

Connecting parents, teachers and students

Study Circles help open the channels of communication

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by Meredith Hooker
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Before Takoma Park resident Rosa Sanchez took part in Montgomery County Public Schools' Study Circles, she didn't know how to talk to her daughters' teachers, and she didn't know how to be involved at school.

But after taking part in a six-week Study Circle session, Sanchez felt confident enough to communicate with her children's teachers, as well as with other parents about their involvement in their children's education.

Sanchez, now a Study Circles facilitator, recently helped run the first MCPS Study Circle held only in Spanish for about 16 parents and teachers from five Montgomery Blair High School cluster schools. Sanchez is also Blair PTSA's Latino liaison.

MCPS Study Circles allow parents, teachers and students from different ethnic backgrounds to build relationships and talk about barriers and challenges they face in school, said John Landesman, director of MCPS Study Circles. Study Circles — usually held in English, or English and Spanish combined — consist of six two-hour sessions during which participants address school-related issues.

The Study Circle Sanchez helped facilitate, which held its last meeting Monday night with a celebration of the participants' cultures, drew 16 participants from about 10 different Spanish-speaking countries. It was important, Landesman said, because it helped the parents and teachers learn about each other's cultures, as well as how to be more active in the school system since parent involvement can affect a child's education.

“For one thing, a lot of parents — all kinds of parents — don't know what they're supposed to be doing,”

Landesman said. “In Montgomery County, we're supposed to be involved, but what we should be involved in is not always so clear.”



How to get involved
Any parent, student, teacher or administrator can request study circles at their school. Call the Study Circle office at 301-279-3455. For more information about MCPS Study Circles go to www.mcps.k12.md.us/departments/studycircles.

It's even harder to learn when language is a barrier, Sanchez said, which was why it was important to hold meetings in Spanish.

Letting the group talk to each other in their own language and in smaller numbers was more comfortable for them than speaking at a larger PTA meeting where they may have had trouble speaking English or feeling confident enough to ask questions, Landesman said.

Study Circles served Takoma Park resident Herenia Lopez, a parent and English for Speakers of Other Language employee at Eastern Middle School, very well. She said she thought it benefited participants to be presented with material in their native language.

“It helped 100 percent,” she said, adding MCPS could use more Spanish-only programs. “Our community needs it.”

“I think the Study Circles is the best thing MCPS has to offer,” Lopez said. “It works, it's good because we can learn as parents, as educators and as a community, as a part of the community.”



Lopez — who was helping her child with homework before she was interviewed Monday night — said she learned how to become more involved in her children's education, as well as how to help other parents be involved with their children.

This Study Circles session grew from *Conquista tus sueños*, an empowerment program held for Blair cluster Latino parents, Sanchez said. After *Conquista* sessions ended, several parents wondered how else they could learn about MCPS and how to help their children achieve. Now, she said, some parents plan to also attend *Impact in the Schools*, a program held at Piney Branch Elementary School by nonprofit *Impact Silver Spring* that looks at race, class and the achievement gap.

Parents have learned quite a bit from the Study Circles, Landesman said, and were able to talk about their questions and concerns, prompted by questions asked by facilitators. The environment is open and encourages discussion, he said.

The first two sessions of Study Circles are devoted to trust-building, Landesman said. In following sessions, parents look at statistics and talk about what they mean, like the number of Latino students who took the SAT and what parents can do to encourage their children to take the test. They also talk about how to approach teachers, how to navigate the school system and how school in Montgomery County differs from schools in other countries.

“In a lot of countries, parents are not expected to participate in schools,” he said.