

What
DEMOCRACY
looks like



Kansas City, Kansas

*Where neighborhood voices
lead to better solutions*



STUDY CIRCLES
RESOURCE CENTER

Helping People Work Together
For Creative Community Change

*Study circles are changing the
status quo in many of the city's
most challenged neighborhoods.*



Kansas City, Kansas

Where neighborhood voices lead to better solutions

On her first day at work in the Belrose Manor public housing project in Kansas City, Kansas, Sabrina Boyd heard gunfire. She went back to her office and asked whether her employer provided bullet-proof vests.

Belrose had a bad reputation. Police wouldn't patrol there alone. The project sat near the crossroads of interstates 35 and 70, a location that made it a drug-trafficking center for the entire metro Kansas City area. Gangs held sway on the streets, and kids didn't feel safe going out to play.

People living in Belrose felt disconnected from one another and powerless to change their situation, or even have a say in neighborhood affairs. But all that started changing in the summer of 2003, when hundreds of residents began meeting in small groups called "study circles" to work on school and neighborhood problems.

Originally part of a local public school reform initiative, and now run under the auspices of the United Way of Wyandotte County, study circles are giving Kansas City residents the opportunity to meet, speak out about problems, propose solutions, and work together to make things better.



(From left to right) Jess Brizendine of the University of Kansas Community Policing Division; Sabrina Boyd of KU's G.E.A.R. U.P. project; Brenda Mortell of KCK Study Circles/United Way of Wyandotte County; and George Kemper of the KU's Community Policing Division. The four pose in front of the Belrose Community Resource Center in the Belrose Manor public housing project.

Principles guiding study circles...

- Involve everyone. Demonstrate that the whole community is welcome and needed.
- Embrace diversity. Reach out to all kinds of people.
- Share knowledge, resources, power, and decision making.
- Combine dialogue and deliberation. Create public talk that builds understanding and explores a range of solutions.
- Connect deliberative dialogue to social, political, and policy change.

A study circle ...

- is a small, diverse group of 8 to 12 people.
- meets together for several, two-hour sessions.
- sets its own ground rules. This helps the group share responsibility for the quality of the discussion.
- is led by an impartial facilitator who helps manage the discussion. He or she is not there to teach the group about the issue.
- starts with personal stories, then helps the group look at a problem from many points of view. Next, the group explores possible solutions. Finally, they make plans for action and change.

A study circle program ...

- is organized by a diverse group of people from the whole community.
- includes a large number of people from all walks of life.
- has easy-to-use, fair-minded discussion materials.
- uses trained facilitators who reflect the community's diversity.
- moves a community to action when the study circles conclude.

Coupled with other reforms, study circles had helped the KCK Schools boost graduation rates from 50 percent to 70 percent and see steady improvement in standardized test scores.

In fact, study circles are changing the status quo in many of the city's most challenged neighborhoods. A community police officer who regularly patrols Belrose says police made 20 calls to the neighborhood in January 2003. He says they now make that many in a year.

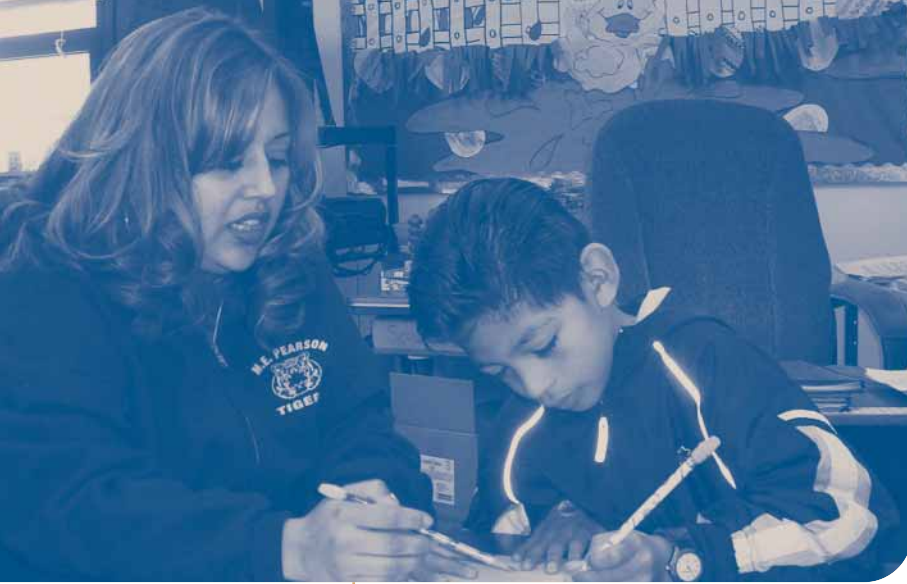
'Like an adrenaline rush'

B*renda Mortell serves as study circles* community coordinator for the United Way of Wyandotte County.

