



**STUDY CIRCLES**  
RESOURCE CENTER

Helping People Work Together For Creative Community Change



# **Organizing Study Circles with Young People**

**A hands-on guide for  
youth and adults**

**Version 1.0**

**Study Circles Resource Center — A project of the Topsfield Foundation, Inc.**



# **Organizing Study Circles with Young People**

## **A hands-on guide for youth and adults**

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**We are grateful to the young people and adults who have let us learn with them as they created study circle programs in schools and communities throughout the country.**

**The Study Circles Resource Center is dedicated to finding ways for all kinds of people to engage in dialogue and problem solving on critical social and political issues. SCRC helps communities by giving them the tools to organize productive dialogue, recruit diverse participants, find solutions, and work for action and change.**

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# Organizing Study Circles with Young People

## A hands-on guide for youth and adults

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### What do we mean when we say “youth” or “young people”?

Generally, *young people* refers to teens, approximately 13 to 18 years of age, who are usually in grades 8 through 12.

## Introduction

With the growth of study circles as a tool for community dialogue and problem solving, more and more organizers in communities and organizations are reaching out to include young people in study circle programs. This is critical, since young people have a stake in helping our communities work — and they bring unique energy, insights, and assets to public conversations and to solving public problems.

Young people get involved in study circles in many different ways: in schools; as part of community-based or neighborhood programs; in after-school programs or youth organizations; as part of large youth events and conferences, and in other settings where young people spend time. Sometimes young people and adults are together in study circles; sometimes the circles are for youth only. Through this process, young people learn about issues, gain new skills, have a chance to hear and be heard, and find ways to work with others on the issues that are important to them. In short, they have a chance to experience their own potential as active and involved citizens.

### Using this guide

The purpose of this guide is to help young people and adults organize successful youth study circles in a variety of settings.

**Part 1** provides an *Overview* of youth study circles, including the rationale for participation, study circle principles, and universal guidelines.

**Part 2** covers the basic steps of *Organizing* study circles with young people.

**Part 3** describes different *Settings* where study circles with youth take place, and advice for organizing in each of those settings.

**Part 4** offers a list of *Resources*.

**NOTE:** A companion guide, *Organizing Community-wide Dialogue for Action and Change*, covers all aspects of organizing community-based study circles. You can view and download the guide on the Study Circles Resource Center web site ([www.studycircles.org](http://www.studycircles.org)), or you can order a copy from SCRC. For more information, please call 860-928-2616.



## Part 1: An overview of youth study circles

Young people are key to building our communities and strengthening our democracy. They offer vision, energy, and a distinct point of view about our public concerns. Yet too often, young people are left out of community conversations and decisions — even when the issues directly involve and affect them! Adding these voices to critical community conversations benefits everyone. Young people should be part of the discussions about issues that affect our neighborhoods, schools, congregations, and other organizations.

A study circle is a very different kind of conversation for youth and adults alike. The *process* — making room for all voices, respecting different points of view, emphasizing listening, and searching for common understanding — helps participants address some of our most difficult public issues. Participants find their voice, get involved with others different from themselves, and find ways to make a difference.

### Youth study circles ...

- offer a different way of talking and listening.
- expand understanding of an issue beyond one's own view.
- help resolve conflict and promote critical thinking.
- build relationships and bridges among all kinds of participants.
- connect teens with adults and the broader world.
- help teens solve problems and take part in solutions.

Some study circles involve only young people as participants. In this case, the circles provide a structured process for diverse groups of young people to talk about issues they care about. Fostering important peer relationships, study circles promote honest dialogue without adult interference.

In other settings, study circles bring young people together with adults. This approach builds trust and understanding between generations that are often distant or even pitted against one another. With the help of strong facilitation, these study circles provide a setting that offers a new way of hearing one another and then working together. Adults and teens alike attest to the power of this experience.

### A study circle ...

- is a small, diverse group of 8 to 12 participants.
- meets regularly to address an important social or political issue.
- sets its own ground rules for a respectful, productive conversation.
- is led by an impartial facilitator, who manages the conversation but is not an “expert” or “teacher” in the traditional sense.
- considers an issue from many points of view.
- does not require consensus, but uncovers areas of agreement.
- offers an opportunity to move from talk to action.

