

SED LETTER

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Putting

the

Public

Back

into

Public

Schools



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Putting the Public Back into Public Schools

We aren't rallying around [our schools]. Instead of moving closer to the institutions, Americans are moving away. People without children deny any responsibility for the schools, saying that falls on the parents. Parents, however, may feel accountable for their own children but not for children generally. . . . erosion of our commitment to a system of public schools should be taken very seriously.

— David Mathews,
Is There a Public for Our
Public Schools? (1996)

David Mathews, former Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare and current CEO of the Kettering Foundation, is one of many concerned about the backlash against public schools. Based on ten years of research commissioned by the Kettering Foundation, Mathews writes, “Despite a long tradition of support for public education, Americans today seem to be halfway out the schoolhouse door.”

He sees community building as one way to improve our schools. “It is not simply that the schools need to be improved; the *relationship* between the schools and the community needs repair,” he notes. According to Mathews, “Strong communities, with people banded and pulling together, are our last line of defense against the breakdown of families and society. And they are also an essential source of ‘social capital’, a necessary form of reinforcement from outside the school that encourages children to learn.”

SEDL has a history of helping communities become engaged with their schools. We have long stressed the importance of creating home, school, and community partnerships as a way to help ensure student success. This issue of *SEDLetter* looks at ways in which we can involve the public and ways in which citizens have made a difference in their communities and schools through SEDL field-based research projects.

One of our projects, *Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools*, focuses on deliberative dialogue as a process to engage state and local policymakers and the public. The article, “Study Circles Stave Off Crises for Two Arkansas School Districts” is a story of what happened in the communities of North Little Rock and Alread as a result of their involvement in the *Calling the Roll* project. The two communities faced very different crises, but the deliberative dialogue process helped both communities and their schools through tense situations.

“The Community is the Key to Engaging Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families” discusses the importance and challenges of including culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families in community dialogue related to schools. These families are often left out of education discussions, yet their input and participation is needed to ensure their children’s needs are met.

“Parents Are Partners in Fabens” celebrates the successes of one of SEDL’s Collaborative Action Team (CAT) sites near El Paso, Texas. Like the deliberative dialogue process used in *Calling the Roll*, the CAT project provides a process that helps parents and community members of all backgrounds work together to provide the best education possible for their children. Instead of having a focus on policy making, the communities involved in CAT choose projects to help meet local and school needs such as providing health care services for their children, improving school facilities, and creating new learning opportunities for their children.

Finally, we present comments from Rutgers University professor Benjamin Barber who has devoted his career to the study of democracy. Barber, like Mathews, recognizes a great need for public engagement in our schools to ensure that every child in America receives a quality education. Barber spoke at a conference that SEDL cosponsored last fall as part of the *Calling the Roll* project. We think you will find his insights interesting with regard to the importance of public participation and the need to educate our children to become better citizens, to carry on the traditions, rights, and responsibilities of our diverse democracy.

SEDL

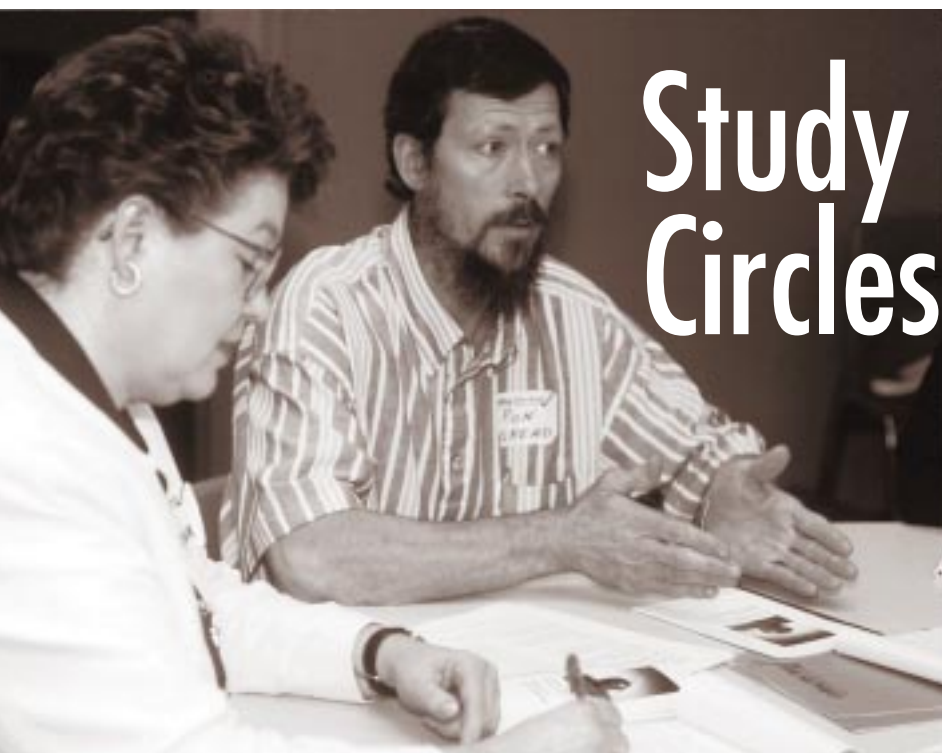
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Study Circles

Stave Off Crises for Two Arkansas School Districts

By John Pennington

Ann Brown of Little Rock, Arkansas, and Ron Harder from Alread, Arkansas, participated in Study Circles facilitator training held in Little Rock at the Second Baptist Church.

Sometimes things happen at just the right time. In the fall of 1998, that's exactly what happened for two Arkansas school districts. In an attempt to improve public engagement in their schools,



North Little Rock School District (8,676 students in grades K–12) and Alread School District (86 students in grades K–12) decided to try something new—study circles.