When people ask what study circles are about, Mortell says, "Just come to one. You'll understand." In study circles, people who've had pent-up frustrations and unanswered questions suddenly realize they can speak their mind, get answers, and work with neighbors and public officials to make changes. "It's like an adrenaline rush," she adds.

KCK Study Circles follows the ideas developed over the past 15 years by the Connecticut-based Study Circles Resource Center and used in cities and towns around the country. As many people as possible are recruited to join in. Ground rules are set to ensure respectful dialogue where all participants feel their voices are heard and no one can dominate the discussion. Each circle typically meets four times, giving participants a chance to know each other well and move from talk to solving problems. Instead of using discussion guides produced by the Study Circles Resource Center, local organizers encourage the circles to set their own agendas and focus on their immediate concerns.

In Belrose, this creative approach has worked well. Despite the gunfire she frequently heard, Sabrina Boyd dug in to her duties of mentoring and tutoring students in grades 6 through 12 through the University of Kansas' G.E.A.R. U.P. (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) project. Meanwhile, KU's Kansas City campus had established community policing throughout its neighborhood in the city's Rosedale section, which includes Belrose. Residents who used to pull their children



Martha Rocha, an active participant in the Pearson Elementary School's study circle program, tutors Pearson second-grader Daniel Mera.



Study circles were chosen...because they seemed to stand the best chance of reconnecting the community to its schools on a lasting basis—not just for one night.

inside at the sight of a police car became accustomed to casually

conversing with officers George Kemper and Jess Brizendine. Several organizations, including Kaw Valley Habitat for Humanity and locally based City Vision Ministries, had built homes nearby. Belrose was waiting to flower, yet conditions were still bad enough that when Derrick Estelle reported for duty as new manager of the complex in early 2003, traffic for a nearby drug house made it nearly impossible to get into his office driveway.

Shortly after Estelle's arrival, people working at Belrose held a brainstorming session. Many of them had been involved in KCK Study Circles. Introduced as part of the Kansas City, Kansas, Public Schools' "First Things First" reform movement, study circles gave people a chance to meet; speak out about their schools and neighborhoods; propose solutions; and work together with school administrators and other officials to create positive change. Coupled with other reforms, study circles had helped the KCK Schools boost graduation rates from 50 percent to 70 percent and see steady improvement in standardized test scores. Could study circles help save Belrose, too? The brainstormers decided to give it a try.

The neighbors take charge

The first session was set for a spring evening in April 2003. Organizers went door-to-door with brightly colored fliers, then followed up with personal visits when they realized some of the tenants could not read. The day of the event, last-minute reminders and the aroma of fried chicken, yams, and peach cobbler drew about 10 families to Belrose's community resource center for the kickoff. People wanted to talk, their voices were heard, and word spread that these were not your ordinary, boring public meetings but a chance to really change the way things were in their neighborhood. By July, nearly every family in the complex gathered for a night of games and barbecue. Soon, the residents banded together to start a tenants' association, hold a youth sports camp, and rid their neighborhood of about 10 drug houses.

Not all neighborhoods and schools experience outcomes as dramatic as Belrose's after holding study circles. "Most are quieter, but they're all having an impact," says Dr. Ray Daniels, superintendent of the Kansas City, Kansas, schools. It was Daniels who, in league with the United Way of Wyandotte County, got study circles going in his city of 146,900 in 1999.

A longtime veteran of the school district, Daniels realized when he became superintendent that there was "a growing disconnect" between parents and the schools. Some parents seemed more concerned with school cafeteria fare and athletics than they were over whether the schools were effectively educating their children. Others, including a growing number of immigrant parents from Hispanic and Hmong families, needed help navigating the daily pressures of life in a new country and survival in declining neighborhoods. Daniels and the United Way evaluated several possible means of addressing these issues. Study circles were chosen because they emphasized cooperation between all kinds of people, and because they seemed to stand the best chance of reconnecting the community to its schools on a lasting basis—not just for one night.

They haven't been disappointed. Study circles have brought hope and change to some of Kansas City's poorer neighborhoods, where people had never before had a voice. With nearly 800 students, almost all qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches, M.E. Pearson Elementary School stands like a sheltering bulwark in a neighborhood known for its open-air drug trade and prostitution. The school has long had strong principals and a small, dedicated group of parent volunteers who work with teachers and with parent liaison Lilia Garcia to fill weekly take-home book bags for students (and their parents) learning English; provide food and clothing for the school's families; and even offer tutoring and a free weekly meal to homeless adults and children. But after a fall 2003 round of study circles, the Pearson parents decided to extend their reach beyond the school.