### Key study circle principles

- **Inclusion** — reaching out to large numbers of people from all parts of the school or community
- **Diversity** — involving participants of all kinds of backgrounds and beliefs
- **Respect for multiple viewpoints**
- **The connection of dialogue to action**

Whatever the mix of youth and adults, study circles are usually co-led by two facilitators — two young people who are different from one another, or a young person and an adult. Such co-facilitation models an important kind of leadership and teamwork. It also offers an opportunity for a young person to develop and practice key facilitation skills, with the support of someone with more experience.

**Where does the dialogue lead?**

Because study circles bring different kinds of people together, around a shared concern, they open up new ways for young people to relate to one another and to the world around them. Learning how to listen actively and to create relationships with different kinds of people are keys to full participation in a diverse society.

Beyond better understanding, study circles provide the opportunity to *do* something about an important issue. The dialogue experience is powerful; it is equally — or more — important to be able to *act on* shared convictions. Adult allies need to think about how they will help youth participants turn action ideas into reality. This is true whether the circles happen in a youth organization, a school, a neighborhood, or a community.

**How are study circles different from other processes?**

There are many kinds of youth activities with different purposes and goals. Here are some examples. (Note that the role of an adult can vary.)

<b>Group</b>	<b>Goal</b>	<b>Role of adult(s)</b>
Support groups	therapy/understanding	professional counselor
Rap sessions	learning, fun	leader
Book groups or seminars	learning	teacher
Debating teams or clubs	learning/competition	teacher/coach
Study circle	understanding/action	mentor/trainer/sponsor

When young people participate in study circles, they gain skills, knowledge, and a broader understanding of themselves and the world in which they live. And they find concrete ways to make a difference. Sometimes this happens in combination with other kinds of youth activities — such as service learning, volunteering, community service, or classroom work.

**Here are some important things to keep in mind when you are organizing youth study circles:**

- Young people are effective in every aspect of study circles — planning, organizing, facilitating, and participating.
- Study circles are most successful when participation is voluntary.
- Each study circle should be diverse.
- The discussion topic should be relevant and important to the participants.
- All kinds of young people — not just the obvious “leaders” — can be good facilitators. Facilitators should mirror the diversity of the participant group.
- The conversation can include icebreakers and other exercises, along with the “talk.”
- Take time to reflect on how this process is different from other kinds of conversations.
- Study circles offer opportunities for action after the dialogue.
- Young people are busy! Scheduling and transportation can be challenges.
- Have food and have fun!



## **Part 2: The basic steps of organizing youth study circles**

The following information covers all aspects of organizing study circles with young people.

### ***Step 1: Get started***

Most youth study circle programs begin when a few people (adults and/or youth) see a need or opportunity to bring young people together for dialogue on an important issue:

- Sometimes, schools are looking for a way to help students talk about important issues, either in the classroom or as part of school life.
- Sometimes, a youth organization sponsors study circles as an ongoing part of its activities.
- Sometimes young people want to talk about an important issue, and are looking for a productive way to do it.
- Sometimes these efforts grow out of an existing community study circle program.

Begin by getting a diverse group of people together — both young people and adults. Talk about the situation and why study circles might be helpful.

*Use these questions to focus your conversation:*

- What is the situation or issue we want to address?
- What are we trying to accomplish? How would study circles help?
- Who needs to be involved?
- What would be the best way to reach young people? (In the neighborhood or community? Through schools? Through an organization?)
- Are there others already working on this issue? Could we join forces?
- What resources would it take to get a program going?

## ***Step 2: Clarify your issue***

### **“Naming” the issue**

As a group, spend some time talking about the issue or concern you want to address.

Many youth study circle programs don't use the term “study circle,” since it might suggest academic work, or just be too dull. They might use another term such as “roundtable” or “teen talk.” It doesn't really matter what you call your program, as long as it stays true to study circle principles. Choose a name that works for you.

- How do we usually talk about it?
- What words do we use to describe it?
- What can we call our program that makes it clear what we will be talking about, and appeals to lots of different kinds of people?

