

Groups hope for cycle of success

by Erin Uy
Staff Writer

Mar. 3, 2004

Study circles offer insights on how to improve education

Antonio Bernart, a parent of a junior at John F. Kennedy High School, said families of different ethnic backgrounds have a hard time being part of a school community.

Bernart told a group of parents, teachers and students who were part of a "study circle" at the school on Thursday that being part of a minority group offers a range of challenges. It makes learning difficult for students and involvement among parents, especially non-English speaking ones, awkward.

He has typically discussed the issue with people of shared ethnic backgrounds to figure out what could be done to improve communication and student performance, but it was only through sessions with the diverse group of people in his study circle that Bernart gained the most insight.

The study circle, which meets weekly, is dedicated to discussing the impact that race, ethnicity and culture have on the quality of education the students received, and Bernart, talking to his fellow study circle members about his first session, said his experience has been positive.

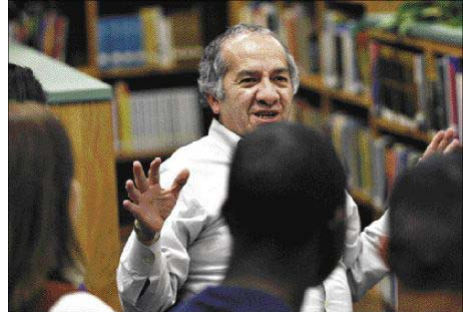
Through dialogue, Bernart, who is Hispanic, said he learned that closing racial gaps in school is an issue that should involve all members of Kennedy's community because it affects everyone.

Samantha Klinger, a senior at Kennedy who is white, was part of Bernart's study circle in the first six-week session. From across the table of diverse faces, Klinger enlightened Bernart about her encounters with discrimination and stereotyping at Kennedy where minorities make up a majority of the population.

Issues and problems related to diversity are not exclusive to minorities, she told him at a previous discussion. "I never thought that could happen," said Bernart, who now looks at diversity through a bigger scope.

Understanding can lead to solutions

Ideally, the new perspectives Bernart and others have gained will lead to strategies to close the achievement and communication gaps at schools. The study circles group, which just



Hans Ericsson/Special to The Gazette

Silver Spring resident Carlos Vasquez talks with other members of a study circle that met at Silver Spring's John F. Kennedy High School to discuss ways to close the achievement gap by exploring how race, ethnicity and culture affect students' academic achievement.

completed its first series of discussion sessions in February, is taking time to digest their new insight and transform it into ways to effectively help the school.

Study circles, groups of about 12 to 18 people that are intended to represent the diversity of the school community, explore the obstacles students face when working to excel, or just make it through school.

In 2002, the county adopted the study circles program, a community-building program developed through Connecticut-based Study Circles Resource Center, to address the issues of race and diversity in the growing county.

The county pilot program for study circles was initiated in 2001, and was made up by a group of members of the county Department of Family and Community Partnerships, Impact Silver Spring, and others. About 10 study circles communicated on ways to address race and then developed Action Teams to organize their discussions and create solutions.

The group decided that study circles would be most effective and are most needed to build relationships across racial and ethnic groups among the school communities, particularly in areas where achievement gaps are most significant, said John Landesman, the county study circles director.

At Kennedy, about 40 percent of students are African-American, 27 percent are Hispanic and 11 percent are Asian American. And like schools throughout the county, there are distinct achievement gaps between African-American and Hispanic students, and their white and Asian American peers.

In 2003, African-Americans at Kennedy had a passing rate of about 22 percent and Hispanics had a passing rate of about 23 percent in their Algebra High School Assessment Tests, according to a 2004 Office of Shared Accountability report. Comparatively, whites had a passing rate of about 42 percent and Asian Americans had a passing rate of about 61 percent. In the areas of biology, English and government, test scores revealed similar differences.

Limited English-proficiency students faced some of the lowest passing rates, about 6 percent in English, about 25 percent in biology and about 43 percent in government, according to the report.

Taking an active role

Linda and Carlos Vasquez of Silver Spring, parents of two Kennedy alumni and one sophomore currently attending, sat in on their first study circle session Thursday. The Vasquezes, who are of Hispanic descent, do not have trouble communicating in English, but said they have seen the problems other Latino families encounter.

