

Stepping Out of The Circle

By Britt Johnson

Some of the greatest ideas of our generation do not fit neatly into a box. But this month it fit into a circle, the diversity study circle. On Friday, April 18, 2008, eighteen participants including students, staff, and administrators came together in a study circle to talk about the ways racial, ethnic and social differences get in the way of student achievement at Damascus High School.

In the timeframe of one school day, people really got a chance to share their stories, build relationships, work together to solve problems and dig deep into their own social consciousness. Study Circles gave everyone the opportunity to understand Damascus' diverse group of students, listen to their challenges and ultimately come up actions steps to address the racial, ethnic and social barriers students encounter in the school system. Participants were chosen based upon their diverse perspectives and backgrounds. Led by three trained facilitators, the



group was placed in an environment where racial and ethnic issues could be discussed candidly and productively.

Opening up each other's hearts and minds, group members wrote and shared personal stories from a timeline that spanned across the classroom walls. "The timeline was my favorite part because it showed me that it is not about race, or gender or social issues, it was about just respecting people for who they are," said one student.

Sharing personal events in their lives and shedding a few tears, participants got a chance to discover how everyone's past shapes where we are and who we are today. "I never realized that this kind of stuff happened to the kids I pass in the hallway," said one student. "It showed the struggle that each of us go through on a day to day basis. I began to stop judging them on what they looked like but instead on who they were as an individual."

The study circle was an amazing experience not only for students, but more importantly the administrators. "There was a feeling in the room that just could not be described, something you can't just capture into words," an administrator commented.

Participants made sure that the discussion did not just end with the one day study circle. They drafted their own ideas for next year, testified before the Board of Education and spoke with community and deputy superintendents about the importance of the program. Plans are underway to hold more Study Circles at Damascus during the upcoming school year.

"There is nothing like the feeling of knowing you made a difference" one participant said. "And it was because we were willing to step out of our own circle and talk about the important issues".