*For example:*

- A program on “school climate” might be called “How can we make \_\_\_ High School a place where everyone is welcome and all can succeed?”
- Youth study circles on race and diversity might be called, “Calling all Colors - Conversations on Diversity.”
- Study circles on violence prevention in an after-school program might be called, “Putting the Neighbor Back in the ‘Hood: How can we make our neighborhood a safer place?”
- Community study circles on healthy youth development might be called, “Every Voice Counts: Teens and adults working together to build community.”
- Ongoing, extracurricular study circles in a high school, talking about race relations, gay and lesbian issues, substance abuse and other issues might be called, “Y.E.S. — Youth Empowered to Succeed.”

### **Discussion materials**

The best study circle discussion materials are simple and straightforward, and tied to real life. The goal is to move the conversation along, and help participants examine an issue from many points of view.

Many organizers begin with discussion materials from SCRC, and adapt them to their local situation. In some cases, study circles with young people use questions, brainstorming, and other group exercises to help shape the conversation. Or, they rely on articles, videos, or other material to examine an issue. Consult SCRC for advice on this aspect of your work, or visit our web site, [www.studycircles.org](http://www.studycircles.org), to see how existing discussion guides are structured.

**Multiple-session study circles usually follow this general progression:**

Youth study circles usually last approximately one-to-two hours. In school programs, study circles are timed to fit into the school schedule.

- **Session 1:** Getting to know one another, setting ground rules, and connecting to the issue. Why is this issue important to me?
- **Session 2:** Examining the issue/concern from many points of view. What do different people say about this?
- **Session 3:** Picturing the future. What are some different ways we could make progress on this issue?
- **Session 4:** Conclusion and looking ahead. What have we learned and where do we go from here? What can we do to make a difference?

The format can be adapted to suit the setting, the scheduling, and the goals of the program. You can combine these parts into fewer sessions; or, if the group stays together, they might talk about a range of topics over time.

### ***Step 3: Build your team***

#### **Coalition/Steering Group**

A diverse steering group plans all aspects of the program, from start to finish. Here “diversity” means many things: age, race, group, gender, institutional connections, group identity, etc. *Ideally, the steering group reflects the diversity of the people you hope to recruit.*

*For example:*

- A program in a high school might have a steering group that includes students of different ages and groups, teachers, administrators, staff, perhaps a parent or school volunteer, and a guidance counselor.
- Study circles on race relations in a YWCA could be organized by a racially diverse committee of young people and adults, including YW staff.
- A community-based program on improving student achievement could have several students as part of the organizing group, along with school officials and community members.

If the study circles are sponsored by an institution — school, youth organization, congregation, service club, after-school program — it is a good idea to find adult sponsors or “champions” for the program. A “champion” brings visibility and credibility to the study circles. S/he also can advocate for the program within the institution, and show how study circles might connect to other aspects of institutional life and the broader community.

#### **Coordinator**

You might want to identify someone to be the main contact for your program. In some cases a young person and an adult share this responsibility.

#### ***Step 4: Make a plan***

Once your team is together, it’s a good idea to talk through the goals of your program, and write them down.

*These questions will help focus your thinking:*

- What are we trying to accomplish?
- How many people do we want to involve? Over what time period?
- What is the mix of young people and adults?
- What kinds of diversity do we want in the program?
- What kinds of change do we think the study circles will lead to?
- How will we know if we are successful?

*Besides goals, there are a few other key questions to answer as you start your organizing.*

- What is the setting for the study circles?
- What is the right timing for this effort?
- Do we expect action to result from the dialogue, and if so, how will we support it?
- What kinds of resources do we have? What else do we need?

## ***Step 5: Share the work***

Now that you have put together a diverse steering group, and laid out a plan for your study circles, there are a few important organizing tasks to think through.

### **COMMUNICATIONS**

The communications work you will do has three major aims:

- Building awareness, interest and excitement
- Getting the word out — to help recruit facilitators and participants
- Telling the story to the broader world

Whether you are explaining the study circles to one person, developing a description of the program for a newsletter, or speaking to a group of people, focus on a few key points:

- What is the situation that has led us to do this?
- What are study circles and how do they work?
- What is the issue we are talking about?
- Where will the dialogue lead?

Once you have the key points clear, think about *how* to get the message out. Be creative! What would catch *your* attention? Ask young people how to reach their peers. Remember, you are looking for all kinds of participants, so you need to use a variety of methods to reach different groups.