Both districts participated in the *Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools* project, hoping to open the lines of communication between their schools and the public. In Arkansas, the project was sponsored by the Arkansas Friends for Better Schools, the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, and the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC).

Calling the Roll brought multiple, diverse groups of 8–12 people together to thoughtfully discuss how well public education is working in their communities. Participants agreed to attend four two-hour meetings held in schools, churches, and community centers.

North Little Rock Faces Teacher Strike

“We didn’t have much to lose by becoming involved in *Calling the Roll*,” admits North Little Rock school board member Teresa Burl. “We wanted anything that could improve our communication, anything that could make people aware of what’s going on in schools and give us some input. We get a lot of criticism from the media that we’re not keeping the public informed.”

Not only did the media attack the school board, teachers in the district criticized it as well. Tensions came to a head earlier that year, after the board voted to no longer recognize the district’s teacher union. The teachers threatened to strike.

“The perception was that we [the school board members] were tyrants and we were just rubber-stamping everything that any administrator gave us,” Burl says.

Although the North Little Rock School District became involved in study circles to improve communication with the public, not to prevent a teacher walkout, Burl said the dialogue that resulted from the process allowed the crisis to be handled rationally.

“I thought the process was really open. I don’t think anyone felt they were less powerful in the study circles. There was no fear or retribution. They were free to bring up any issue,” she reports.

Debbie Rozzell, a district employee who was the study circles coordinator, agrees. Parents involved in the *Calling the Roll* project told administrators and teachers to “get over” their petty squabbling, she reports.

“I think the communication level increased dramatically between the administration and the teachers. I don’t think the administrators understood how unhappy some of their actions were making the teachers and how dissatisfied some of the teachers were. It was good for us to hear the teachers’ point of view. But it was also good for the teachers to hear from parents and the school board.”

“Study circles were an absolute godsend,” Burl adds. “It helped us to avoid some things that could have been terrible, even disastrous

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“Study circles were beneficial to the district, there’s no doubt about it. The results reaffirm that this is the way to do things.”

—North Little Rock superintendent James Smith

for our school district.” If a teacher strike had happened, “it would have split our community.”

The 115 study circles participants in North Little Rock have influenced how North Little Rock School District conducts business, says superintendent James Smith. For example, school board meetings are now televised. Also, after the study circles session, the district formed four discussion groups to further examine issues that had been identified as challenges during the study circles project. The discussion groups each included ten residents and ten school district employees, and were charged with mapping out the district’s strategic action plan. Two of the district’s three strategic planning goals for the 1999-2000 school year—increased student performance and better communication—were study circles recommendations.

“Study circles were beneficial to the district, there’s no doubt about it,” Smith says. “The results reaffirm that this is the way to do things.”

North Little Rock school board member Monieca West believes study circles were “extremely beneficial.” She applauds *Calling the Roll* for involving the public in the district’s strategic planning process:

“It has certainly given the school board a checklist and guidebook to use to set policy in the future.”

Alread Up in Arms

Faced with a crisis of his own, Alread school board president Ron Harder was eager to bring study circles to his community of 350 people.

In March 1998, a teacher in the district was arrested, and later convicted, of producing methamphetamines. The teacher was related to the district’s superintendent and every member of the school board but Harder. To make matters worse, the teacher’s father was on the school board.

“That was the rock bottom. The community was really up in arms,” Harder observes.

The arrest came two days before Alread’s regular Saturday night board meeting. Twenty-six people showed up for the meeting, ready to pull their kids out of the district. Alread school board meetings rarely draw an audience of even one person. The board voted to suspend the teacher at the meeting.

“The tar was hot, the feathers were ready, and the rope was right outside,” admits Harder.

Even though school officials had not been aware that one of their teachers was involved in drugs, the public wanted heads to roll. The superintendent tendered his resignation.

“The public perception was that the school

was at fault for not knowing about the meth lab,” Harder explains.

In July 1998, Judy White, Arkansas Friends for Better Schools coordinator, contacted Harder about participating in *Calling the Roll*. Harder jumped on the chance to start the healing process.

“I was champing at the bit, waiting for an opportunity to get involved,” Harder says.

He hit the ground running, going door to door, recruiting people to serve as facilitators. His hard work paid off—17 of the 50 people that attended the statewide study circles facilitator training in Little Rock were from the small Ozark mountain town.

“That shows how dedicated they were to the process,” says Arkansas Friends for Better Schools president Dan Farley. “They didn’t want to exclude anyone.” Farley is also the executive director of the Arkansas School Boards Association. ASBA is now sponsoring study circles in Arkansas.

In addition to the controversy surrounding the convicted teacher, Alread had other demons to exorcise. For almost twenty years, the community has been separated on the basis of where its residents were born. In the 1970s, many outsiders, including Harder himself, migrated to Alread to enjoy its natural beauty—a movement Harder refers to as “coming back to the land.” In the decades that have followed, Alread’s citizens have labeled each other as being either an Alread native or as a back-to-the-lander.

This separation led to an ongoing dispute over public access to the school gymnasium. The district had forbidden the gym to be used for any activity that was not school based, Harder said, a measure that seemed to be intended to keep back-to-the-landers from using the facility. Study circles gave the community a chance to talk about the problem and come to an agreement.

“The timing of the whole thing is that we had a nineteen-year standing disagreement over the use of school facilities by the community at large,” Harder reports.

Because of the facilitated discussion provided by study circles, the school board, at its first meeting after the community’s study circles, voted 5-0 to approve a compromise achieved in the deliberative dialogue process. The public can now use the gymnasium if someone representing the school is present.

