

## **Kuna, Idaho**

### **Executive Summary**

Kuna, a small community outside of Boise, has one of the oldest on-going Study Circles programs in the country. The program makes for a compelling case because of its unique positioning within the community as a neutral vehicle for local decision makers to solicit public feedback on a range of controversial issues. The Study Circles program in Kuna, which was launched in 1999, has evolved into a local institution that has no formal authority, but has earned significant credibility among a diverse group of decision makers as a forum to engage constituents in a constructive fashion.

Over the course of the past five years, Study Circles have been convened in Kuna about a dozen times on issues ranging from school funding to urban growth – each one engaging 30 to 115 residents. The program is operated by an independent, non-profit organization that was specifically created for the purpose of sponsoring community dialogue. Whereas other Study Circles programs seek to mobilize residents behind recommendations, Study Circles organizers in Kuna have responded to a highly contentious political environment by explicitly deciding that the program would not choose the issues upon which the public would deliberate. Rather, the group helps decision makers that bring an issue to Study Circles to frame questions in a neutral way, reaches out to the community to participate in the dialogue, facilitates discussions, and then reports back to the decision makers on the public's priorities.

To a surprising degree, the Kuna approach to Study Circles seems to have made an impact in the community. Many decision makers in Kuna have found that it is in their interest to take controversial issues to Study Circles and, more often than not, have taken very seriously the feedback they have received. Strong priorities voiced in Study Circles have affected the thinking of local decision makers and influenced their actions in several instances.

Unlike other communities, Kuna's Study Circles program is neither embedded in a public agency, on the one hand, nor left to the initiative of active members of the community, on the other. Rather, the creation of an independent non-profit organization has allowed the program to distance itself from any individual institution or position, while maintaining a tangible home for the process. The decision to not actively choose the issue on which the public will deliberate has allowed the program to maintain its neutrality, while promoting the idea that the approach to public deliberation is useful for all kinds of policy issues.

The Kuna Study Circles program is certainly not perfect. The program's reliance on local decision makers to bring issues to Study Circles has meant that some issues that may be ripe for dialogue do not get addressed. On a related point, the non-profit that organizes the program has struggled at times to effectively operate because of its lack of a formal institutional base. Despite considerable creativity and commitment, the group's limited resources may have kept the program from engaging a more substantial portion of the community and reaching newer residents who have less of an investment in the city.

This case study will provide a brief profile of the community and a history of the Study Circles program in Kuna. It will specifically focus on how Study Circles have been used to address controversial issues related to the Kuna school system. Finally, it will assess Kuna's experience with Study Circles in terms of four critical areas:

- **Participation:** How, if at all, have Study Circles changed the range of actors that form opinions upon public issues or influence community decision making on those issues?
- **Deliberation:** How, if at all, has deliberation introduced new considerations, or shifted the balance of existing considerations, in decision making processes?
- **Embeddedness:** How, if at all, are participation and deliberation incorporated into the practical and moral reasoning processes of individuals, institutions and organizations in the community?
- **Outcomes:** Have shifts to greater participation and deliberation resulted in any differences in the actions of local government, civic associations or other stakeholder organizations? Have they resulted in changes in important areas of public concern?

Research for this study was conducted through two rounds of phone interviews, a two-day site visit, and a review of relevant documents related to the Study Circles program and newspaper articles written about the events related to the program. A list of the people interviewed for this case study is available in the appendix.

### **Community Profile**

Less than 40 years ago, the community of Kuna, Idaho, had a population of fewer than 600 people. Since then, this formerly sleepy agricultural town outside of Boise has grown by leaps and bounds thanks to its close proximity to the state capital and its low housing costs. Between 1990 and 2000, Kuna grew from 2,000 to more than 5,000 residents. Over the next two years, the city expanded by close to 40 percent, making it the fastest growing city in the State of Idaho and one of the fastest growing cities in the country. Kuna's population is currently closing in on 10,000 people. All in all, the community has grown to more than 15 times its size in 1970 with almost all of that growth taking place over the past 15 years.

Kuna's explosive growth has, in many ways, changed the character and identity of the community. The number of housing units in Kuna tripled since 1980. The Kuna fire department, formally a volunteer operation, recently hired four full-time firefighters and replaced their chief. The number of young people in the city's school system also increased substantially and is projected to continue to increase by 100 students a year into the near future.

Describing how the community has changed over the years, one long-time resident said: "Ten years ago, I could name every person in town. I don't think I hardly know anyone anymore. ... I've been going to the same church for many years ... I feel like a stranger there now." Many older residents complained that Kuna has become a bedroom community to Boise. Newer

residents, they said, tend to commute to work in the city and only invest time in Kuna to send their children to school.

Kuna is located in the Treasure Valley at the foot of the Boise Mountains. It has a small town center along a main street surrounded by newly constructed sub-developments and sparsely populated agricultural land. By far, the largest employer in the community is the Kuna school system with 255 employees in 2002. A local grocery is the next largest employer with 23 employees. Like most of the rest of the state of Idaho, almost 95% of Kuna residents are white with a small Hispanic community.

