

One Nation INDIVISIBLE

Stories From the Field

www.onenationindivisible.org

May 2014

“Why Do We Need to Talk About Race So Much?”

Montgomery County, Maryland’s Educators and Parents Circle in on Culture, Bias and Learning in Diverse and Changing Schools

STORY BY MEREDITH CARLSON DALY

PHOTOS BY TCHAD MOORE

Eighteen teachers and administrators sit in a wide circle. They’ve taken a detour from their day jobs at a middle school in Montgomery County, Maryland to talk about subjects most people try to avoid: race, culture, tension, bias, stereotypes. At first, some of them do not seem happy to be there.

“I wish we didn’t have to have these conversations,” a white educator tells the group. “As a scientist, I see us all as humans.” Her white colleague agrees: “Why do we need to talk about race so much?” she asks.

“I don’t want to talk about race either,” an African American educator adds. “I wish I could just go home, watch reality TV. I’m not a deep person. I wish I wasn’t called names when I was 14, but we have kids walking around being diminished.”

The African American educator’s comments provide one of many reasons for why the group has gathered. John

Landesman, the soft-spoken coordinator who has convened the circle, explains the format—and the goals—for what will be, at times, a testy, touchy two-day session. (Group members asked that their names be withheld so that they may speak openly.)

“We’re not speaking about race to be politically correct,” Landesman, who is white, tells the group. “We’re helping people figure out

how to talk to one another. We don’t think problems are fixed by going through a study circle.”

The teachers and school staff members work at one of a growing number of public schools where racial and economic demographics have shifted in recent years. As the day wears on some members of the so-termed study

Parents and educators at Redland Middle School in Rockville, Md., take part in a study circle



circle speak emotionally and with seeming ease about their experiences growing up in countries or cultures different from predominantly white, middle-class America. Others, though, continue to question the need to spend a day here, arguing that their time would be better spent back with their students.

Suburban Montgomery County, bordering Washington, D.C. hosts the state's largest public school system. While the county is generally affluent, it is increasingly racially, culturally, linguistically and economically mixed. The public schools enroll more than 150,000 students in 200 schools across nearly 500 square miles. Students come from more than 157 countries and speak more than 138 languages. Public school officials here have long nurtured and promoted the system's reputation for rigorous academic programs, college-bound high school graduates and stellar achievement. Over the past decade, students of color have become the majority here and the share of students from families that earn low incomes has grown. And as is true in so many increasingly diverse suburban districts, the county's teachers and leaders are still overwhelmingly white and middle class.

Amid these changes, administrators adopted this ambitious program that starts with a seemingly simple act: People from a variety of racial and cultural backgrounds sit in a circle and talk. The Study Circles Program, started in 2003, organizes and facilitates group conversations at schools for students, parents and educators. Generally, study circles have been initiated only at schools where staff members have requested the process.

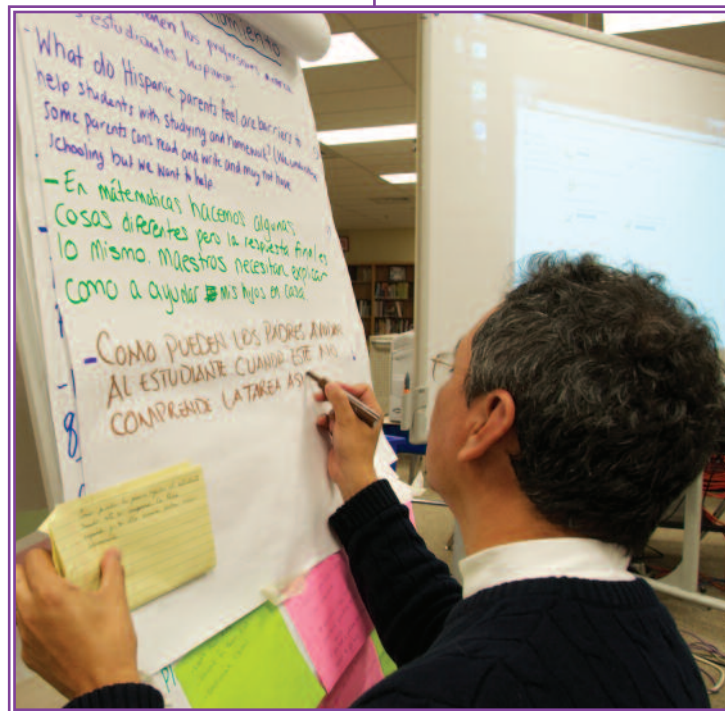
Since 2004, the county schools have hosted more than 700 study circles. The goal is straightforward: To spur discussion about the ways racial and cultural experiences play out in classrooms, cafeterias and hallways and how they permeate the learning experience for kids and affect teaching practices and decision- and policy-making

among adults. Some of the questions explored include: Are students of color treated differently from white students? To what extent is a student's status in school affected by the status of the student's racial or cultural group in the larger society? What are teachers' assumptions about why kids act a certain way or why they do or do not excel? How might adult expectations, unconscious biases or lack of understanding of students' cultures and experiences set up barriers to students'

educational advancement? How might we remove those barriers?