The main reason for the success of study circles and *Calling the Roll* in Alread is that almost a third of the community participated in the project, according to current Alread superintendent Boyce Watkins. Hired for his leadership and communication skills, Watkins says he

Editor’s Note:

Since John Pennington interviewed Harder, Harder lost his bid for reelection to the school board. However, he still leads the study circles in Alread.

decided to “put all his eggs into one basket” and depend on the process to get the public involved in how the school district operates.

“It not only met, but exceeded, that particular goal for the school district,” declares Watkins. “I know no other combination of approaches that would have achieved more in that particular area.”

As a result of study circles, Alread also made a long-needed revision of its student handbook. The district listened to the entire community, both adults and students (75 percent of Alread students in grades 9-12 participated in study circles), and used the input to rewrite a handbook Harder describes as “worse than pathetic.”

“It’s now a source people can actually use,” Harder says.

While the other communities across the country have used study circles, those held in North Little Rock and Alread proved to be something special, reports SCRC program director Matt Leighninger. He says, “The study circles in North Little Rock and Alread are the two most successful held on education in the country.”

Both North Little Rock and Alread have been designated for the Study Circles Best Practices Project, which is looking at sixteen communities across the nation that have achieved success with study circles. The project’s final report is expected in August 2000. **SEDL**

The Study Circles Resource Center is a project of the Topsfield Foundation. Paul Aicher, president of the Foundation, received a letter from Judy White of Arkansas Friends for Better Schools regarding Alread’s participation in the *Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools* project. We thought you might enjoy excerpts from her account of the action forum in Alread.

Dear Paul:

I wish you could have been with us in Alread last Thursday night. The community’s celebration of, and reporting on, study circles were a wonder to behold. Imagine a WPA-era building packed full of the citizenry of Alread. We are greeted with hearty hellos and hugs. Tables are laden with potluck dishes (lots of chicken and dumplings, deviled eggs, and way too many deserts!). A little bit of everything is also represented in the 150 or so souls present, from the sweet old ladies in pastel sweat suits, to the back-to-the land farmer who grows 15 varieties of potatoes.

There were children—toddlers to teenagers—everywhere. From a K-12 student enrollment of 92, more than 20 high school students participated in the study circles. A mother of four told me, “Something wonderful has happened to the relationship between the adults and young people in the community because of study circles. We’re at a different level now. They talked and we really listened to them.”

At dinner, “Miss Wilma,” age 96, was recognized for her many years of teaching first grade. She received a plaque, and more importantly, loving recollections from former students—one in his 70s! this set the tone for the whole evening: a commitment to children and community.

After dinner, we adjourned to the gym and the action forum. In the study circles, people had identified nine main areas of concern and made recommendations. The reports included a never-to-be-forgotten “performance” by two young mothers. To everyone’s delight, they dressed up in country-western and motorcycle gear and sang (and danced!) their group’s recommendations. (I contend that Alread is breaking all kinds of study circle records and precedents.)

I was impressed by the thoughtfulness and

comprehensive nature of the recommendations—putting on a community play; creating a web page and a list of available housing to attract newcomers; sponsoring more foreign exchange students; opening the school library one evening a week; improving communications; and lobbying at the state capitol.

The way these folks made study circles happen was the most democratic and inclusive effort that I have ever seen. Now they have a newly energized sense of responsibility and power. I think you will be especially pleased that they are concerned about the idea of community and how to nourish it. It was thrilling to see people coming together for their children.

You would also be pleased that these folks are flexing their political muscles in new ways. Their new state representative came to the action forum. Alread let him know in friendly and certain terms that he would be hearing from them, and that they expected to be consulted by him when issues that would affect Alread were before the legislature. He, in turn, seemed happy to be there and enthusiastic about Alread’s study circle work.

Ron Harder, school board president and furniture maker, and study circle organizer in Alread, told me that he used to worry that the community was too small and insignificant, and therefore powerless. He says he doesn’t feel that way anymore. He sees the community as having a stronger sense of its own identity and importance and says it now sees resources it had not recognized before.

We cannot know where it will lead, but I am convinced that the impact of study circles on Alread is and will be, profound. The people of Alread are grateful for the study circle “gift.”

I am so honored to have been a part of this effort! Thank you so much for making it possible.

All the best . . . Judy

Getting culturally and linguistically diverse families involved in education issues can ensure that all of a community's perspectives on education are included in the decision-making process.



The Community

“A bend in the road is not the end of the road—unless you fail to make the turn.”

—Anonymous

This philosophy has been an important part of SEDL's *Community Dialogue in Education Reform* project. Suzanne Ashby and Cris Garza, program associates in SEDL's Language and Diversity Program (LDP), first began with a goal to research and select one public engagement strategy that might be effective in including culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families, who are so often left out of discussions about school reform, then adapt that model and test it. While conducting their research, Ashby and Garza came across unexpected opportunities and challenges that mean revising the scope of their work. In spite of many “bends in the road,” the project has made great progress in expanding awareness and understanding of how to reach into a community and include a broader audience in making decisions about school reform. In fact, the unexpected turns may have led the project down a path that will have an even more far-reaching impact than originally intended.

The issues facing teachers, administrators, and parents regarding school reform are complex. Dealing with these issues requires that educators establish lines of communication with others in the school community, but finding an effective and inclusive forum for community dialogue can be difficult. “We believe that the dialogue process can be an effective tool when people want to talk about school reform,” says Garza. As Ashby and Garza worked to understand more about the concept of public engagement and looked at a variety of possible strategies and

methods, they reached their first turn in the road. They decided to change their initial focus of selecting and adapting a public engagement method and chose to collaborate with another SEDL program.