The public life of a small town is tight-knit. Elected positions, community groups, local commissions and other activities pull from the same pool of active residents again and again. Often the board meeting of a local business association can transition to a meeting of the local historical society with very little shift in the composition of the room. As a consequence, political conflicts in small towns like Kuna can have major repercussions.

As Kuna has grown, its political life has become increasingly contentious. Kuna leaders have had to deal with an entirely new set of challenges and issues that had not been urgent in the past. Questions ranging from how to fund the expansion of the local school system to how the community should manage its growth have transformed the task of governing here. The challenge of determining the future identify and direction of the community has grown significantly more complex and more contested.

For more than 20 years, local saloon-owner Greg Nelson served as mayor of Kuna. Nelson is widely credited in the community for his many years of service and commitment to the town. In recent years, however, his style of leadership and positions on growth became unpopular with some residents. Many local leaders and residents resented Nelson's tight control over the community and tendency to view emerging leaders as a challenge to his authority. One local leader described his interaction with the Mayor saying, "It's taken years to develop a relationship with the mayor. It took a long, long time for him to realize that I'm not here to do his job or compete with him."

Opposition coalesced in 1999 to challenge Nelson for Mayor, but was unsuccessful. (Nelson won with more than 60 percent of the 814 voters who participated in the election.) The following year, Nelson actively campaigned against and defeated members of the City Council who had become aligned with the opposition. Two factions within the community had developed – with some supporting the Mayor and his allies and others opposing them. Over the course of the next few years, community infighting between the two factions increased in intensity.

This tension in Kuna can be seen in the unusual level of open conflict that has occurred over the past few years. Last year, a series of investigations were launched into the practices of the city's mayor and city council. Among the charges made by opponents were that public business was being conducted in a local bar owned by the mayor and that public funds were being misused. Investigations were also undertaken of school board members for violations of the state's open meetings act. Additionally, Kuna has seen at least two campaigns to recall individual members of the city council and school board in the past four years. Lawsuits have been filed to halt the

community's growth and challenge annexation rights. Finally, campaigns to pass bond measures to support the school system's growth and the construction of a new city hall have divided the community.

In the fall of 2003, the opposition successfully unseated Nelson and his allies on the city council. Within months of the election, talk of a petition to recall the newly elected representatives had already begun.

Amid all of this change and conflict, Kuna has quietly initiated a unique experiment in deliberative democracy. For the past five years, hundreds of Kuna residents have taken part in discussions about the future of the community. Some of the most important issues facing Kuna have been addressed by Study Circles, including school funding and the development of the city's comprehensive plan. The community has embedded the Study Circles deliberative process by creating an institutional home for them, a 501(c)(3) charged with working with Kuna leaders to conduct dialogue on important issues as they arise.

### **History of Study Circles Program**

In 1998, Kuna's new Superintendent of Schools began meeting with a group of residents to talk about what they could do to address an array of challenges facing the city. Many were concerned that communication within the community was poor – that the major community institutions in Kuna were not talking to each other. Others were worried about the state of the public schools and increased drug use among young people. The community was changing and something needed to be done to preserve Kuna's character and plan for the future.

Their answer was the creation of Kuna ACT (the Alliance for a Cohesive Community Team). According to the organization's charter, Kuna ACT was launched "to improve the communication in our community by giving people a greater voice in making decisions, helping residents and organizations work together to solve problems, [and] getting citizens involved in long-term planning." It would do so by providing "the community with practical recommendations for actions, which organizations, institutions and individuals can take to improve the Kuna community."

Among the original board members of Kuna ACT were the superintendent, a member of the City Council, members of the County Sheriff's department, and the high school's student body president. Early funders of Kuna ACT programs were the City of Kuna, the Kuna School District, the Sheriff's Department, a local sanitation company and Idaho Power.

Kuna ACT's first round of Study Circles followed the traditional model created by the Study Circles Resource Center. Dubbed "Keeping a Quality Kuna," the five-session round of Study Circles was launched in September 1999. Approximately 80 residents of the community participated in the discussions. Each of the sessions focused upon a different aspect of the community: quality education, quality safety, quality community, and quality government. The final session focused on "making a difference," asking participants how they could move "from words to actions."

More than 100 recommendations for action were generated through this first round of circles and reported to community decision makers. According to the program's coordinator, some of the most important public recommendations involved increased communication between law enforcement, government and other community institutions, public involvement in planning for the community's growth, creating a community theme and mission statement, volunteer service activities, and increased attention to disaster planning. While an Action Forum was convened at the end of the round to mobilize participants behind the recommendations, the program found that managing citizen task forces took more resources than were available to the small organization.

An additional 80 students also began meeting in circles in the fall as part of the high school's leadership class. "Teen Talk" engaged students in discussions about challenges facing young people, school quality and drug use among youth.

Following the first round of Study Circles, Kuna ACT found itself in a delicate political position. By an unhappy coincidence, "Keeping a Quality Kuna" had been held at the same time as the local campaigns for mayor were moving into high gear. More importantly, Kuna ACT had launched its new program just as a major controversy was unfolding involving the Kuna School Board and a contentious debate over a plan to fund the construction of a new high school. While attempting to play a neutral role in the community, the organization found itself with a president – the Superintendent of Schools – who was at the heart of the conflict.