*Many youth study circle programs have developed effective and creative communication strategies, such as:*

- developing a web page about their program.
- planning an event that celebrates and draws attention to the study circles.
- designing T-shirts and lapel buttons to spread the word.
- making a video that tells the story.
- using local TV or radio to talk about the program.

### **Telling the story to the broader world**

Don't overlook the chance to tell others about the study circles. If you are working within an institution or organization, it's important to keep key leaders informed. Make sure they know about

the benefits of the program, the outcomes, and the power of the process. Invite them to important events, or better yet, invite them to participate! The best way to keep a program growing, deepening, and reaching more people is to inform and include people who make long-term decisions for the institution.

Use the local media to tell the story to the community. An effective newspaper or television story can build broad community support.

## **BUDGET**

Even a small program can incur some expenses. Take some time to make a list of anything you can think of that might cost money.

*Here are some typical items:*

- Copying
- Postage
- Posters/fliers
- Room rental
- Food/refreshments
- Room decorations
- Telephone calls
- Childcare
- Transportation costs

## **Funding ideas**

In a community-based study circle program, the organizing group usually raises funds to support the effort. If the study circles are organized at a school, youth organization, congregation or other institution, some funds may be available through the general operating budget of the institution. Additional funding sometimes comes from service clubs, local charities, corporate sponsors, and local foundations. Remember that involving many different kinds of young people will be a strong selling point when you approach a local funder.

## **DOCUMENTATION**

Documenting and evaluating your program will help you improve it over time. Keep track of how many, and what kinds of participants are involved. Make a list of action ideas and outcomes from the study circles. Find out how the facilitators are doing. All of this information will give you a sense of how things are going. You'll be in a better place to make adjustments, and improve the program. And, you'll be better able to advocate for your program with funders or decision makers.

Documenting can be very simple. You can use a form that participants fill out at the conclusion of the circles. Or, if you want more detailed information, you can go to an expert. For example, study circle programs in schools often ask someone in the social studies or psychology department to help with documenting and evaluating their program.

## **RECRUITING**

***Recruiting participants is the central task in organizing a program!*** The simplest way to approach this task is to talk about and make a list of all the different kinds of participants or groups you hope to attract. Once you have your list, step back, and ask yourselves, “Who is missing?” Then, beside each group list a person, organization, network, or another way you could reach that group.

How you recruit participants depends on the setting for the study circles. If you are working within an institution, use all the existing channels to reach out. (If your study circles are community-based, recruiting young people into the circles will be one part of the overall recruitment plan.) In every case, *think about who you are trying to reach, how to reach them, and who is the best person to invite them.*

While publicity is important, *the best way to recruit someone is to invite them personally, one-on-one.* Find several people to help with recruitment, and ask each of them to be responsible for a certain number of invitations.

Some youth programs have boosted recruitment by offering incentives, such as T-shirts, hats, lapel buttons, movie passes. Sometimes, young people get extra academic or community-service credit for facilitating or participating in a school or community program.

## PLANNING FOR ACTION

The kinds of action that follow youth study circles range from individual to group actions. Much depends on the setting and duration of the program, its goals, the number of participants, and how much support there is for the program.

When organizing a youth program, it is important to think about action and change early in the planning. Changes in attitudes and behaviors, and new relationships happen in almost every study circle. This is a natural result of the dialogue process. Other kinds of action and change, such as small-group activities or new projects, can also come from youth study circles. Organizers need to anticipate what kind of support these activities would need, and think about how to provide that support.

*The following questions and examples will help you think about action and change:*

- Are we hoping to make an impact beyond changes in individuals' behaviors and attitudes?
- What kinds of support can we offer to help action ideas take hold?
- What is already going on that we could build on?
- Who else needs to be involved in helping action ideas succeed? How do we get them on board?