"Ultimately, what I hope is that the status quo isn't OK," says Landesman, the Study Circles coordinator.

The hope, too, is that Study Circles participants will collaborate on action plans to improve policies and practices or resolve conflicts that they identify together. After developing a shared understanding of a problem, many past and current Study Circles members do construct these action plans and present their concerns and ideas to school leaders. In recent years, parents and teachers have addressed such challenges as making enrollment in gifted and talented programs better reflect the demographics of a particular school, hiring more bilingual staff members, and training bus drivers who parents had perceived as being disrespectful to students.



About 63 percent of Montgomery County's students are students of color, with Latino students the largest (27 percent) of that group. Latino kindergartners and first graders represent 30.7 percent of students in those grades in Montgomery County, slightly outnumbering white students in those early years. A little more than a third of students come from families with incomes so low they qualify for free and reduced lunch, even though it is still one of the nation's wealthiest counties, with a 2012 median household income of nearly \$95,000. In April this year, a report from the Montgomery County Council's Office of Legislative Oversight detailed increasing racial and economic segregation in the county's high schools. The report also revealed a widening gap in achievement between white students and students of color. So, even as officials attempt to build relationships and focus on equity on the schools that are becoming more diverse, worsening segregation threatens equity and cross-cultural understanding and interaction in this growing school district.

In their 2013 book, *Confronting Suburban Poverty*, Elizabeth Kneebone and Alan Berube of the Brookings Institution show that Montgomery County has lost 37,000 jobs since 2007.

The number of residents living below the poverty line surged by two-thirds, with more than 30,000 people now officially poor. In 1990, immigrants accounted for less than one in five county residents. In 2010, one third of county residents were immigrants, more than 40 percent of whom were living in poverty. The signature achievement of former Montgomery County School Superintendent Jerry Weast, who hired Landesman to launch Study Circles, was a systemic, very public focus on the disparities in opportunities and achievement between schools in wealthy, largely white "upcounty" communities and poorer, racially mixed "downcounty" communities, such as Silver Spring, which borders Washington, D.C. Weast's efforts are detailed in the book, *Leading for Equity: The Pursuit of Excellence in Montgomery County Schools*.

"We have to look at the data and ask ourselves the hard questions," says Tomas Rivera-Figueroa, assistant principal at Parkland Middle School, one of the "down-county" schools where the leadership team spent two days in a study circle. "Our building has 45 percent Latino [students]" Rivera-Figueroa says. "Why is it that 95 percent have a 2.0 GPA?"

"The kids are the first to say, 'the teacher doesn't understand me.' We have to have those conversations and create an understanding. Our leadership is very progressive and understanding, but we may not be very conscious of what we do."

—Tomas Rivera-Figueroa,
Assistant Principal,
Parkland Middle School

He continues: "Why is it that a majority of suspensions are of African Americans?" With about 75 percent of the school's suspensions involving black students, who make up about 24 percent of the school population, this is an important question.

"The kids are the first to say, 'the teacher doesn't understand me,'" says Rivera-Figueroa, who has been Parkland's assistant principal for nine years. "We have to have those conversations and create an understanding. Our leadership is very progressive and understanding, but we may not be very conscious of what we do." That is where the Study Circles program comes in.

Parkland Middle School is a fitting example of how the Study Circles process works. It also demonstrates that building a more inclusive, fair and successful school requires steady, constant work. First, the numbers: African American, Hispanic and

Asian students make up 85 percent of the student body. The school staff is nearly 70 percent white. The principal is Asian. The assistant principal is Latino. A 2008 report from the Civil Rights Project at UCLA revealed that African American and Latino teachers were far more likely than white teachers to report that they had "quite a bit" or "a great deal" of training in methods designed for racially and culturally diverse classrooms. Specifically, sixty percent of Latino teachers, 58 percent of black teachers and 70 percent of mixed race teachers reported these amounts of training, compared with only 42 percent of white teachers.

"The real benefit of what study circles do is to reveal what the barriers actually are," says Alex Cartagena, the former parent community coordinator for the Study Circles Program. "The answers are always in the room."

Social psychologists Linda Tropp and Thomas Pettigrew have long explored effective strategies for engendering positive intergroup relationships and reducing prejudice within schools. Tropp and Pettigrew considered findings from studies conducted over six decades with more than a quarter of a million participants in 38 countries. They found that while intergroup face-to-face contact does reduce prejudice, the quality of that contact matters. The more able educators and others are to cultivate meaningful relationships across groups, the more likely that contact will reduce prejudice. As for schools, Tropp and Pettigrew point to the importance of creating opportunities for students to cooperate across racial and ethnic groups. Study Circles coordinator John Landesman and other educators in Montgomery County view study circles as a pathway for cultivating these important relationships and spurring necessary collaboration and cooperation in reaching a shared goal.