Moving their project into a second phase, Ashby and Garza took the opportunity to work with an ongoing project conducted by the policy staff in SEDL's Office of Institutional Communications and Policy Services (OICPS). *Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools* focused specifically on the use of study circles as a community dialogue tool for engaging state education policymakers with the public. An early phase of the project took place in the fall of 1998. It examined how fifteen communities in Arkansas and Oklahoma conducted study circles, which are small-group dialogues, on education. Across the two states, state and local policymakers, organizers, educators, community members, and students participated in the study circles. Ashby and Garza decided to focus on the study circles method of dialogue to see if it could be an effective means of incorporating diverse viewpoints.

In October and November of 1998, Ashby and Garza made trips to several sites in Oklahoma and Arkansas that were conducting community study circles about education. They tried to choose sites where some linguistic and cultural diversity was likely so that they could observe how culturally diverse attendees and other participants worked together. Their observations of the study circles focused on both verbal and nonverbal interactions between

Is the Key to Engaging Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families

By Kathleen Trail

participants, such as pre- and post-meeting conversations, head nodding, and eye contact. They collected information about the cultural implications of these interactions and the linguistic adaptations needed for the meetings. This time, the road took a sharp curve—there was simply not enough diversity in the individual study circles to allow the researchers to make significant observations about the interactions of CLD participants.

To gain a deeper understanding of the study circle process, Ashby and Garza interviewed facilitators, local organizers, and study circle participants. Not only had Ashby and Garza noted the lack of CLD participants at the meetings, the participants themselves also recognized that the groups lacked diversity. One participant commented, “I don’t think there were enough parents there to represent the [minority] parents’ opinion about things. Sometimes people are afraid to come out.” Another parent, after a discussion of topics relevant to minority students, said that there were “no opposing viewpoints in the group. We need to hear from a minority. We would have benefited from other viewpoints. We were all middle class.”

Ashby and Garza decided to revamp their focus and move the project into a third phase. If their target population wasn’t attending these meetings, maybe the real question should be, “What do we have to do to get them there?” The best answer seemed to lie within the communities themselves. Returning to North Little Rock, Oklahoma City, and Tulsa in August and September of 1999, they began trying to answer

this question by talking to the people they had met at the study circle meetings, including the organizers of the project, the facilitators of the workshops, and steering committee members. They contacted anyone who might have some insight into how to reach the CLD communities: school counselors, principals, and school administrators active in their districts; social service agencies; and various cultural and political organizations, such as the NAACP. Through their conversations, they were directed to community leaders of minority groups, local activists, and other grassroots organizers. These leaders and activists recommended that they delve even deeper into a community. Ashby and Garza found themselves calling or going to visit community religious leaders, local business men and women, grandparents, and many others that they might not have initially considered contacting. Each of these people had a different connection to CLD populations and a different understanding of how to reach those targeted by the project. In spite of their unique perspectives, these people also had something in common—they represented a *personal link*, either direct or indirect, to culturally and linguistically diverse groups and individuals.

As they spoke with more and more people, Ashby and Garza found many of the recruitment concepts that they knew in theory echoed in the interviews. To go beyond traditional recruitment strategies and effectively reach a broader audience, a recruiter must be aware of differences inherent in different cultures, languages, and even socioeconomic circles. Flyers or notices

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announcing meetings must be distributed in different languages and may need to be phrased or designed differently, depending on the culture. In some cultures where women do not



SEDL program associates Cris Garza and Suzanne Ashby

wear slacks, people are wary of interacting with women who do. Assumptions about the availability of convenient transportation to a meeting can vary with class. Another example of a cultural issue is that some minority families are not comfortable with visits from strangers when the husband is not home. In examining these cultural differences, Ashby and Garza began to realize that recruiters must be

culturally aware if they are to increase the comfort zone for a diverse group of people.

Awareness of these differences is also important in planning and conducting the meetings as well. Notices announcing the event should provide information about several factors that can influence meeting attendance. Child care, transportation, food, scheduling, and the availability of an interpreter can have a dramatic effect on a person's decision to attend a meeting. Situations where reading and writing are required can distress those with language or education barriers. Ashby and Garza also noted the importance of ensuring that CLD populations are represented at all levels of a public engagement process so participants can see themselves in the process—as organizers, facilitators, or members of steering committees.

Ashby and Garza's search for answers about how to reach people became part of the solution itself. In the process of building a network, they realized that two of the most important factors in this networking process are *time* and *effort*. Getting to know a community happens slowly. Someone from outside the community has to work to make connections with people beyond the surface level. Many people need to be invited to meetings by someone they know and trust who can lend credibility to the process. Finding those people who are known and trusted can be a labor-intensive process. Garza reports, "In some ways, it amazed us that we were able to find people who would give us the

information we needed—we formed our own network." Going through the networking process gave them insight into the value of the process and the necessity of going through several layers of people to make sure you've made a connection with as many groups as possible.

Several publications document Ashby and Garza's findings. *Public Deliberation: A Tool for Connecting School Reform and Diversity*, designed for schools and communities, provides a description of and purpose for public deliberation, a synopsis of school demographics with links to school reform, and a summary of several different public engagement formats. A guide that addresses the process of recruiting diverse participants is planned for distribution this summer. It will include the findings from the numerous interviews that Ashby and Garza conducted in North Little Rock, Oklahoma City, and Tulsa. A third publication, also expected later this summer, will serve as a school outreach guide, with the focus on helping schools to better connect with the CLD members in their communities outside of the study circle process.

Ashby and Garza's project highlights both the importance of and the potential for including members of culturally and linguistically diverse populations in making decisions that affect them. The issue goes beyond "political correctness" or democratic practice. This inclusion directly correlates to the value for everyone of having as diverse and representative a population throughout the decision-making process. Educators overwhelmingly agree that family and community support is crucial in improving school effectiveness. Research on minority parent involvement and participation points to several student benefits: better academic achievement, enhanced English-language development, improved behavior in school relationships. And successful schools and students contribute directly to a community's economic and social stability.

