

Case Study: Study Circles Help Community Calm Graduation Ceremony Circus

Background

In 2004, GSBA began a partnership with the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC) to bring to school districts a model of public engagement centered on the use of small group discussion that leads to action.

GSBA introduced the process at the 2004 Communication Workshop. The two organizations would later collaborate with the Thomaston-Upson school system on the initial demonstration of study circles in Georgia.

The Situation

Thomaston-Upson is a small, rural school system with over 5,000 students, approximately 325 certified teachers and an additional 300 support staff at three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school.

The issue was decorum – or the lack of it – by students and the audience at the high school graduation ceremony. Instead of being a point of pride, it had become a point of contention. The Superintendent and Board decided to try the study circle model to achieve an action plan for resolution.

The Process

- In December 2004, GSBA and SCRC began preparation work with the system. Jon Abercrombie of the SCRC assisted with the strategic approach, training facilitators, and developing the discussion guide. The district recruited participants representing all community segments.
- The study circles were held in early April 2005. Led by an adult and student facilitator, seven groups of 6-10 people each discussed three major issues:
 - How schools affect their lives and their community
 - What issues and challenges were the system and community facing, and how might they work together to address them.
 - Graduation and associated issues.

- The specific issues related to graduation included:
 - Should the system allow students who earned all required credits for graduation but not passed the Georgia High School Graduation Test to walk at the graduation ceremony? If not, what alternatives should the system consider?
 - What did participants like most/least about their experiences at graduation?
 - What are the most important outcomes of the graduation ceremony for the school, families and the community?
 - What significant viewpoints does the community hold?
 - How do people think about graduation and what it should be like?
- After the issues were discussed at length, the discussion turned to possible action steps that could be taken to address the challenges facing the system and in particular the graduation process.

The Outcome

Shortly after the session, the study circles evaluation committee presented to the Board a set of recommendations designed to produce “a more dignified graduation.” Actions included:

- The system published “Acceptable Behavior Guidelines,” distributed to everyone attending graduation. These were widely publicized by system officials and students in various publications.
- Seniors received lessons on proper behavior and administrators sat with them during the ceremony. Unlike previous years, the system did not distribute actual diplomas until after the ceremony. Any breach of the rules results in withholding of the diploma.
- Thomaston-Upson also made significant changes to the ceremony itself, including having seniors sit facing the stage rather than the audience, limiting the number of tickets to hand out to family and friends and limiting entry to a single access point.

While the Board of Education agreed with almost all of the recommendations, they continue to allow students who have not passed portions of the state’s high school graduation test to participate in the ceremony.

On May 27, the Class of 2005 enjoyed a trouble-free ceremony that honored the spirit of the occasion while encouraging respect for all graduates, their family and guests.

What they said

“The level of individual participation, particularly from the students, was very impressive. The students were the ones who really seemed to understand the need to differentiate ceremony from celebration and to call for us to create rules and enforce them. We are so pleased with the study circles process, we are discussing its use to address other system issues.”

Keith Rohling, Thomaston-Upson Board of Education

“It is always hard to truly get the pulse of the community, but study circles give every stakeholder an opportunity to take part in the process. In our case, the students really took ownership of the issue, which is what we wanted. We were very pleased at the results as well as the outstanding support we received from both the Study Circles Resource Center and the Georgia School Boards Association.”

Dr. Howard Hendley, Thomaston-Upson Superintendent

“The greatest benefit of using the study circles model was the ability to have people from throughout the community hear differing viewpoints. Any time you can give the public a voice in the decision-making process, they are going to have more ownership of the outcome. For the most part the participants supported the recommendations and they in turn encouraged their peers in the community to support them as well.”

Karen Truesdale, Thomaston-Upson Director of Public Relations