Leyla Fandey, Parkland’s media specialist, has been an educator for two decades. She seems comfortable speaking in the study circle, telling her peers about her unusual upbringing in Iran, fleeing with her family as a teenager to Germany, then to Germantown, a Montgomery County suburb. She believes strongly, she says, in the need to better understand and affirm students from cultures that are very different from those of most of Montgomery County’s teachers. “Our experiences do affect how we teach,” she tells her peers sitting with her in the study circle.

“When I see immigrant students, I know what they’re going through,” Fandey tells the group. “Some of them have to be the adults in the home. When I was 15, I had to learn German. I remember feeling nauseous: What if I got the translation wrong for my parents?”

The group participates in an exercise debunking stereotypes. Landesman asks each educator to write down three characteristics of their culture and three words describing how others might generalize their ethnicity:

One entry from a Latino: “proud, family-oriented, throw big parties,” and then, how others might stereotype Latinos: “cheap, illegal, uneducated.”

“Our experiences do affect how we teach. When I see immigrant students, I know what they’re going through. Some of them have to be the adults in the home. When I was 15, I had to learn German. I remember feeling nauseous: What if I got the translation wrong for my parents?”

—Leyla Fandey, Parkland Middle School Media Specialist

“What are stereotypes for whites?” Landesman asks the group. “Do we think of stereotypes as non-white?”

Some of the white educators in the room struggle to characterize their cultures or even list stereotypes they imagine people might have of them: “Christian, white,” writes one. “Over-privileged, redneck, racist,” writes another. A white teacher comments that she doesn’t “look at” race or consider it.

“I think about it every single day,” says Tomas Rivera-Figueroa, the assistant principal.

After the study circle session, Erika May, an African American school counselor, says she hopes the session will enable participants to “look at our students differently,” and ask, “What are [the students’] values and why?”

The desire that May articulates was exactly the genesis of the Study Circles program when it was launched a decade ago, says Ruby Rubens, the county’s longtime fair housing manager and education ombudsman. Rubens, who is African American, helped start Study Circles with Landesman. At the time, more immigrants from Latin America, Africa and Asia, were moving into what had historically been a predominantly white, prosperous county.

“There had never been a time,” Rubens explains, “when that kind of dialogue within a diverse community could take place and the study circle process was the perfect vehicle.”

The study circle process worked well for parent Gladis Calderon, who immigrated to Montgomery County from Guatemala in 1982. A decade ago, she was volunteering at her children’s elementary school, making copies, running errands for classroom teachers and attending Parent-Teacher Association meetings. She kept



This bilingual Study Circle in Montgomery County, Maryland is translated simultaneously

quiet, she says, because at that time, her English skills weren't strong. But her desire to be involved in her children's education was.

"I didn't understand what was being said a lot, but my presence helped," she says. Then the school principal asked Calderon to participate in one of the first study circles. "When I was on the PTA, I was the only Latina, I felt left out. The study circles made a big difference. We learned where we all came from, how to help each other out. That made a big difference for me. People from the PTA started noticing me more. I had more confidence in myself."

Calderon recruited other Latino parents to participate and volunteer at the school. She joined AmeriCorps, the national volunteer program that provides the Study Circles Program with interns. Upon finishing a three-year program with AmeriCorps, Calderon accepted a paid position as an outreach coordinator for Study Circles.

"The study circles changed my life in many ways. I learned to understand other people. I learned that people are shy because they don't know how to have a relationship."

—Parent Gladis Calderon

"The study circles changed my life in many ways," says Calderon, whose older two children are now in college. Her youngest is a high school senior. "I learned to understand other people. I learned that people are shy because they don't know how to have a relationship."



At the newly renovated Redland Middle School in suburban Rockville, a large, middle-class community bordering wealthier Potomac, the Latino population has increased rapidly over the last decade. At Redland, students of color now outnumber white students two to one—a complete flip of demographics from just five years ago.

Administrators hosted three study circles at Redland early in the 2013 school year. Organizers convened the first for students who are still learning English. Another circle included the same students and school staff. The third circle brought together Latino parents and staff and administrators. The study circles that included

Latino parents were conducted in Spanish with English interpretation provided via headphones worn by teachers and staff members.

Usually, study circles bring together between 15 and 20 people. But this particular circle attracted more than 25 parents, teachers and school staff members. Group members brought food to share: Empanadas, pupusas, pizza and donuts. The mothers and fathers shared stories about education in their own countries where parents were not encouraged to participate and a teacher’s word was never questioned. They mapped out goals session and agreed to form a Latino parent group to continue a key mission of the study circles: cultivating parent involvement. They elected a parent president and vice president, who have since continued to meet.

