

Study Circles aims to eradicate racial conflict within schools

Written by Deepanjali Jain

"I know that if I am stopped in the hallway, it is not because of the color of my skin."

Roughly twenty Hispanic, black, white, and Asian students stood in a line. When they heard the above statement and others like it, they stepped forward if it applied to them.

"Most of the African American kids, they didn't take a single step. As you progressed to the front of the room, the skin color got lighter," said junior Arielle Fien. "It was a very powerful simulation."

This simulation, which is called "Does Skin Matter" and others like it, were conducted during the Study Circles program at RM.

The Study Circles program explores the existence of racial and ethnic divides that are "built into the system," junior Matt Reese said. "It raises your awareness to the differences in treatment that people with different skin tones that are enrolled in different [IB and non-IB] programs receive." At RM, the program involved approximately twenty different students.

"I was really impressed with the diversity of the group, there were kids in and out of IB, and kids of all races," said Fien, "but I think that white Jews were overrepresented." Participating students were recommended by teachers, but several other students specifically requested to be included and were accommodated.



"Mr. Carrasco was really responsive to our efforts to get Study Circles [to RM]," said senior Jake Rosner. "He was familiar with the program because they had had it at Eastern."

According to John Landesman, the coordinator for the study circles program for Montgomery County Public Schools in the division of Family and Community Partnerships, most study circle programs "include parents, staff, and students, and meet for 6 weekly two-hour sessions." The program at RM involved only one six hour session.



The study circles program was created to encourage discussion of how treatment and performance differ from student to student based on race. "We are a very diverse school system and Richard Montgomery is a very diverse school. A student's racial or ethnic background should not be a factor in how they succeed. Unfortunately, for too many students race and ethnicity are factors in how they do in school," said Mr. Landesman in an email interview.

At RM, the dropout rates for black and Hispanic students are 7.62% and 6.56% respectively, compared to 2.09% for white students.

"It isn't necessarily conscious," said Reese, "but if you just look at people who get stopped in the hallway, the people that get in trouble with security, you can see that people of

different races are treated differently."

The program was initiated by a national organization that recently changed its name to Everyday Democracy. Everyday Democracy states on its website that it "helps your community find ways for all kinds

of people to think, talk and work together to solve problems."

The Study Circle program was conducted on the heels of a recent Rocket Talk discussion on race that discussed the issue of race relations and student performance with the entire student body. "No one really took the [Rocket Talk] discussion seriously," said Fien, "I feel that since the study circle was so small, and so long, we all really got to know, respect and listen to each other."

Students who participated in the study circles program discussed issues such as racism and stereotypes and "how it affects the students and their school performances" said senior Kim Castro. Most were surprised by the stereotypes they harbored and acted upon on a day to day basis.

"Despite everyone's belief that they are, or how much they may want to be, no one is colorblind," said Fien, "and this program really opened my eyes to that."