Mayor Nelson and his allies in the community came to view the Study Circles program with suspicion, believing that it was being used to promote an oppositional agenda. Critics of Kuna ACT argued that at least some of its members wished to use the public dialogue to criticize Nelson and advocate for increased spending in the community. Indeed, the candidate who lost to Mayor Nelson in the 1999 election (and who would later defeat him in 2004) served as an early Study Circles facilitator. A board member of Kuna ACT would later win a seat on the city council, defeating one of Nelson's allies.

While it seems to be true that many backers of the Study Circles program were highly critical of the Mayor, the organization took considerable pride in its position as a neutral broker for the community. Kuna ACT supporters argued that the organization has been steadfastly neutral from the beginning. Supporting this claim, there seems to be little evidence to suggest that outcomes from the program were biased or manipulated in one direction or another.

Kuna ACT members recounted stressful testimony before the city council in which they were charged with being biased and driven by political motivations. According to one supporter of Kuna ACT, the organization's leaders were "shown the door" in 1999 when they presented results of the first dialogues to the city council. He said that Mayor Nelson felt threatened by the new group and responded by shutting them out. Said another supporter: "One of the hurdles we had to overcome was mistrust that circles were a vehicle to promote our agenda. Because of the people who were on council, people were suspicious. They felt if someone was going to work hard at something it must be because they want power. It took a good two years to allay that permanently."

The initial opposition and distrust faced by Kuna ACT led the organization to adopt a policy that would strengthen its stance of neutrality. Rather than choosing what issues the public should deliberate about, the organization became an intermediary between public officials and the community. According to the organization's new policy, Kuna ACT would only convene Study Circles around issues brought to it by community institutions. Periodically, local leaders from the school board, city council or planning commission would come to Kuna ACT with a difficult or controversial policy questions that they believed requires community discussion. Kuna ACT would then convene a dialogue around the subject and report back on the results of the deliberations.

This positioning of the organization allowed Kuna ACT to distance itself from any perception that it was manufacturing problems for the community or identifying with a certain position or policy. Additionally, it put the group in the position of offering a service to decision makers – providing them with a venue to address difficult issues on which they need feedback.

While the Study Circles program got off to a rough start with the mayor and council, according to many who were interviewed, Nelson would later come to support the program. Among steps taken by Kuna ACT members to convince critics of their neutrality were testimony before the city council, attempts to increase the transparency of the reporting process, and “a lot of personal meetings.” Additionally, the Superintendent of Schools and other board members who had been closely identified with the local conflicts distanced themselves from Kuna ACT in order to avoid tainting the organization. In recent years, Nelson voted to support the funding of the organization and was more receptive to input from circles, according to Kuna ACT members.

Following “Keeping a Quality Kuna,” the group organized circles to address some of the major issues identified by participants out of the first round. With these circles, the organization began using a format that diverted from the traditional Study Circles model. Rather than conducting a series of decentralized sessions over the course of several weeks, the group adopted an approach in which participants were convened for only one or two evenings at a central location. In the new model, participants listened to a presentation on the topic of discussion and then were randomly divided into groups that met in separate rooms at the site to deliberate. Presentations were given by local leaders with expertise on the issue, who were coached by Kuna ACT to stick to factual descriptions and avoid editorializing. Often local decision makers were available at the Study Circles to respond to questions and observe the discussions.

The primary advantage of this change in format was that it demanded a smaller time commitment on the part of participants. The use of presentations as the primary vehicle for “educating” participants allowed organizers to be more flexible with their choice of discussion topics (i.e. they did not need to rely on the Study Circles Resource Center to produce a discussion guide on the topic.) By convening all of the circles at a central location, participants were able to see everyone who was participating in the dialogues. On the other hand, the Kuna program lost the deeper, more sustained deliberation that is a hallmark of Study Circles programs.

Among the forums held to follow on the results of the initial round of circles at the beginning of 2000 were sessions on disaster planning on February 24, planning for the city's growth on March 9 and 16, and school funding on April 13 and 20. The school funding Study Circles facilitated discussion on the school bond controversy mentioned earlier after the school board brought the issue to Kuna ACT. These forums were the most controversial Study Circles that have been organized by the program in Kuna over the past five years and were undertaken in the midst of a campaign for another vote on the bond issue. The story of the Study Circles on the school bond is described in greater detail below.

Over the next four years, Study Circles were primarily used in Kuna to engage residents around planning and school issues. Planning issues were primarily brought to Study Circles by the local planning and zoning board and school issues were brought to Kuna ACT by the school board.

Planning issues were addressed four times following the initial "Keeping a Quality Kuna" round. The first forum on planning issues in the spring of 2000 brought together more than 65 people to discuss the "kind of Kuna they want." Discussion topics at the Study Circles included the development of a city theme for Kuna, the revitalization of downtown, future sites of commercial areas, and the location of a new Post Office. Strong priorities out of the circles included the construction of a new bridge, the creation of a farmers market, the development of a new city hall, and new sidewalks and gutters at a main intersection in the city.