*Examples:*

- A school-wide conversation on “school climate,” with many students, faculty, staff, and administrators, could lead to: changes in individual behaviors and attitude; staff development programs; a student peer mediation program; and comprehensive revision of school policy. (Individual, small-group, and institutional outcomes)
- A modest program (1 to 3 circles at a time) on race and diversity, run by a Boys and Girls Club, could result in: changes in individual attitudes; a new interracial “buddy system.” (individual and small-group outcomes)
- Ongoing study circles in a congregation-based teen group could lead to: deeper understanding of dialogue; better listening skills; increased understanding of the topic; and stronger relationships. (individual and small-group outcomes)

### Outcomes from study circles:

- Changes in individual attitudes and behaviors
- New relationships
- New projects or collaborations
- Changes in institutional policy

## After the circles

Many youth study circle programs hold a concluding event.

*A concluding event has many goals:*

- to give participants a chance to talk about the process, and what they learned.
- to talk about and plan for action.
- to thank facilitators and others for participating.
- to look ahead to future activities.
- to celebrate with food and fun!

## FACILITATION

Study circle facilitators are *key* to the success of your program. They guide the conversation, and ensure that the group has a productive discussion. Facilitators must act *neutral*; that is, they don't join the conversation by adding their opinions or taking sides.

Facilitators come from all walks of life and all backgrounds. In youth programs, young people usually facilitate, often working in pairs with an adult or another young person. When a young person and an adult co-facilitate, they model teamwork, and help to set the right tone in the circle.

Sometimes in intergenerational study circles, adults tend to take over the conversation. With the help of ground rules, strong facilitators can make sure everyone gets a fair hearing.

It is possible for adults to facilitate young people in study circles, but it can be challenging. Since the adult is perceived to have "power," young people may feel uncomfortable, and hold back or edit their comments. This can be intensified if the adult in question is an authority figure, such as a teacher. It can also be a challenge if the topic is one where young people and adults are at odds with one another. It's possible to avoid this situation if the adult facilitator is particularly sensitive to these possibilities, and works hard to set a safe and welcoming tone.

**NOTE:** Two resources, *Training Young People to Facilitate Study Circles* and *A Guide for Training Study Circle Facilitators*, are available from the Study Circles Resource Center. For more information, visit our web site, [www.studycircles.org](http://www.studycircles.org)

## **KICKOFF**

Kickoffs are designed to draw attention to the program, build excitement, and sometimes generate more recruits. You will need to decide whether a kickoff would add to your program. Will it help you meet your goals?

Young people should play a key role in planning this event. The kickoff can be brief, and still grab the attention of the audience. Be creative, and keep the message clear and simple. Be ready to sign people up.

## **LOGISTICS**

Pay special attention to *scheduling* and *transportation*. Lots of youth activities are held on weekends to accommodate students' school schedules, extra-curricular activities, and part-time jobs. When study circles happen in an institutional setting, the circles will have to be scheduled to match that institution's timetable.

**NOTE:** in school settings, scheduling is everything! See pages 16-19 for different ways to work within the school day.

Remember, young people are trying to balance school, sports, jobs, family responsibilities and homework — and still carve out time to take part in study circles. Find ways to make participation easier. Look for meeting spaces that are safe, comfortable, the right size, “friendly,” and easy to get to.

Keep transportation in mind when you're deciding where to hold the study circles. Find locations that are served by public transportation. You can also use car pooling or school buses.

### ***Step 6: Hold a round***

Study circles with young people may be organized in several ways.

- You can organize them in rounds, holding a number of study circles at the same time. When many people talk about the same issue at the same time, the impact is greater. It would make sense to take this approach if your goal were to address an institutional concern, such as school climate.
- Youth organizations with regular programming might build ongoing study circles into their activities.
- Conferences, summits, and other one-day events could build one or more study circles into the day.

## ***Step 7: Sustain your program***

The most effective youth study circles are the ones that keep going over time, especially if they become a permanent part of the institution. The program is more likely to develop and improve when the institution “owns” it.

Take some time with your steering group to pause and reflect on the program. Ask key people for feedback and consult your evaluations.

*Ask yourselves:*

- What are we doing well?
- What could we do better?
- What would it take to make improvements?
- How can we expand the effort and deepen the impact?

**NOTE:** The information here complements *Organizing Community-wide Dialogue for Action and Change*, SCRC’s “how-to” guide for organizers of community study circle programs. (To view this guide, go to [www.studycircles.org](http://www.studycircles.org). To order a copy, call the Study Circles Resource Center 860-928-2616.)