"You can value diversity and wish to have it as part of your process, whether that's a study circle or another forum. Even so, if outreach and recruitment happen only in traditional ways, you won't be able to bring members of CLD communities into the discussion. They won't come," says Ashby. The *Community Dialogue in Education Reform* project is smoothing the path to incorporating greater diversity in school reform dialogue, not only by raising awareness of the need to address these issues, but also by giving educators the tools to translate good intentions into reality. **SEDL**

Parents Are Partners in Fabens



Estela Gallardo is the mother of four children who recognizes the importance of being involved in her children's schools.

By Víctor Javier Rodríguez

Fabens, Texas, is a largely agricultural community located about 25 miles southeast of downtown El Paso, near one of the fastest-growing areas along the Texas-Mexico border. Like many other rural school districts, Fabens Independent School District faces the issue of doing more with fewer resources in its school community. However, Fabens differs from many districts in its reliance on parents and community members.

Fabens Promotes Participation through the Collaborative Action Team Process

For more than three years now, Fabens ISD has been promoting family and community participation in schools using SEDL's Collaborative Action Team (CAT) process, which focuses on team building, team planning, and momentum generation, and identifies key factors to encourage collaboration.

SEDL's CAT process identifies environmental factors—the characteristics of the organizing group, the accommodation of members' needs, the influences of the school system, and community culture. It also identifies operational factors—access to local resources, mission, and communication—as key issues in engaging parents. In short, the process seeks to address the barriers to parental involvement.

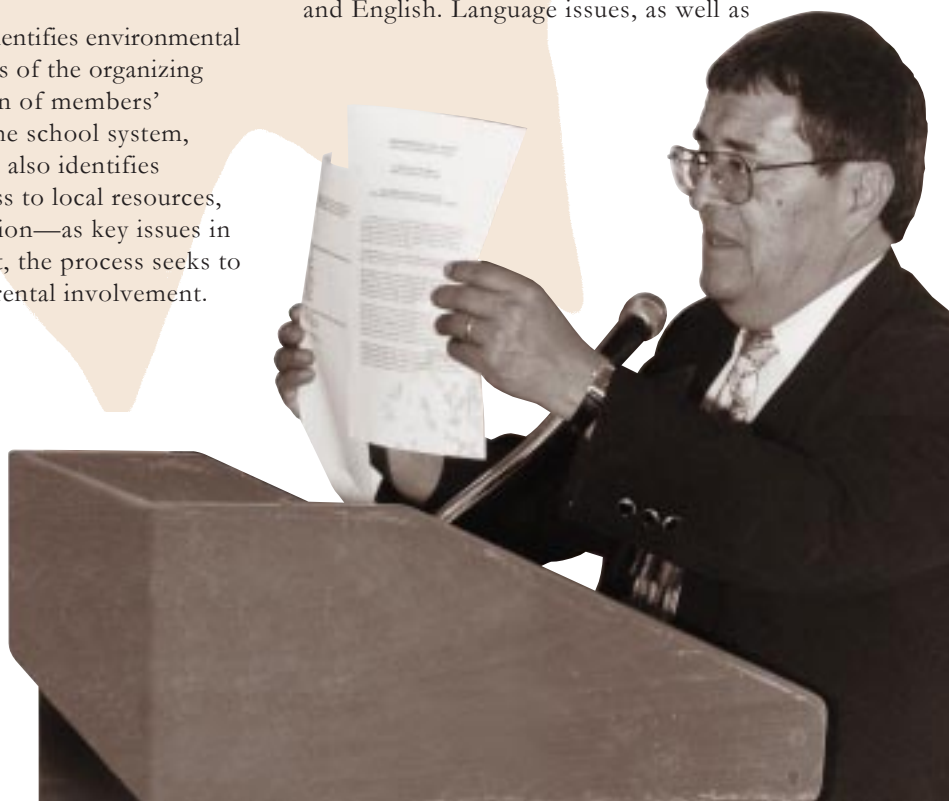
Enrique Pérez, principal at Risinger Early Childhood Center (the district's school for early childhood education and kindergarten) and facilitator for SEDL's CAT site in Fabens, agrees that eliminating barriers is important. He adds that building trust, promoting partnerships, and creating opportunities have been crucial in the CAT process implemented in Fabens.

"We have some very fine minds in people who have a limited education," says Pérez. "As a general rule, school districts would normally not even notice these people. The way we've done things—through the CAT process—they get to contribute great ideas. We seek advice from our parents and in turn they're getting some very good training to make the system work for them."

Pérez, who has been instrumental in getting parents involved in the school community, conducts CAT meetings in both Spanish and English. Language issues, as well as

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Enrique Pérez, principal at Risinger Early Childhood Center and a facilitator for SEDL's CAT site in Fabens





SEDL communications specialist Victor Rodríguez and Augustina Olivarez talk at a Collaborative Action Team meeting held in Fabens, Texas. Olivarez is a grandparent who volunteers at a local school, is a CAT representative, and encourages others to become involved in the Fabens schools.

Language issues, as well as transportation and child care, are just a few of the barriers Principal Enrique Pérez tries to eliminate in order to engage parents.

transportation and child care, are just a few of the barriers he tries to eliminate in order to engage parents. He also holds meetings more than once, at different times, to accommodate working parents.

“I don’t care what time of day it is, if you want parents involved you have to make some provisions for their children,” he explains. “You might have to have the meeting more than once. Some will come during the school day, but you’d better find a time during the evening if you want to give everyone the opportunity to participate. Being sensitive to their needs, it’s part of the process, and this is where we had help from SEDL.”