The report out of this round of circles offered several quotes summarizing the consensus views of participants. "Many of our participants don't really want to see Kuna grow and change," said one group in the report. "[Participants in our group] moved into the area because of the small town life style and atmosphere. They acknowledged that growth was inevitable, but still don't like it and really want to see it managed more than it has been." Said another group: "We need to use the comprehensive plan to control development and make Kuna a unique community that welcomes its residents and provides services. Let's not become a bedroom community where all the commercial dollars go to Boise or Meridian."

The public was convened twice in 2002 by the Kuna Planning and Zoning Board to discuss the city's comprehensive plan. One strong priority that emerged from the Study Circles was the need for larger homes and lots. Most home construction in Kuna had been constrained by zoning laws to a relatively small plot of land. Participants in the forums expressed strong concern that this constraint meant that growing families would eventually have to leave the community, forcing children to switch school systems during crucial years of development.

According to members of the Planning and Zoning Board, previous efforts to increase housing diversity had been rejected by the City Council in the past because local developers had said that the market would not support larger homes. The city council was persuaded to act in 2002, however based on how strongly citizens prioritized the need for larger homes in the community. Other priorities out of the 2002 Study Circles included improvement of community parks, safer bike paths, the need to define the cities growth boundaries, broader use of the city's theme, and restoration of the downtown as a historic district.

Planning and zoning board members said they worked with Kuna ACT because the organization was able to bring more people into the process than the board could on its own. According to members of the groups, Study Circles are a convenient vehicle for involving the public because Kuna ACT takes the effort out of reaching out to residents to participate. As such, the organization provides a service to decision makers by taking on the burden of engaging the public for them.

Following the initial discussion on the school bond, three additional issues were brought to Study Circles by the Kuna school system. Study Circles were used to address another issue involving school bonds in April 2002, revisions to the Kuna Schools' drug testing policies in April 2003, and the School District's Facilities 5-Year Plan in May 2003.

In part, the school system's extensive use of Study Circles can be explained by the strong support shown by the Superintendent of Schools, who was a backer of the program from the beginning. The Superintendent seems to believe strongly in the value of greater community involvement in decision making. He and several members of the School Board came to view circles as a safe and respectful way to interact with the public and learn their views.

"I have found it really useful to understand where concerns are coming from. I can see if a concern is valid or if it is not based on valid information," said one member of the school board. He said one of the advantages of Study Circles is that they foster dialogue, rather than testimony. "The Board was sitting up there as targets" during formal meetings, he said.

Perhaps a more significant motivation for using Study Circles, however, is that the board came to see them as a vehicle for heading off criticism. Following the highly contentious bond issue in 1999, the school board, according to the same board member, became gun shy about addressing remotely controversial issues. Some members came to see Study Circles as a way to provide cover from charges that they had not consulted the community.

It is noteworthy that while Kuna ACT repeatedly engaged with the mayor and city council, the city government brought few issues to Study Circles outside of those brought by the planning and zoning board which serves the city in an advisory capacity. While opposition to the program from city leaders apparently softened over the years, public dialogue never became a meaningful part of how the city government went about its business.

The fall of 2003 began a transitional period for Kuna ACT and the Study Circles Program. Kuna ACT's President, who had led the organization since 2000, stepped down to run for city council – she was elected with the slate that defeated Mayor Nelson. Over the years, she had played a monumental role in increasing the organization's credibility and reach. Additionally, the organization's only employee, who coordinated the Study Circles program from the beginning, also left her position to finish her graduate studies. Kuna ACT elected new leaders in the winter, but has been slow to make any discernable progress forward. No Study Circles have been held since last Spring and Kuna ACT has to yet to show whether it can sustain itself under its new leadership. <<Need to revise this as Kuna ACT just held a Study Circles on a new school bond issue.>>

Nevertheless, the election of a new mayor and city council offer potential opportunities for Study Circles going forward. The former Kuna ACT president, who now serves on the city council, has actively campaigned for the city government to take more issues to Study Circles and the new mayor agreed to bringing the first topic, an urban renewal program, to the public in the coming months. Equally important, an array of other issues being dealt with by the schools and the planning board are expected to be brought to Study Circles over the course of the coming year.

**Table 1: Major Rounds of Study Circles in Kuna**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Sponsor Organization/s</b>
3/99 – 5/99	Pilot Study Circles	Kuna ACT
9/99 – 11/99	“Keeping a Quality Kuna”	Kuna ACT
11/99 – 4/00	“Teen Talk”	School Board
2/24/00	Disaster Planning Forum	Local Emergency Response Agencies
3/9/00 & 3/16/00	City Planning Study Circles	Planning and Zoning Board
4/13/00 & 4/20/00	School Bond Study Circles	School Board
4/17/01	Auditorium Study Circles	School Board
10/26/01	City Planning Study Circles	Kuna Futures
4/17/02	Level Pay on School Bonds and Juvenile Justice Program	School Board
6/13/02	Comprehensive Plan Study Circles	Planning & Zoning Board
4/17/03	Drug Testing/Code of Conduct	School Board
5/22/03	School District 5-Year Facilities Plan	School Board

**The School Bond**

The Kuna School District teaches more than 3,500 students in its four elementary schools, middle school, high school and evening school. Like the rest of the community, the school system has undergone substantial growing pains in recent years. The School District is governed by a five-member elected school board and managed by a Superintendent hired by the board. The school board conducts monthly meetings open to the public that follow a traditional format.