## Part 3: Settings for youth study circles

Whatever the setting for organizing youth study circles, certain key principles apply:

- Set clear goals for your program.
- Make sure that young people’s leadership and voice are central.
- Include all kinds of people.
- Emphasize respect for all points of view.
- Be clear about the ways dialogue might connect to action.

### Schools

Schools are one of the most common settings for study circles with young people. However, bringing study circles into today’s schools can be challenging. Every day, schools feel mounting pressure to meet tougher academic standards, to get by with limited funds, to find and retain the best quality teachers and administrators, and often, to help students with family and social problems.

Schools are also called upon to develop young people into critical thinkers, lifelong learners, and involved citizens in a fast-paced and often confusing world. Such demands shape school culture, and tend to squeeze out “programs” such as study circles.

**It’s a mistake, however, to see study circles as an “add-on” to the already overburdened school day. Study circles — active listening, critical thinking, working together across differences, identifying common ground, and making a difference on something important — combine many education objectives in a powerful learning experience. Educators who incorporate study circles into school life find that the process helps to empower students and enhance learning.**

Study circles work in school settings in many different ways, and accomplish different things.

*Here are some examples:*

- **As an extra-curricular activity, before, during or after the school day: These programs are often small-scale, and address such topics as race and diversity, substance abuse or other issues the students select. Participation is voluntary,**

and the circles happen throughout the school year. Such programs are relatively easy to organize and depend heavily on adult leadership — a teacher, guidance counselor, or parent.

**NOTE:** this is *not* the same as a support group, which has therapeutic goals.

- **As a school-wide conversation (one time, occasional, or annual):** A school-wide conversation is a major undertaking, especially if the school is large. It means involving all members of the school community — students, faculty, staff, and administration — in study circles addressing a common concern. Participation can be mandatory or voluntary. In school-wide programs, students are effective as organizers, facilitators, and participants. These efforts can be scheduled in many different ways: once a week for several consecutive weeks; as part of half-day assemblies or other whole-school activities; or once a day for several days in a row. School-wide conversations are a good way to address an issue that affects the institution as a whole — such as school climate, violence prevention, or dress code. To be successful, there must be a *real* commitment from administrators and teachers to listen to, and act on the results of the dialogue.
- **In the classroom, tied to academics:** Study circle methodology and principles can be adapted to the classroom. Study circles have been used in American studies classes, government, civics, history, social studies, world cultures and others. Students benefit from both *content* and *process*, learning research methods, issue framing, and facilitation. This use of study circles is tied to teachers' interests, and works best when the content connects directly to academic requirements.
- **As part of large events (assemblies, opening day, special events):** Study circles can be built into a school event, such as an opening day assembly, to provide a way to include student "voices." This calls for careful planning of the event's agenda, training student facilitators, developing a framework for the conversation, and providing a method of reporting out.
- **As part of community service or service-learning projects:** This application of study circles is a way to connect students and their schools to the community. Adult organizers, teachers, or mentors play a central role in these

programs which take place outside the school. Participating in community or neighborhood study circles for academic credit is a good example.

- **As a permanent structure for connecting student voices to school decisions:** Sometimes, study circles become a permanent part of the institution, providing a powerful way for students to participate in school life, and have a voice in decisions and policies. The circles meet regularly, are student-led with adult support, and examine a variety of school, community, and national issues. Organizing study circles this way opens communication among students, student government, administrators and teachers, the school board, and the community. Students participate in solving problems, and develop a greater sense of empowerment. In this way, the study circles are a vehicle for ongoing, informed, participatory citizenship.

**Here are some things to keep in mind when working with schools:**

- Study circles in schools need support and buy-in from school administrators.
- It's important to find the right person to start a program. It could be a principal, a teacher, a guidance counselor, or a parent. Ask around, and find out who would be open to the idea.
- It's a good idea to find an adult "champion" to help the program develop. This person can be a teacher, a parent, an administrator, or another person with close ties to the school. The primary duty of this person is to advocate for the program with administrators and other leaders.
- Spend time building support among teachers. They are critical to the success of most programs, and are sometimes resistant. Teachers might not be supportive because...
  - (1) they already have too much to do.
  - (2) they are afraid they will have to deal with issues or situations they don't feel qualified to handle.
  - (3) they are more comfortable with the traditional teacher-student relationship.

