussed the barriers that usually keep them from participating. Action teams were created, the PTA officer positions were all filled, and parent involvement increased.



“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, and I think I was much more tolerant of her after that.”

—Study circle participant





Policy Change

Students in a study circle explained how the school's discipline policy was unfair to African American students. As a result the school's leadership team met and revised the policy.

School Change

The annual School Improvement Plan (SIP) usually represents the ideas of the mostly White staff and one or two active parents. After the study circle, the following year's SIP was developed from the concerns and ideas that the study circle agreed upon. Several members of the study circle are now active members of the SIP committee.

“Realizing that people are concerned about their children regardless of their race or income level... that was important. We all care about our children, there's that desire to help. I think that's empowering.”

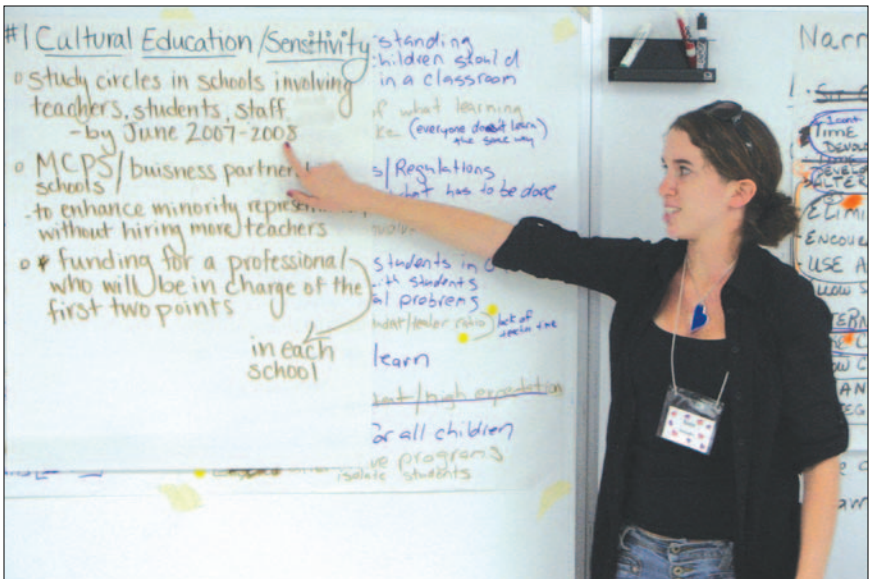
—Study circle participant

The MCPS Study Circles Program provides each school with the following:

- Two trained facilitators
- An interpreter and translation equipment (when needed)
- All discussion, recruitment, and advertising materials
- A two-hour informational meeting for all potential participants
- A presentation at a staff meeting
- Oversight and weekly support of facilitators
- Recruitment and reminder phone calls in needed languages
- Support for action steps.

“I learned not to be intimidated by people who seem important to me like teachers or people who went to college. I learned that my opinion was just as important as theirs, and they want to listen to it.”

—Study circle participant



Contact John Landesman, coordinator of the Study Circle Program, at 301-279-3455. Or get more information at our Web site, www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/studycircles

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