Doug Rutan was hired as the new Superintendent of Schools in Kuna in 1997. He had previously served as an Assistant Superintendent of Schools in the much larger neighboring community of Meridian. Soon after taking his position, Rutan and the school board were confronted with the challenge of dealing with the school system’s growth. The school population had grown from just over 2,000 students in 1991 to close to 3,000 students in 1999 and the schools were being forced to add four to six new teachers each year. Enrollment projections forecasted an increase of 100 students per year over the next decade. In the fall of 1999, the junior high and high school had every classroom in use during every school period.

In April 1998, the school board convened a facilities committee of 35 community members and staff that was charged with creating a facilities plan for the school district and making recommendations for a future bond issue. In August 1998, the facilities committee recommended a plan to construct a new 1,200 student high school and shift existing facilities to meet the enrollment needs of junior high, middle and elementary school students. A bond committee of community members and staff was also formed to manage the process of raising funds to support the purchase of the land and construction of the high school.

An election to approve the issue of a \$14 million bond for the facilities redevelopment was scheduled for September 16, 1999. The school board identified a parcel of land that it believed would be ideal for the new high school and moved to secure the land. However, the process that the board went through to purchase the land prior to the issue of the bond would later prove to be highly controversial. Critics would later charge that the board attempted to side-step public approval of the land purchase by arranging an unusual loan agreement with a bank.

According to Rutan, he wrote a newsletter article several months prior to the vote to explain the Board's activities to the public. He said he received no responses to the newsletter and was asked no questions from the community. He said no significant public comment was made on the issue at the Board's public meetings.

In the weeks leading up to the election, however, the local weekly newspaper published a front-page article questioning the board's actions and the legality of the land purchase. The article ignited a flurry of community concern and protest. Critics of the school board launched a campaign to defeat the bond measure, charging that the board had attempted to avoid public scrutiny by purchasing land without consulting their constituents. Led by the editor of the local newspaper, they charged that the board's actions violated the law or at least the intent of the law. Some members of the community suggested that a member on the school board who was involved in real estate stood to benefit from the land purchase. School board members countered that their actions fell within the law and that they had acted in the best interest of the school district.

The charges leveled against the school board were strong enough to lead to the defeat of the bond measure. By law, the bond required two-thirds approval from voters in order to pass. Of the 2,020 voters who participated in the election, only 55 percent supported the measure. Supporters of the bond said that they didn't have enough time to assuage doubts raised in the minds of voters prior to the vote.

Criticism of the school board's actions did not end with the election. School board critics campaigned to recall two members of the board for their actions related to the bond. Mayor Nelson actively took part in the campaign, going door to door to support the recall. At the same time, the school board conducted a community survey and held a public meeting to learn why the community had voted against the bond. Board members described the meeting as "ugly," "accusatory," and "angry." One board member said the board felt beaten up: "From that point on, I wasn't going to open myself up again." Rutan said he that he and several members of the board considered resigning from their positions.

The coordinator of the Kuna Study Circles program approached Rutan in the winter and proposed that he suggest to the board that they use Study Circles as a means for communicating with the community about the bond measure. He agreed. Despite some initial reluctance, Rutan was able to convince the Board to take the issue to Study Circles. Describing the Board's initial reaction, he said: "They were afraid ... Many of them wanted to just resign. They thought they were sticking their necks out with circles, but I said, 'Don't you think we need to know what people are thinking?' We didn't have a choice. So they reluctantly allowed us to go forward. They have been supporters ever since. Now whatever I bring up, they say: 'Bring it to Study Circles'."

Study Circles were held on the school bond issue on two nights, April 13 and 20, with almost 100 residents participating in six circles. Participants listened to a presentation from the school board about the school bond, the land deal, and the needs of the school system. Two scenarios were offered for meeting the needs of the growing school system, each with explanations of their strengths and costs. On April 13, participants generated questions for the facilities committee about their process and for the school board about the bond. They discussed the needs of the school system, the future of Kuna schools and the proposed scenarios. On April 20, the Study Circles came back together to discuss the school bond and their recommendations to the school board.

Most people who were interviewed about the Study Circles said that a majority of the participants in the forums were people who had already taken a position as a supporter or opponent of the school bond, but that many participants came with an open mind and a desire to learn more about the issue. Despite strong feelings on both sides, the discussions were apparently quite civil and respectful. Many of those interviewed said that the dialogue did not change many people's minds about the initial bond and how the school board had dealt with it. Some said, however, that the Study Circles helped many participants to better understand where the school board was coming from and refocused their attention on the needs of the students instead of the controversy about how the land was purchased.

A report issued in May by Kuna ACT described the findings of the April deliberations. Each circle reported strong support for passage of the bond as it had been proposed in the initial election. Small minorities in several of the circles (14 in total) either abstained from the recommendation of what to do about the bond or voted for other options. In general, participants said that while they were unhappy with how the school board had gone about securing the land for the high school, it was the right thing to do and that the needs of the students should be the priority.

"The land has been acquired. Move forward," reported one Study Circle. "Let's not hold the kid's hostage because groups of people don't like the way the land was acquired. It doesn't change the fact that we have crowded classrooms and a need for a new school."