**Address these concerns by explaining how the process works, and the benefits it offers. Invite teachers to take part in study circles to acquaint them with the process. They can also observe student study circles.**

- Schools have constantly changing populations. This means that programs like study circles need to be “institutionalized” if they are going to have long-term impact.
- Parents can be allies. Often a parent can get the ear of an administrator when others fail. Having parental involvement and support is helpful.
- If the study circles are tied to curriculum or academic standards, they stand a greater chance of success. Find a way to connect them to something schools already have to do, instead of treating them as an “add-on.”
- Study circles work well with student government, and bring student voices into school decision making.
- Study circles are made to order for addressing school climate and related issues. The process builds a positive learning environment by fostering mutual respect. Study circles help students talk about stereotyping, harassment and bullying, race and ethnicity, and cliques.

### **Youth organizations**

Many organizations serving youth incorporate study circles into their programming. Sometimes this is driven by the mission of the organization. For example, the Urban League, the YWCA, and the National Conference for Community and Justice are organizations dedicated, in part, to improving race relations. Study circles on race and diversity are a natural addition to their youth work.

Other youth organizations, such as faith-based youth groups, after-school programs, Boys & Girls Clubs, and 4-H Clubs add study circles to their ongoing programs. Topics might change according to current events, the interests of the participants, or the mission of the organization.

### **Conferences, leadership training, other youth activities**

There are all kinds of activities, workshops, conferences and other youth events that are enhanced by adding small-group discussions. A study circle offers the opportunity to work in small groups, to experience dialogue, to have the benefit and example of group facilitation, and to learn from peers.

Study circles are particularly appropriate in civic activities, student government conferences, leadership training programs, community advocacy work, and many other youth programs aimed at youth empowerment and citizenship development.

## **Community programs**

For advice on involving young people in a community-based program, see *Organizing Community-wide Dialogue for Action and Change*. You can view the guide on the Study Circles Resource Center web site ([www.studycircles.org](http://www.studycircles.org)), or you can order a copy from SCRC. For more information, please call 860-928-2616.

### **NOTE: Study circles with younger children**

Sometimes adults who have been working with teenagers borrow some of the elements of study circles to use in small-group discussions with younger children (5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> graders). These small-group experiences prepare children to take part in study circles when they are older.

*There are some important distinctions in this adaptation:*

- The goal of these groups is usually educational.
- The language and concepts in these discussions should be age appropriate.
- The “facilitator” is almost always an adult, and the role is often *not* neutral. In fact, the “facilitator/leader” often becomes a “teacher” in these groups, since the participants have limited knowledge and life experience to draw upon.
- Like study circles, these small-group discussions may use ground rules, and emphasize dialogue. Through the process, there are often changes in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.



## Part 4: Resources

### SCRC discussion guides

\*guides designed specifically with young people in mind

*\*A Community for All Generations — Teens and Adults Working Together: A Guide for Public Dialogue and Problem Solving, 2002.*

*Building Strong Neighborhoods for Families with Children: A Guide for Public Dialogue and Problem Solving, 2000.*

*Facing the Challenge of Racism and Race Relations: Democratic Dialogue and Action for Stronger Communities, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. 1992, 1994, 1997.*

*Helping Every Student Succeed: Schools and Communities Working Together, 2002.*

*\*Reaching Across Boundaries: Talk to Create Change — A Mix It Up Handbook, 2003. (Topsfield Foundation, Inc., and the Southern Poverty Law Center)*

*Toward a More Perfect Union in an Age of Diversity: A Guide for Building Stronger Communities through Public Dialogue, 1997. (Topsfield Foundation, Inc., and Marci Reaven)*

*\*Youth Issues, Youth Voices: A Guide for Engaging Youth and Adults in Public Dialogue and Problem Solving, 1996.*

### SCRC “how-to” guides

*A Guide for Training Study Circle Facilitators, 1998.*

*Organizing Community-wide Dialogue for Action and Change: A Step-by-Step Guide, 2001.*

*Training Young People to Facilitate Study Circles, 2003.*

For more information, or to order any of these publications, please visit the Study Circles Resource Center web site ([www.studycircles.org](http://www.studycircles.org)), or call SCRC (860-928-2616).