

Montgomery County Public School Study Circles Program

Frequently Asked Questions

How are Study Circles organized?

Facilitators are not responsible for any part of organizing or logistics. There are six Community Superintendents within Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) who supervise all principals. Each Community Superintendent identifies a few schools that they think could benefit from having a Study Circle. Study Circle staff members then meet with principals to plan goals, organizing strategies, and various dates. Information is sent to all school stakeholders (see “how are participants recruited?” below). The Study Circles staff works with school personnel and outside organizations to reach and recruit families and teachers.

How are participants recruited?

An ideal Study Circle is made up of a diverse mix of participants; both in terms of their racial/ethnic/cultural backgrounds and their roles in the school. We recruit teachers and school staff, including administrators, when we give a presentation at a school staff meeting. We try to get both parents who are quite involved in the school and parents who are not-so-involved. Usually, the school picks a list of parents who are mailed a personal invitation to come to an orientation meeting. Our staff then follow-up with reminder phone calls/e-mails. We then provide targeted outreach to recruit parents and students who would not normally come to such a meeting. After the orientation meeting (when interested participants fill out information sheets), we make sure the circle is diverse, figure out which night of the week works best for everyone, send letters, make reminder calls, and send reminder e-mails.

What happens at a Study Circle orientation?

Usually the orientation lasts 90 minutes, and happens about 2-3 weeks prior to the beginning of the Study Circle. When participants arrive, we serve pizza, make introductions, and lead a short activity which helps reveal people’s perceptions of the school. After a presentation which explains the basics of the program, we give everyone an opportunity to participate in a 20 minute sample Study Circle. At the end of the meeting, we ask those who are interested to fill out a participant information sheet and to tell us which nights of the week will work best for them.

How often/when/where do Study Circles meet?

Each Study Circle meets for six 2-hour weekly sessions. The circle meets at the school, in the library, gym, or media center at 7-9pm or 6:30-8:30pm.

Do you provide childcare? Translation? Food?

We provide childcare on request. All of our written materials are bilingual (English/Spanish) and we provide simultaneous interpretation if needed. We serve dinner at the 1st session.

How many people are in a Study Circle?

Anywhere from 12-20. Usually about 15. Again, an ideal Study Circle is made up of a diverse mix of parents, staff and administrators; both in terms of their racial/ethnic/cultural backgrounds and their roles in the school.

Montgomery County Public School Study Circles Program Frequently Asked Questions (continued)

Do Study Circles ever include students?

Yes! We have had several student-only Study Circles and more are being planned. When we run a Study Circle at the High School level (with parents, teachers and other staff), we have found that having student participation is great. We have not yet tried having Middle School students as participants, but we are open to this possibility, as long as everyone seems to think that it makes sense for the particular school.

What kind of support can facilitators expect from Study Circles Program staff?

The Study Circles program will provide you with all the materials needed for a 6-session Study Circle. Everything will come to you neatly labeled. You will have an initial meeting before the beginning of your Study Circle to help you get started and answer any questions you may have. You will also be assigned an experienced point person from our staff who will check in with you weekly to help you plan, brainstorm, and troubleshoot any concerns.

What is the time commitment for facilitators?

About 3-4 hours per week. A typical Study Circle meets once a week for 2 hours. It is a good idea for one or both facilitators to get there a half hour early to set up, make final planning arrangements, and greet participants as they arrive. Beyond the actual Study Circle, you can anticipate 1-3 hours of preparation per week with your co-facilitator. Weekly phone check-ins with your staff point person usually last about 1 hour. The Study Circles Program staff takes care of all the organizing aspects, including reminder phone calls to participants.

Once trained, how are Facilitators placed in a Study Circle? Do we get paid?

Once trained, facilitators self-evaluate their readiness to facilitate. The training team looks at this in combination with their own assessments of facilitators' perceived skill, personality, adaptability, strength in working with a co-facilitator, and neutrality. Every facilitator will receive a personalized written evaluation, indicating strengths and areas for improvement. At that time we will indicate whether we think you are ready to be placed in a study circle, or what skills we would like to see you practice. →Once dates have been set for a new six-session study circle, and we have heard from you about your availability and location preferences, our staff will select/match two facilitators based on skill level, personality, and racial/ethnic background. All study circles are led by facilitators from different backgrounds. Facilitators this year were provided a \$500 stipend for a 6-session study circle.

Facilitator's Job Description

- Manages the discussion
- Facilitates from a neutral perspective
- Helps the group set up and follow ground rules
- Helps participants examine issues from many points of view
- Handles group behaviors
- Helps the group move from dialogue to action
- Is not an expert on the issue
- DOES NOT JOIN THE DISCUSSION (except to add probing questions)

Study Circles Program (301) 279-3455 www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/studycircles