Kuna ACT also issued a list of questions that had been generated by participants for the school board. Participants in the Study Circles were reconvened in June at a meeting in which the school board and other community leaders responded to the questions. Following the meeting,

the school board voted to go ahead with a new bond election with only minor changes made to the bond itself.

Over the course of the summer and fall of 2000, the school board and school bond committee actively campaigned for the passage of the bond. According to at least one critic of the school board, an informal agreement was made between the sides that opponents would not actively oppose the vote “if the school board put out a straightforward bond.” In September 2000, almost 2,200 residents voted on the bond issues. The bond passed. Nearly three-quarters of the voters supported the \$15.2 million bond to pay for the construction of the high school, purchase of the land and make improvements to two elementary schools.

While Kuna ACT members, school board members and Rutan all widely credit the Study Circles with contributing to the eventual passage of the bond, it is not entirely clear what the relationship is between the community dialogue and the second election. Three factors suggest that the link may not have been as significant as some would suggest:

- First, twenty times as many people voted in the bond election as participated in the Study Circles. As such, it seems unlikely that the deliberations had a strong direct effect on the views of voters. However, some community members who were interviewed did say that they believed opinion shifts on the part of participants had an effect on the broader community because many of those who participated were “active” citizens or leaders.
- Second, the language of the bond itself did not change significantly between the first and the second election. As such, one cannot argue that the deliberations impacted the content of the bond to make it more agreeable to voters. (Although, it is interesting to note that in recounting the story, several people said that the bond that passed was smaller than the original bond in response to what people had to say at Study Circles. In fact, the bond was slightly larger in the end because of increased interest payments.)
- Third, the school board and bond committee actively campaigned to pass the new bond. And, at least according to one opponent, the opposition did not actively campaign against the measure because of a private deal. As such, it is difficult to discern what role the deliberations played in passing the bond relative to the influence of the campaigning.

Nevertheless, a persuasive case can be made that the Study Circles did make an important contribution to the process. Most importantly, according to Rutan, the Study Circles inspired the school board to move forward with the bond issue. After the defeat of the bond in the fall, the school board was demoralized and shell-shocked. They felt that they had been unfairly attacked and a portion of the community had turned against them. Rutan said that the support of Study Circles participants for the bond had a rallying effect on the board. “They’d been re-thinking the plans,” said Rutan, but the Study Circles reaffirmed their belief in what needed to be done. “It’s the right land. It’s the right price. We need to stick to it.”

Kuna ACT members also argued that the Study Circles gave active members of the community the opportunity to hear the school board members out and re-focus their attention on the needs of the students. The coordinator for the Study Circles program said that the dialogue helped people

“get past the issues that were causing the polarity and really look at the bottom line – what we really need for the children.” People saw that “this is the right thing to do,” she said. “It wasn’t just because of the Study Circles that the bond passed – they had good people campaigning for it. But, I don’t believe it would have happened if it hadn’t been for the Study Circles talking this through.”

To the extent that this is true, Study Circles may have reframed the issue and shifted the terms of the public debate. In addition, it seems important to emphasize that those who participated in the Study Circles tended to be those people who were more active in community life. As a consequence, the process of shifting participants was likely to have an effect on the larger community. Opponents of the school board who hear more about the importance of increasing school funds may reduce their activities to rally support against the bond, while the opposite effects occurs on supporters.

Some people also said that the Study Circles helped the school board and bond committee better understand the issues about which the public felt most strongly. In response, they were able to address the public’s concerns better as they campaigned for passage of the bond measure. In this sense, the Study Circles may have played the role of “focus group” for advocates of the bond.

In the end, the Kuna School District’s experience with the 1999 school bond taught a formative lesson to school leaders. Members of the community said that the school board is much quicker to involve the public on controversial issues now. One new member of the board said her colleagues are “much more cautious about making decisions.” She added, “You learn to be a little more careful about not making a decision in haste” after going through a controversy like the one over the bond.

“As long as Doug Rutan is here, I don’t think you’ll see the schools do what they did again,” said one critic of the board. “This community was ready to take [Rutan] and hang him. There was a time he’d walk down the street and more people we’re yelling at him than saying hi. We remind the school board all the time that we want input. If they don’t do it, we’ll scream at them. ... I know people on the school board learned a big lesson on that one.”

### **Code of Conduct and Drug Testing**

Over the next three years, the Kuna School Board asked Kuna ACT to convene three additional rounds of Study Circles. Forums on the school district’s facilities plan and a proposal to institute a level-pay system for school bond funding attracted community participation and impacted the board’s decisions, but neither were significantly “hot” issues. The recent Study Circle on drug testing in the schools, however, did generate significant interest in the community.

Last year, a party during the school basketball season was broken up by police officers who found drugs and alcohol there. It came to the attention of the high school principal that several members of the Kuna High School basketball team had attended the party. When confronted, the students admitted to having been at the party, but denied that they had used illegal drugs. In accordance with school policy, the principal suspended the students for two weeks.

