**Speaking up, taking action to improve education for all**

Across the country, people are concerned with how our children are doing in school. In Arkansas, the school boards association has been running “study circles” allowing local residents to weigh in on educational decisions in their community since 1998.

Soon after the program began, the Lakeview School District sued the state of Arkansas for not providing equitable and quality education for their youth. The courts agreed and required the state to reform its education system. The effort forced Arkansas legislators to increase the state’s sales tax, putting an added burden on a state steeped in poverty.

The Arkansas School Boards Association (ASBA) decided to step up their ongoing efforts, organizing a statewide study circles event called Speak Up, Arkansas! on Taxes. More than 240 people in 20 counties participated in these discussions to learn how their tax dollars work and offer recommendations to improve the tax system.

“We believe people tend to support what they help to build, and we have a chance now to validate that premise,” commented Dan Farley, Executive Director of Arkansas Friends for Better Schools. “Education is at the core of everything we aspire to – including the democracy we all cherish.”

The ASBA has continued the Arkansas Study Circles Project beyond the dialogues on taxes. In the last decade, more than 6,000 people have participated from 90 sites across the state. They have expanded to include other topics around education such as student achievement, family involvement, early childhood care and education, and diversity. Some accomplishments of the program include:

- Bringing community recommendations for tax reform to policymakers,
- Helping smaller schools consolidate,
- Defining goals of parental involvement, and
- Developing after school programs.

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**About Everyday Democracy**

A national leader in the field of civic participation and community change, Everyday Democracy helps people of different backgrounds and views talk and work together to create communities that work for everyone.

[www.everyday-democracy.org](http://www.everyday-democracy.org)