In the CAT process, a primary strategy for building team effectiveness is to build and maintain team membership that is broadly representative of the whole school community. Representative membership helps identify issues of common interest to all segments of the community and increases creative approaches to student achievement and school improvement. It also provides a pool of leaders who receive the training needed to share responsibility for collaborative action.

Parents and Community Members Participate at All Levels

While it is true that most schools welcome parent volunteers, schools must also let family members know that there are many ways they can participate in the education of their children. Fabens ISD makes an effort to ensure parental representation at all levels, from parenting and communicating to decision making and

collaborating with the community.

Fabens’ Augustina Olivarez is a good example of a grandparent who serves as a volunteer at a local school and is part of the CAT partnership. Although she sees her main role as a school volunteer, her advocacy in encouraging parents to become involved is just as important as the time she spends volunteering.

“I enjoy participating because I’m interested in what goes on in the community,” Olivarez says in Spanish. “I’m happy to see more young parents becoming involved, because when my children were growing up, schools weren’t as inviting as they are now. As an aside, she adds, “Besides, my husband would have never allowed me to become involved.”

The cultural aspect of parent involvement is not to be taken lightly. Parents who are out of the cultural mainstream (recent immigrants to the United States, for example) may feel they are not capable of contributing to their children’s education. For this reason, schools must take the initiative to provide these parents with needed information and encouragement to engage them in meaningful work.

Take for instance Lupe Ramos, a parent actively engaged in Fabens ISD and the local CAT team. She has recently been trained to serve as a CAT facilitator.

“Lupe Ramos,” observes Pérez, “has put two boys through college. She doesn’t have a college degree, but you’re talking about a highly sensitive and insightful woman. She was given basically an opportunity to look at some problems and an invitation to contribute. It’s just her fate that she doesn’t have a degree, but her contribution is of an inestimable value. Lupe has

Fabens High School students, shown here with social worker Mary Eberle (standing), play an active role on the Fabens Collaborative Action Team.



found ways to bring different sides together. Sometimes you can have that brilliance, but you also need an opportunity to put it to use.”

Augustina Olivarez and Lupe Ramos are CAT members whose own children are grown but still want to participate in the schools. Other members of the Fabens team attend meetings with family in tow. Estela Gallardo, an immigrant from Mexico and a mother of four children, ages 1 to 14, brings her entire family to meetings. She also volunteers as a teacher’s aide at one of her children’s school.

“I volunteer at school because I realize how important it is to be involved,” says Gallardo, who appreciates the opportunity to participate directly in her children’s education. “My oldest child went to school in Mexico, and as a parent I was not allowed to go near the classroom, let alone help the teacher in the instructional process.”

“I feel my involvement has helped my children’s self-esteem. Their social skills have benefited and this helps them to learn better.”

In terms of engaging Spanish-speaking parents at school, studies have shown different results between conventional and nonconventional activities. Specific cultural knowledge is most likely not required when inviting parents to open houses, parent-teacher conferences, and other parent-information meetings. On the other hand, engaging parents from culturally diverse backgrounds in nonconventional activities (such

as parents as co-teachers, shared decision making regarding curriculum, and participation on site-based management committees) requires educators to have an understanding of the cultural perspectives of the parents they want to involve.

The Fabens CAT team provides an excellent opportunity for educators to develop their own cultural skills to foster parental involvement. Terry Domínguez, a teacher at one of the local schools is a new CAT team member and is encouraged by what she sees happening at the meetings.

“This CAT process is new to me, but I’m all for engaging parents in education. I believe in going out to the community and getting their input,” says Domínguez. “I’ve heard good feedback from these meetings and I expect to learn more as I continue to participate in the CAT team.”

Local social worker Mary Eble, of the Kellogg Community Partnership, has been involved in the Fabens CAT site for three years now. She says that the best part the CAT process is that it involves parents and makes them part of the decision making:

“The process itself is a benefit, regardless of the outcome. When you see people who don’t have the academic degree, who are non-professionals, who speak a different language, and you see them as equals—that’s when the process can be considered a success.” **SEDL**



The Arts of Liberty: Absent from School Today

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By **Leslie Blair**

*Dr. Benjamin R. Barber, professor of political science at Rutgers University and founder of the Walt Whitman Center for the Culture and Politics of Democracy, is also an impassioned speaker and writer about the issues of politics, culture, and education. He is the author of numerous books, including a collection of essays, **A Passion for Democracy**, and his most recent, a study of civil society called, **A Place for Us: How to Make Society Civil and Democracy Strong**. Barber was the keynote speaker at SEDL's *Calling the Roll for Better Schools* conference, held last fall in Dallas, Texas. Barber's thought-provoking observations reminded participants of the reasons they went into public service and why their work in public education is so important.*

Leslie Blair is a SEDL communications associate and editor of SEDLetter. You may reach Leslie at lblair@sedl.org.

Our nation, our democracy, and our public interest depend on the education of every child in the country, Professor Benjamin Barber maintains. Although he admitted many of the points he makes are truisms, Barber told the audience at the keynote address, “I want to say them because I’m disturbed that so many Americans, like the people in this room, so many citizens, so many legislators, have to spend so much of their time making such an obvious point to their neighbors and to their fellow citizens—that this nation, this democracy, this citizenry, depends for its future on our children and on their education. It’s not just the special interest of parents, it’s not the special interest of kids going to school, it’s the public interest of this nation that we have an educated youth.”

This is a concept that Thomas Jefferson and John Adams well understood, according to Barber, although their eighteenth-century frame of reference included only white men. “They understood that every young man had to be educated. Not just for their own good, not just to make a career, not just to hold a better job, not just build a new country, but to make democracy work.”