Following the incident, parents of the student athletes met with the principal of the school to complain that the two-week suspension was too harsh a punishment. They argued that the party was a private activity and that the students shouldn't be punished by the school for attending it. The principal agreed to a compromise, shortening the suspension to one week on the condition that the players take drug tests to demonstrate that they had not actually been using illegal substances. Two of the students tested positive and received the full two-week suspension.

The principal's compromise raised the ire of parents and community members who believed that the schools must be tough in dealing with students who are caught with drugs or alcohol. They argued that the school policy was, in fact, too lenient and that stricter measures were needed to stem drug use in the community. A school board committee was quickly created to respond to the incident. The committee recommended the creation of a new policy for the schools that would strengthen the District's code of conduct and introduce random testing to the schools. Under the proposed policy middle-and high-school athletes and students involved in extracurricular activities would be subjected to random checks.

The committee's recommendation created a minor controversy in the community. A group of parents emerged charging that the school board was rushing to judgment and had not done adequate research on drug testing to understand its full ramifications. According to one opponent of the stricter policy, the board responded to a community demand for drug testing too quickly. She said that had she not organized a vocal group to oppose the policy it would have been instituted immediately. Her group's opposition, she said, prompted the board to slow down and send the issue to Study Circles.

"We knew the Code of Conduct was too weak," said a member of the school board. "We agreed the night it was presented that we needed to do something. We kind of went to circles after we realized how controversial [the policy] was." The president of the school board explained the situation, saying, "The trouble is – we usually don't get feedback until after we've acted. We publish an agenda for our meeting and no one comes. So unless people are riled up then we don't get feedback until we have done the deed."

Rutan and the school board asked Kuna ACT to convene Study Circles to review the new policy in April 2003. Attendance at this session was different from other forums, like those on the school bond. While the bond issue brought in "old-timers, farmers, city council people, all different kinds," the participants in the Study Circles on drug testing tended to be parents of high school students, according to those who were present. Some of those interviewed expressed frustration that the parents of younger students who would later be affected by the issue did not widely attend the forum.

The drug testing issue had become contentious enough that Kuna ACT asked officers from the Sheriff's Department to be present in case a conflict broke out between participants. Nevertheless, participants reported that the discussions remained largely civil. Presentations at the beginning of the session were made by representatives from the schools and from law enforcement. The opposition leader to the drug testing policy was critical of the presentation,

however, saying it was biased towards the policy and did not incorporate arguments against drug testing that had been researched by her group.

Participants in the Study Circles were asked to evaluate the current Code of Conduct as well as the new proposed policies. They discussed what roles various community stakeholders should plan in addressing substance abuse among young people, as well as how the school should deal with making policy decisions on these kinds of issues in the future. Opponents to the policy came prepared with research and information about how similar policies had worked elsewhere. One member of the group said they found school board members and the superintendent to be receptive and open in their views.

The final report on the Study Circles found that there were too many questions that had not been answered and research that remained to be conducted to come to a conclusion on the drug testing policy. The primary recommendation from the program was that the schools “do more research to substantiate the effectiveness of a random drug testing program.” Individual group recommendations in the report show that participants were concerned about consistent enforcement, parental involvement, confidentiality and cost. Many groups believed a stronger code of conduct was needed, but repeatedly asked for more information and involvement.

The school board unanimously chose to pass changes to the Code of Conduct, but decided not to pursue random drug testing. Instead, the board adopted a voluntary policy in which the school would pay for drug tests that are requested by parents.

School board members said the Study Circles exposed them to an array of concerns that they had not yet considered. Unlike a school board meeting, the Study Circles allowed board members to listen to exchanges between parents and to ask questions. Said one school board member who had led the effort to draft the initial policy, “There were a lot of concerns I had not considered... We had an issue come up and I said I want something done. [But] as we came to look at it, we found that the solutions weren’t so simple.”

“They were pushing drug testing through. But [Study Circles] really made them stop and be more careful with how money should be spent,” said a participant in the program.

In addition to feedback from the Study Circles, the school board was influenced by the cost of the proposed random testing program, as well as the lobbying of individual board members by the opposition group. While it is impossible to discern which factors were most important in influencing the school board, the Study Circles clearly played a significant role in the outcome of the issue. Most importantly, they served as a neutral venue in which outside groups could introduce new information and argumentation to be considered by the public.

### **Assessing the Kuna Study Circles Program**

An evaluation of the Kuna Study Circles program should address at least four key questions:

- **Participation:** How, if at all, have Study Circles changed the range of actors that form opinions upon public issues or influence community decision making on those issues?
- **Deliberation:** How, if at all, has deliberation introduced new considerations, or shifted the balance of existing considerations, in decision making processes?
- **Embeddedness:** How, if at all, are participation and deliberation incorporated into the practical and moral reasoning processes of individuals, institutions and organizations in the community?
- **Outcomes:** Have shifts to greater participation and deliberation resulted in any differences in the actions of local government, civic associations or other stakeholder organizations? Have they resulted in changes in important areas of public concern?

### **Participation**

Without access to detailed records about participation rates in Study Circles over the past five years, it is difficult to make a very refined assessment of participation in the deliberative processes. It is safe to say that Kuna ACT has maintained a strong commitment to increasing participation levels and that they have been successful in widening the circle of influence on community decision making in Kuna. At each Study Circle, as many as 115 people take part in a discussion about a problem facing the community – most of whom would not have otherwise attended a formal hearing. Beyond creating a new venue for participation in decision making, Kuna ACT has experimented with an array of different techniques over the past several years for reaching out to the community – newspaper articles, signs around town, letters and postcards.

