

## Study circles examine reasons for school choice

### Meetings target issues related to race, ethnicity in Northeast Consortium

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The Northeast Consortium allows students some degree of choice for their high schools, but what happens when the high schools end up unbalanced — in terms of demand for seats and also in student ethnicity — as a result?

This question is at the heart of a new series of public discussion meetings, which aim to focus on race and ethnicity issues. Beginning in two weeks, the meetings will be modeled on the school system's "study circle" method of discussion, where participants break up into groups of about 15 and discuss sensitive issues in a responsive environment.

According to John Landesman, director of Montgomery County Public Schools Study Circles, the discussion needs input from all stakeholders in the school system.

"All parents, teachers and staff are encouraged to participate," he said. "The group of people will address racial perceptions around school choice."

The benefit of study circles, and the roundtable-style discussions they use, is the participants find it easier to discuss sensitive issues, Landesman said.

"For an issue that's taboo," such as race or ethnicity, "roundtable discussions get people with different viewpoints to talk honestly," he said.

According to Montgomery County Public Schools 2005-2006 enrollment data for consortium high schools, the three high schools James Hubert Blake, Paint Branch and Springbrook have considerable differences in their ethnic makeup.

Students listed as African-American make up 34 percent in Blake, 45 percent in Paint Branch and 44.4 percent in Springbrook. By contrast, the level of white enrollment at the three schools was 45.7 at Blake, far greater than the 25.6 percent at Paint Branch and 16.1 percent at Springbrook.

At the initial study circle orientation meeting, held at Briggs Chaney Middle School March 29, trained facilitators introduced discussion topics such as stereotypes and perceptions to give participants an idea of how later meetings would progress.

During these exchanges, participants commented on how the perception of race influenced school communities and even school selection.

One parent at the meeting said she had heard comments in other households about how parents prefer some schools over others because of race.

"When kids know their parents say things like that in a household, it makes them think it's OK to feel that way themselves," she said. Another parent at the meeting raised the issue of how few minority teachers there were, saying he had occasionally been mistaken for a teacher simply because he was white. Both parents declined to be named for this story.

However, not all parents necessarily felt that this was a problem for the students. Barbara Turner, president of the Paint Branch PTSA, who gave permission to be quoted for this article, said at the meeting that she felt her son's generation had few problems making friends with colleagues of all racial backgrounds.

"My son has a very diverse circle of friends," she said. "Kids don't have the same viewpoints, don't have the same concerns" as her own generation might.

After six meetings, usually held weekly, the study circles will forward a plan of action steps to address the problem discussed. At other meetings, they have been able to effect changes such as revitalizing a school's PTA body, Landesman said. Parents left the meeting with an open invitation to extend to teachers, staff and administrators to broaden the involvement.

For several years, more students have chosen Blake as their first choice high school, leading to overuse of that school. An enrollment cap at that school has contributed to a record number of students not getting into their first choice this year, according to Larry Hansch, director of the Division of Consortia Choice and Application Program Services.

"Eighty-five percent of students got the first choice this year," to begin ninth grade in fall, he said Tuesday. "It's the lowest it's been."

Blake also has a higher percentage of white students, but Carole Goodman, Blake principal, said that had not always been the case.

Goodman said Tuesday that MCPS statistics show the total percentage of white students across the consortium has gone down over the past eight years, except for Blake, which has remained roughly constant by ethnicity of students.

"We have not changed demographically, but what has changed is the overall population of the area," Goodman said. "I don't know what makes students choose the school to go to — but I do know that eight years ago [when Blake first opened], nobody wanted to come to Blake."

Others have asked whether the issue of socioeconomic factors was more relevant than race. Laura Griffiths, a staff development teacher at Springbrook, said poverty and language barriers may be greater factors.

"When you come from a background of educated parents, they'll be extremely involved and they'll know what's going on at school," she said Monday. "For those who come from a first-generation immigrant family, whose parents might not speak English and may be holding down two or three jobs ... they won't know there's a high school choice."

Springbrook Principal Michael Durso, added that much of the discussion may relate to how schools are seen by the public.

"We can get into dangerous areas, where having X number of X race makes it a good school," he said Monday. He cited as an example how schools with majorities of different racial backgrounds may generate different levels of concern. "One school may be considered to be imbalanced, yet we don't address the other: they're perceived differently."

Community meetings to discuss race and ethnicity in school choice

Parents, students, staff and administrators of schools in the Northeast Consortium are all welcome to participate in the study circles. For more information, contact 301-279-3455 or visit [www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/studycircles](http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/studycircles). Tentative dates for the roundtable meetings are April 20 and 27, May 11, 18 and 25.

For tabulated information on all three high schools, including enrollment and assessment by race and gender, visit [www.mcps.k12.md.us/departments/regulatoryaccountability/glance/](http://www.mcps.k12.md.us/departments/regulatoryaccountability/glance/)