“It was understood in the nineteenth century, in the common school, the public school movement. It was understood into the beginning of the twentieth century. Sometime in this century, we somehow got the idea that schooling was nothing other than job preparation and vocationalism.”

Barber observed that our country’s low pay for educators, our reluctance to spend more money on education than we do on prisons, and our often materialistic mentality help demonstrate to children where our values lie. “The children are onto this game,” said Barber. “They know that if we really valued schooling, we’d pay teachers what we pay lawyers . . . if we valued citizenship, we would give national service and civic education more than pilot status . . . if we valued children we wouldn’t let them be abused, manipulated, impoverished, or killed by gang-war crossfire.”

One way to turn our focus to education and children is to become involved in community discussions like the study circles in which Arkansas and Oklahoma communities participated during the *Calling the Roll* project. Barber sees the project as a tool for building a common ground. “What I love about that is the effort to use the language of democracy, the language of civility to find ways to reconcile the conflicts that divide us and to find the common ground on which we can build common schools, public schools, public education.”

He challenged the teachers, lawmakers, and community leaders at the conference to “hold up a mirror . . . to look in it . . . I think sometimes people that are doing the work of liberty, the work of democracy, the work of public education, don’t realize just what they’re doing and how well they’re doing it. . . . I want you to look in the mirror and see what you are doing because I think what you are doing is practicing

the arts of liberty.” Barber proposed that the arts of liberty should be taught in our schools, universities, and colleges—that we should teach what the arts of liberty are and how they can be integrated into daily lives.

Barber went on to describe some of the arts of liberty that we should incorporate into our curriculum.

The first art of liberty is the connection between rights and responsibility. Although most of us think of a piece of paper when we think of the Bill of Rights, Barber notes that these rights are rooted in civic competence and responsibility—without citizens taking action, without democracy at work, the rights are useless. As an example, Barber relates the story of a student he had in the 1970s who had found a bill of rights that the student thought was much better than ours in the United States. It included the right of assembly, the right of free speech, the right not to have people quartered, the right to health care from cradle to coffin, the right to a job, and so on. It was the bill of rights for the Soviet Union. Barber explained, “Now the point is that it was worthless. It was just a piece of paper because there was no citizenship, no democracy. It was meaningless.”

Barber noted that “we have been nominally democratic for so long that we presume it is our natural condition.” Instead, democracy is something which requires us to put forth an effort. He illustrates his point by telling of a survey of Rutgers students about five years ago. The students were asked to name the most precious democratic right they had. Almost 75 percent said it was the right to a trial by a jury of peers. However, when they were asked if they thought there should be mandatory jury service, 80 percent of them responded no.

“The system can’t work that way,” maintains Barber. “You can’t have trial by jury unless

you're willing to do it. So that connection, reconnecting, recouping rights and responsibility is a powerful thing, particularly for young people."

The second art of liberty is understanding that our differences are valued and should be incorporated into institutions of American life, especially the public school. Barber explains, "Los Angeles has 160 languages spoken there in the schools, 160. Now that's a formidable pedagogical challenge, but a terrific tribute to California and America that we are assimilated from 160 different backgrounds. We're trying to make them Americans in a way that allows them still to have their [cultural] identities, but have a civic faith in a fair and democratic society in which they share power. That's the challenge."

The practice of this art of liberty has enabled generations of immigrants to move to the United States and become active citizens—to live and work alongside immigrants from other countries. This is the art of liberty that has allowed our country to become diverse. Diversity is our strength, observed Barber; the power of difference makes us a stronger nation. We have been able to draw upon our diversity throughout our history, which is why "we look as a society more like the globe than any other country."

The third art of liberty is the meaning of community and the understanding that we are each a part of a community. This is a difficult concept, according to Barber, especially when people afraid of diversity are trying to build walls between suburbs and cities, rich and poor, white and nonwhite, men and women. "We're on a large ship here in America," explained Barber, "and if there's a hole in one end, if steorage gets flooded, first class goes down . . . the inner city goes under, the main part of the city goes under, the first ring suburbs go down, the second ring suburbs go down, and so on."

Using Columbine as an example, he spoke of Denver residents who tried to get away from inner-city problems, from hate, "but there's no way to get away from it." Working together as a community, instead of building walls, finding common ground is essential in the arts of liberty. And, Barber pointed out, conflict is the essence of democracy. "Don't be afraid of conflict, don't be afraid of argument, don't be afraid of tough argument," he advised. "The acknowledgment of conflict, the willingness to

live with conflict and still find common ground, is again one of the great arts of liberty."

The most difficult art of liberty, however, is not resolving conflict and finding common ground, but rather the seemingly simple act of listening. "We run away from listening," Barber observed, "but the art of listening is the key little art . . . how else will we hear each other, how else will we find common ground?"

"A lot of what study circles are about for me is simply the art of listening, giving people the opportunity to listen. Affording politicians the chance to actually listen to citizens and citizens the chance to listen to politicians and fellow citizens.

"We need a democracy in which we spend time listening to one another and not just reversing words we've said over and over again . . . the opinions we've had over and over again. How otherwise would we ever change our opinions?"

The final art of liberty that Barber discussed is understanding that democracy is not about vertical conversations.

"It's not about citizens listening to leaders or leaders talking to citizens; it's not about editors writing for citizens. It's about citizens talking to citizens and leaders talking to leaders. That's the great strength of democracy, when we talk to each other.

"One of the problems I have with our democracy here in America is that I think we have a lot of good space to talk to our leaders and for our leaders to talk back. I think there's a lot of good conversation between political leaders and editorial leads and the American people. What we don't have is talking among ourselves, talking to each other. This presidential election provides us a chance to talk to one another. Why can't we send the candidates away for a while and we'll talk about it: What do you think of these guys? Do you have a candidate you really like?

