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## Saint Paul Neighborhood News

### Choices for Community: A Regional Conversation on Housing, Schools and Race

By Dick Little, Executive Director, Education and Housing Equity Project

During the first half of 1997, over 500 citizens from 35 different communities participated in public discussions focused on the challenges of school achievement, racial equity and housing segregation in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. These discussions included locally sponsored 'community circles', a metropolitan citizens' forum held at Macalester College in May, and town meetings held in Minneapolis and St. Paul schools in September.

The Community Circle Collaborative process reflects a conscientious effort to recapture the benefits of a town-hall forum while also insuring all voices are heard.

The Community Circle Collaborative is a metro-wide dialogue project that engages citizens from all walks of life, in deliberative discussions about the future of the Twin Cities metropolitan area. A partnership between the Education and Housing Equity Project and dozens of other regional and community-based organizations, the Collaborative has sponsored community circles charged with discussing two central questions:

- **What are the impacts of existing patterns of residential, economic and racial segregation on the educational achievement and life opportunities of Twin Cities area children and families?**
- **What can or should we do, as individuals and as a community, to enhance educational success and housing and economic opportunities for all children in the Twin Cities area?**

In the spring of 1997, citizens met as many as five or six times to deliberate



these issues. With the help of foundation funding and trained facilitators, the community circles identified issues related to housing and educational equity that fell into four distinct groups. Running through all of these groups were questions of individual and institutional racism. These included:

- Issues related to regional growth and equity, such as public and private investment in development, employment, social relations (e.g., media stereotypes and crime) and services (e.g., transit)
- Systemic issues related to housing and neighborhood quality, social isolation and segregation (e.g., transience, concentrations of poverty, and exclusionary regulations)
- Systemic issues related to education — those that focus on the school as an educational institution — and those that focus on the school as a member of the larger community
- Issues related to individuals, such as substance abuse, lack of self-esteem, dysfunctional families, prejudice and discrimination.

Some of the findings are best expressed in the words of community circle and forum participants:

*"We are in deep denial. We believe we aren't like Detroit, but we are; it's just happening more slowly here."*

*"It's important to get the advantaged to understand how they're affected by [the] plight of low-income minorities."*

*"Describing the problem of the inner city as a result of abstract 'racism' is not helpful because fighting 'racism' seems a futile exercise."*

*"Suburbanites like to have the benefits of the city but do not like to pay for them."*

*"More affluent neighborhoods [have] essentially accepted socio-economic redlining"*

*"You can't learn if you are hungry."*

Recommendations for action may be found in EHEP's report on the first round of the Community Circle Collaborative initiative, available by the end of the year. A second round of discussions is planned for 1998, which will culminate with a Citizens' Summit co-sponsored by the Collaborative, the Minnesota Meeting and Minnesota Public Radio's Civic Journalism Initiative. Conclusions will then be shared with public, private and non-profit sector leaders.

For more information or copies of the EHEP report or discussion guide call the Education and Housing Equity Project at 612/871-2519, or e-mail: micah@mntn.org. ●