They formed a new neighborhood association dedicated to tackling some of the area's most pressing problems. Volunteers delivered a thousand fliers, door to door, to advertise the group's first meeting. The guest speaker at one early gathering discussed the issue of landlords renting condemned homes to unsuspecting tenants, a common problem in the Pearson neighborhood. Area residents are continually frustrated by slow

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—Michael Windes,
Principal, M.E. Pearson
Elementary School

police response times, but they'll soon learn how they can set up their own Neighborhood Watch program. Michael Windes, Pearson's current principal, says study circles are a way for the neighborhood to face its most fundamental needs and empower individuals to take charge of their lives and surroundings. "We're trying to build, in the minds of the families, ownership, access, responsibility, and the feeling of being valued," he says.

It's all about the community

P*eople of all ages respond to this idea.* Across town in another rough-edged neighborhood, a small boy sits on the porch of a house that appears ready to collapse behind him, while teens mill aimlessly in the streets. But at nearby University United Methodist Church, several of their peers are hanging out with the younger kids at Youth Haven, a drop-in after-school center where neighborhood children can play games, watch videos, and get help with homework. The church has held two rounds of study circles; the latest resulted in plans for a neighborhood cleanup and community garden.

Brothers Daylon and Emmanuel Thompson and their friend Donte Thomas, all volunteers at Youth Haven, plan to entertain as a hip-hop trio at the cook-

Members of the United Neighbors Improving Their Environment (UNITE) take a break from their community cleanup to pose for a group photo. The group cleaned 15 neighborhood blocks, resulting in a noticeable decrease in litter.





out after the cleanup. All three also took part in the study circles, together with Daylon and Emmanuel’s mom, Eleanor, and an elderly neighbor, who has pledged to help water the new garden. Asked why they choose civic engagement over stereotypical urban teen behavior, the three youths say it’s all about the community—and they’re having fun, besides.

Veronica Garza is having more fun these days, too. A longtime volunteer and parent liaison at Douglass Elementary School, Garza emerged from a recent Spanish-language study circle with about 30 new compatriots—many of them couples—eager to share the load as the nucleus of a new parent association. The fledgling group has done everything from plan a Cinco de Mayo assembly to run an after-school homework help line. “I figured after four weeks it would be over,” Garza said of the study circles format, but since coming together, the parents found their voices and are eager to do more together both formally and as a loose network of friends who can help each other out. “Now we have an extended family,” she emphasizes.

Despite the school district’s support, study circles haven’t drawn much notice from city officials. That’s changing, though: In the summer of 2003, about 130 youth, including some high school dropouts, took part in five study circles and planned a cleanup for 16 square blocks of downtown Kansas City, planting flowers and picking up more than 85 bags of trash. The celebration afterward drew officials ranging from Mayor Carol Marinovich to U.S. Rep. Dennis Moore. Through the event, public figures realized how study circles help everyone, including at-risk teens, channel their energy in positive directions.

Study circle participants grab a bite to eat at the KCK Study Circles spring 2004 action forum and celebration. More than 1,300 have participated in the city’s study circle program since 1999.

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Looking to the future

When KCK Study Circles began, organizers hoped to involve 500 people in circles, but nearly three times that number had taken part by early 2004. About 150 people have been trained as facilitators, and study circles are widely seen as a way to get things achieved in Kansas City. The organization has a \$160,000 annual budget and recently hired a project coordinator who will take charge of recruiting and publicity for circles, leaving Brenda Mortell more time to organize the facilitators' work.

In March 2004, the United Way of Wyandotte County's board of directors formally made KCK Study Circles part of its operation. The move helped solidify Study Circles' status and, according to United Way officials, made a lot of sense. "I see study circles as a perfect match," says Diane Hentges, who directs the United Way's volunteer center, noting how volunteers from other community organizations under the United Way umbrella can help study circle participants implement the action plans that follow each round of circles. "The mission of the United Way is to mobilize community resources to meet community needs," she adds.

"I've always felt the United Way is more than a fund-raiser," says Wendell Maddox, the organization's local president. "It has an opportunity to be a catalyst and change agent." And change is the welcome watchword in Kansas City, Kansas. All across the city, people who've felt powerless to improve their situations have done just that by banding together with neighbors to talk, and then act for the common good.

Author Julie Fanselow is an independent writer working with the Study Circles Resource Center to document success stories in participatory decision making and democracy.

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The Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC) works to find ways for all kinds of people to engage in dialogue and problem solving on critical social and political issues.

SCRC is a project of the Paul J. Aicher Foundation (formerly the Topsfield Foundation, Inc.), a private, nonprofit, nonpartisan foundation dedicated to advancing deliberative democracy and improving the quality of public life in the United States.

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