They are working with staff to make sure paperwork from school is translated into Spanish and that school activities are inclusive of all cultures. For example, sixth graders at all county schools spend two nights at a nature center where they get acquainted with each other. Historically, Latino parents have tended to keep their children at home, which meant their kids missed out on an event designed to build community among class members.

Redland’s Intern Principal Everett Davis, a graduate of the county’s schools, is one of the few bilingual administrators at Redland. He sensed that Latino parents

needed to hear, not from him, but from other Latino parents about the benefits of the school-sponsored trip and about the supervision that’s provided. After enlisting Latino volunteers to speak with Latino parents about the excursion, enrollment for the trip spiked.

Landesman recently facilitated a study circle with Montgomery County School Superintendent Joshua Starr and his leadership team. Starr has been superintendent since 2011.

“The value is that it helps people engage authentically in conversations that

are really difficult to have,” Starr says. “Avoidance is easy. It’s harder to confront things head on....These are issues that never go away. Dealing with issues of race and equity is an ongoing task and the best way to do it is through engagement. [Study Circles] is not the panacea. It’s one part of an overall strategy to engage families to improve student achievement.”

Back at Parkland Middle School, Leyla Fandey, the Iranian-born media specialist, says she is glad to have participated in a process that was not always easy. She’s been at Parkland for about a year, she says, and Study Circles helped her get to know her colleagues better and triggered important discussions that need to continue.

“But it was a little bit tense,” Fandey acknowledges. “Then again, nothing is going to happen unless there is a little tension.”



“The value is that it helps people engage authentically in conversations that are really difficult to have. Avoidance is easy. It’s harder to confront things head on....These are issues that never go away. Dealing with issues of race and equity is an ongoing task and the best way to do it is through engagement.”

—Joshua Starr,
Montgomery County
School Superintendent



“...it was a little bit tense. Then again, nothing is going to happen unless there is a little tension.”

—Leyla Fandey, Parkland Middle School Media Specialist

Meredith Carlson Daly is a freelance writer and a native of South Africa. She has written about education, equality and diversity issues for a wide range of publications. She is also former staff writer for the *Hartford (CT) Courant*. She lives in Silver Spring, Maryland with her husband and two daughters, who attend Montgomery County's Public Schools.

Tchad Moore is a multimedia producer/project manager for OVS Media, which broadcasts live events via the internet and a senior field production trainer for Montgomery Community Media. As a freelance photographer and videographer, Tchad has worked with American Film Institute (AFIDocs), Discovery

Communications, The Children's Inn at the National Institutes of Health, Emergent BioSolutions, House of Ruth, and the March of Dimes.

"Stories from the Field" is an occasional publication of One Nation Indivisible. To share a story from the field about efforts to create, sustain or improve racially, culturally or linguistically integrated schools, communities or social institutions, please visit our website and click on "Share Your Story."

Thanks to Kelly Garvin at the Houston Institute and Gina Chirichigno for their editorial assistance on this story.

One Nation Indivisible's Stories from the Field:

Utah's Bilingual Boon: A Red State Embraces Linguistic Diversity

Integration Ambassadors: A Grassroots Organization of Parents and Educators in Greater Hartford, Connecticut, Keeps Racial and Economic Diversity in Schools and on Agendas

Precisely the Patch of Earth: In America's Heartland, Three Faiths Come Together to Share Space, Build Relationships and Create an International Model of Religious Pluralism

We Are From Hazleton: A Baseball Celebrity Helps Bring His Divided Pennsylvania Hometown Together

Lessons From the Former Great White North: Living, Loving and Immigrating in the New Toronto

Why It Makes Sense: African Americans and Latinos in Pro-Immigrant Baltimore

Upstream People: Can Nebraska Show a Separate, Unequal Nation a Better Way?

Beyond Brotherly Love: Philadelphia's Bet on Attracting and Retaining Immigrants Pays Off

Life in 98118: Seattle's Rainier Valley – One of the Nation's Most Diverse Zip Codes

Lifelines in Tough Times: A Small Southern City's Health Care Providers Respond to a Demographic Transformation and Create a Vital Community of Support

Have We Learned Our Language Lesson? In Spite of Massachusetts' Decade-Old English-Only Law, Two-Way Bilingual Programs Demonstrate Promise and Enjoy Enduring Popularity

Wealth for Everyone: A North Carolina Credit Union Serves a Growing Immigrant Population and Creates a More Prosperous, Safer Community

Same New Struggle: Building a Better Southern Strategy in Multiracial Mississippi

Not Your Father's Suburb: Race and Rectitude in a Changing Minnesota Community

These Stories are available on our website:
www.onenationindivisible.org