"Talking laterally—horizontal conversations are the essence of democracy—[is] a good way to learn."

When we talk with others face to face, when we truly listen to what others have to say about a contentious issue, then we can have "a very different kind of discussion, a more human kind of discussion."

And that perhaps is what democracy is all about. **SEDL**

RESOURCES

for Connecting Schools and Communities

Public Deliberation: A Tool for Connecting School Reform and Diversity

La deliberación pública: Una forma de enlazar la reforma escolar con la diversidad cultural



“Deliberation is people talking and learning together” say the authors of **Public Deliberation: A Tool for Connecting School Reform and Diversity**. Public deliberation, then, might be defined as talking and learning together about issues of common concern which affect more than any one single individual. This goal of public deliberation is not only consensus building or decision making but also a greater understanding of and respect for diverse views. This publication discusses various processes of public deliberation in regard to school reform

and diversity issues and includes descriptions of various dialogue formats, as well as contact information for five national organizations that can help communities in the public deliberation process.

and diversity issues and includes descriptions of various dialogue formats, as well as contact information for five national organizations that can help communities in the public deliberation process.

Public Deliberation: A Tool for Connecting School Reform and Diversity is available from Southwest Educational Development Laboratory Publications Department (1-800-476-6861) for \$10 each. Currently the English version is on-line at <http://www.sedl.org/pubs/catalog/items/lc06.html>. The Spanish-language version, **La deliberación pública**, will be on-line in the near future.

Public Deliberation was compiled by Suzanne Ashby, Cris Garza, and Maggie Rivas. (1998). Austin, Texas: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. 39 pp. Víctor J. Rodríguez translated the Spanish version.

Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools

This new videotape tells the story of a SEDL partnership of the same name that examined how 15 communities in Arkansas and Oklahoma conducted small-group dialogues, or study circles, on education. State and local

policymakers, organizers, educators, community members, and students discuss their experiences as participants and how they changed their ideas about education and education policymaking. The videotape provides information about the study circle model of dialogue and what it offers community members, schools staffs, policymakers, and others who are interested in using this dialogue process to inform education policymaking.

Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools (videotape) is available by calling SEDL's publications department at 800-476-6861. See <http://www.sedl.org/pubs/> for additional ordering information.

Julia Guzman and Sue Mutchler were content consultants for this videotape, and Joyce Pollard was executive producer. It was produced by EDF Productions for SEDL. Runtime: 18 minutes, 45 seconds. \$15.00. Closed captions are in English and Spanish.



Insights on Education Policy, Research, and Practice

Insights is a series of policy briefings that address current or emerging issues of importance to policymakers and policy analysts in SEDL's five-state region.

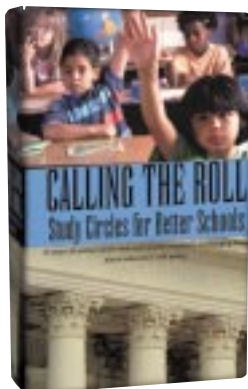
The two most

recent issues of **Insights** focus on deliberative dialogue. **Insights** may be found on-line at <http://www.sedl.org/policy/resources.html>.

Education: How Can Schools and Communities Work Together to Meet the Challenge?

This guide features strategies to involve community members in discussions about their schools and how they can support their schools. The guide provides the basics for a discussion program of four to seven sessions and includes how-to information for discussion organizers, leaders, and participants. It also highlights experiences of five successful schools and communities.

Education: How Can Schools and Communities Work Together was written by Matthew Leighninger and Mark Niedergang and published by the Study Circles Resource Center in Pomfret, Conn.. It is available online at <http://www.studycircles.org/pages/ed.html> or may be ordered by calling 860-928-2616.



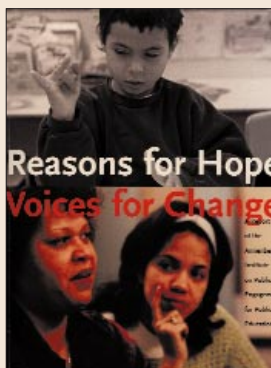
Resources for Connecting Schools and Communities

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Is There a Public for Public Schools?

Published by the Kettering Foundation, this book looks at the fraying relationship between Americans and their public schools. Author David Mathews concludes that it is unlikely that schools will make lasting improvements unless communities change and citizens increase their capacity to act as a cohesive group. The book provides long-term strategies and practices that can help reconnect schools and the communities they serve and ensure that a community has an engaged citizenry.

Is There a Public for Public Schools was written by Kettering Foundation president David Mathews. It may be ordered at a cost of \$9.50 by calling 1-800-600-4060. For more information, also see the Kettering Foundation Web site at <http://www.kettering.org>.



Reasons for Hope, Voices for Change

This Annenberg Institute for School Reform publication was released in March 1998. It offers a look at initiatives that have sprung up across the country to build citizen involvement and

support for school change. The book discusses the definition of public engagement and the challenges and opportunities it presents and examines how communities and schools are proving that a more diverse constituency can empower and sustain school reform.

A single copy of **Reasons for Hope, Voices for Change** may be ordered free of charge from the Annenberg Institute; additional copies cost \$10 each. Ordering instructions for **Reasons for Hope** may be found on-line at <http://www.aisr.brown.edu/publications/publications.html>. Links to downloadable PDF files are found on this page as well.

The Millennium Communications Group prepared **Reasons for Hope** for the Annenberg Institute of School Reform. **SEDL**

This list of resources was compiled by SEDL staff members in the Office of Institutional Communications and Policy Services.

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