Linda Vasquez is a former English for Speakers of Other Languages Hispanic liaison at Kennedy, and said that language barriers between school and the home can hamper learning. Non-English speaking parents don't always know what the school needs from them to help their children, and vice versa.

Carlos Vasquez said they attended the circles because they realize that improving student performance will require a group effort. "We have a lot of energy and would like to do some change. Teachers alone cannot do the work. We need to all do this together."

Kennedy Principal Fred Lowenbach said he has gained insight from the circles and is proud that the school community is willing to confront the issue: "They acknowledge that they want to work through it, not flee from it." Lowenbach said such an attitude would lead to academic success.

The circles require an extended commitment. The members meet for six two-hour sessions to discuss one another's insights and experiences. They then gather the information and meet monthly to create an "action plan" to solve the problems that contribute to the school's achievement gap.

Kennedy's first study circle group is now developing an action plan. About eight other schools -- including Rock Creek Forest, Takoma Park and Glen Haven elementary schools, and Montgomery Blair High School -- have already used study circles to address their achievement gaps.

Success at other schools

At Glen Haven Elementary School in Silver Spring, the study circle that started in April 2003 has already proven worthwhile, said Joanne Smith, Glen Haven's principal. She said the school has now made significant headway with the Vietnamese community.

In the study circle, a Vietnamese grandparent, through a translator, expressed frustration with his inability to help his grandchildren because he could not understand the information that was brought home to him in English. Further, he said he felt useless attending meetings because he could not understand the issues or provide feedback.

Smith said the man was urged to attend the study circle so the school could get a better understanding of issues among non-English speakers.

Since then, Smith said the school, through its action plan, has successfully reached out to more than a dozen Vietnamese families in the school and has created a network of translators and liaisons. At a math student program in February, Smith said about 10 Vietnamese families attended, compared to none last year.

Smith said the study circle would work to use the insight they attained to develop strategies that will help solve their problems. "This is a start and by no means have we reached utopia," she said.

Making progress

Members of Kennedy's study circles said they realize they have a long road ahead before resolving their concerns, but say they've dispelled many misperceptions that have gotten in the way of problem-solving.

Hugo Soto, a sophomore at Kennedy, is originally from the Dominican Republic, but lived in Guatemala before immigrating to the United States. He said he sometimes feels that parents and teachers think students who are struggling in school aren't trying.

At a circle group of about 20 people last Thursday, Soto said he wanted to remind parents and teachers that many students, especially those from immigrant families, are struggling to balance schoolwork, extracurricular activities and the pressures of getting a job.

Just this year, Soto has debated with the decision to pick up a job while he is in school to help his family by being more independent. But a job would take time away from after-school commitments such as ROTC, the study circles and studying. He said he has watched his peers take jobs and forget about priorities in school.

"When we get our money, we lose our minds and we see what is in front of us," Soto said. "We forget that if we work hard now in school that we will get more of that later on in life."

Angela Davis, a mother of a junior at Kennedy, said students at the school face many obstacles, and the group has learned to identify the school's strengths and weaknesses.

She said Kennedy is often characterized as a low-achieving school, but the public fails to recognize the issues of poverty, language and cultural barriers. Davis said those factors should be considered when measuring students' abilities and accomplishments. "Then they would see just how exceptional these students are."

Julian Chung, a Kennedy senior, said he wants to clean up Kennedy's reputation, because it has served as an institution that has helped him achieve. "I'm living proof of Kennedy's success."

Chung said he meets peers from different communities that go to well-rated public schools and encounters surprised remarks of his achievement considering the school he attends.

"A lot of people are surprised kids do well at Kennedy," Chung said.

He said there are some students who feel they have to live up to the school's reputation of being tough and not caring about academics, which leads to their failure.

Chung said closing the achievement gap will involve creating a more positive attitude in the school so that everyone can feel that their efforts are not in vain. He said he believes ridding of the negative atmosphere will help improve the school's morale and success.

"If someone tells you something enough, you are going to believe it," Chung said. "It's a self-fulfilling prophecy."