

# The Bulletin

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## Wheaton roundtables bring parents, teachers, students together

*From The Bulletin January 18, 2005*

Outside of Back to School Night, most schools struggle to get parents and teachers to attend one meeting. Yet 30 parents, teachers, and students from the Wheaton Cluster met together for six consecutive weeks as part of the Wheaton Cluster Community Roundtables.

The roundtables are the first step in the grant-funded Great Expectations Project, designed to increase the number of low-income students and students of color in Advanced Placement classes in the Wheaton cluster are a collaborative effort with the MCPS Study Circles program, which helps schools organize dialogues with teachers, parents, families and students to address barriers to student achievement and parent involvement.

The Wheaton roundtables were organized to confront racial and ethnic barriers to student achievement, and to create the relationships and strategies necessary to address the achievement gap. Led by trained Study Circles facilitators, participants shared stories about their cultures, discussed the effects of stereotypes on student success, and worked with each other to understand the challenges and advantages of participating in the Wheaton cluster schools' community.

Throughout the dialogue, themes emerged as participants related experiences and concerns. Teachers



**Shauna Brown, a Wheaton HS teacher and AP/Honors coordinator, makes a point during one of the Wheaton Cluster Community Roundtable meetings.**

spoke of challenges to overcome students' language barriers, increase parent involvement and understand the diverse cultures and backgrounds of their students. Parents voiced concerns over the quality of communication between schools and families and spoke of the need for early information to ensure their children are enrolled in challenging courses. Students attested that many racial and cultural groups self-segregate in later grades after having been friends in elementary school.

Parents, teachers and students all spoke of the importance of fostering a culture of high expectations and expressed a need for more resources to help understand each other, work together and provide opportunities to continue addressing issues of race and ethnicity in a safe environment.

After the six sessions, participants met one additional time to share their experience with the Wheaton cluster principals. As a continuation of the project, organizers Gay Melnick and Shauna Brown are working with participants to organize a Wheaton Academic Booster Club to help implement strategies developed in the roundtables. Booster Club members will help organize new Wheaton Cluster Roundtables planned for February.

An information meeting for the new roundtables will be held **Wednesday, Jan. 19, 6:30-8:30 p.m.**, at Brookhaven ES. Free food and childcare will be provided. The session also will be translated in Spanish. □

# Study circles address race, ethnicity

*From The Bulletin May 9, 2005*

Principals, staff, parents and students throughout Montgomery County Public Schools are praising the Study Circle Program for helping schools and communities address issues related to race and ethnicity.

“Racial and ethnic differences affect our communication, our decision making, and ultimately, the success of our students,” John F. Kennedy HS Principal Fred Lowenbach said. “These issues are not easy to discuss in diverse communities. Participating in a study circle during the fall of 2004 was one of the most helpful things that I could have done in learning about the Kennedy community. Hearing from students, parents and staff members in this informal setting was absolutely invaluable in helping me understand my new school and community.”

After two years as a pilot project with the Montgomery County Business Roundtable for Education, the Study Circles Program became part of the MCPS Department of Instructional Programs in July 2004. The program organizes roundtable dialogues with teachers, parents and students to help participants understand diverse experiences and create unified groups working together for the success of all students.

Twenty-three study circles have been organized over the past two years. While specific goals vary, each study circle uses the same discussion materials, has about 15 participants, is led by two trained facilitators and meets for six two-hour sessions. “I wanted to invite a diverse population from our community to take a look at the state of our school and make suggestions for change that could impact student achievement,” explained William Gregory, principal of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. MS, which recently completed its first study circle. “But the usual meeting format would not have worked. We needed to find a way to trust each other and understand each other’s experiences before delving into the problems and solutions.”

While most study circles are school



based, the Wheaton Cluster has had four clusterwide study circles. Two Wheaton Cluster staff members, Gay Melnick and Shauna Brown, organized the study circles as a first step for a state-sponsored grant they received to increase the number of students in Advanced Placement classes.

“We have one of the most diverse clusters in the county. This diversity makes communication and collaboration much more difficult,” said Brown, the Wheaton HS AP coordinator. “We believed strongly that any strategy to accomplish the goals of the grant had to be coupled with a process that addresses our differences.” Melnick, academic intervention teacher for the Wheaton Cluster, agrees. “Teachers and parents from different backgrounds and different schools and who, in some cases, speak different languages now have a better understanding of the challenges and strong collaborative relationships,” she said. “The participants are now working together to create changes at the cluster level as well as the individual school level.” Garrett Park ES teacher Dara Feldman pointed out that it’s not just highly diverse schools that need to address these challenges. “The gap in achievement among students from different backgrounds, uneven parent participation, and a

need for cultural understanding among staff and school leadership are issues that every school in Montgomery County faces,” she said. “I’m proud of Garrett Park staff and parents for jumping into a study circle to tackle these issues.”

At the conclusion of each study circle, participants create action plans and begin working together. For example, participants from King MS have begun working in three subcommittees to address school image, student achievement, and parent empowerment and education.

“We began the experience by getting to know one another and share our backgrounds,” Gregory explained. “We now have 12 people, who normally were not vocal in terms of school improvement issues, coming together to propose actions for our school to consider based upon the review of the data and the shared experiences. This is great!” The team has now divided into three subcommittees to complete action plans that will be presented to the school leadership and the PTSA. “Our work together is making a difference in the lives of our kids,” Gregory said.

Any parent, teacher, student, or administrator can request a study circle. For information, call the Study Circles Office at 301-279-3455.