When asked, most members of the community said that there were few obvious groups missing from the forums. While a core group of adherents consistently go to most of the Study Circles, participation tends to shift significantly depending upon the topic of discussion – from land use, to school funding to drug testing. The only segment of the community that seems to routinely be missed is newer residents of the community who have moved to Kuna in the past few years. Most new residents tend to treat Kuna as a “bedroom” community, commuting to Boise for work and other activities. Given the dramatic growth of the community, leaving these residents out of the deliberations is not insignificant.

Beyond the demographic barrier of engaging new residents in the deliberations, it seems Kuna ACT is also challenged by limited resources. Struggling to get by on a meager budget, the organization lacks the resources to conduct extensive outreach campaigns that would be less reliant on passive outreach techniques like writing letters and newspaper articles. They remain heavily reliant on issues being “hot” in order to attract the attention of the community to participate. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, Kuna ACT has clearly been successful in bringing more people into decision making in the community.

## **Deliberation**

Again, assessing the quality of deliberation supported by Study Circles in Kuna is difficult after the fact. The program has taken place over several years and the memories of participants tend to be somewhat fuzzy about the actual content of the deliberations.

Participants widely credit the civility and openness of the discussions. They repeatedly cite the important role played by ground rules, facilitators, randomization of groups, and neutral discussion questions as contributing to the quality of dialogue that takes place. There can be little doubt that new perspectives and ideas are brought to the discussions. Examples of such ideas range from evidence against drug testing brought to Study Circles by opponents of the policy to an idea to move a proposed highway to the south of town after all of the local planners had only considered constructing it to the north during a Study Circle on the city's comprehensive plan.

The degree to which participants come to the deliberations with an open mind, ready to listen to and consider the arguments of others, seems to relate closely to the intensity of the issue that is up for discussion. Highly controversial issues like the school bond discussion in 2000 and the drug testing issue in 2003 tended to attract people who had already developed strong views on the matter. Issues like the development of Kuna's comprehensive plan are less polarized and, as a consequence, attract fewer people who are set in terms of what must be done.

One resident interviewed for this case argued that it is against human nature for people to change their minds in a discussion. Citing the deliberations over the school bond, he said the only added value that came from the discussions was that it helped people understand where each other is coming from. However, when the topic of the conversation moved to Study Circles on comprehensive planning, the interviewee immediately changed gears and spoke admiringly about the new ideas that were generated in the process.

## **Embeddedness**

Perhaps the most impressive achievement of the Kuna Study Circles program is that it still exists today despite the political conflicts that have surrounded it. Deliberation seems to be embedded in Kuna in two ways. First, the creation of Kuna ACT has established an institutional home and sponsor for deliberation in the community. The organization is both the guardian and advocate of the deliberative process in the community. Second, a significant number of community leaders from several different institutions seem to have bought into the idea that greater public participation in controversial decision making is desirable and that Study Circles are the appropriate venue for supporting that participation.

Kuna ACT has made several important choices that have contributed to the degree to which the program has become embedded in the community. First, the program has been positioned so that it offers a service to decision makers. Study Circles are only held when a decision maker takes an issue to Kuna ACT. As such, the organization is helping community leaders by involving the public. A member of the school board described it this way: "The nice thing about Study Circles for the school board has been that to a large degree we can turn it over to someone else. They

provide good facilitators and they set up the meeting place ... It's one thing you can give to someone else to do. ... It can be left so we're not really involved. Give us the data and we'll read it."

Second, Kuna ACT's strong stance on neutrality has prevented the process from being pulled into political struggles. Despite a highly contentious political environment, it seems that Kuna ACT has been able to maintain the credibility and standing of the program with a diverse group of stakeholders. In one interview, an ally of the former mayor whose faction has lost its base of power commented that he looked forward to when he could ask Kuna ACT to convene Study Circles when the newly elected leadership over-steps its public mandate. He explained that his faction would have limited credibility in raising the issue, but that by bringing it to Study Circles the public would be able to see the wrongs that had been committed by their elected leaders. The striking thing about this comment was that despite the fact that the Study Circles program had been founded by the opposition, this individual still saw the program as a neutral venue with credibility to convene the public.

Third, Kuna ACT chose to launch Study Circles in Kuna with a round that addressed multiple community issues. This has prevented the program from being pigeon holed in the community as a kind of forum that is only appropriate for a certain kind of issue. As a consequence, the deliberative process has been used on a diverse set of topics, exposing deliberation to a diverse set of audiences.

Increased participation through Kuna's Study Circles program depends heavily on decision makers choosing to take issues to Kuna ACT. It is noteworthy, for example, that the program has done limited work with the city government, outside of planning issues. This position, however, is not necessarily a weakness if the program can (a) maintain a strong relationship and presence with decision makers, and (b) build a constituency for participation among citizens who may demand a greater voice on important issues to their leaders. Additionally, maintaining adequate funding, staff resources, and organizational leadership have all posed potential threats to the long-term viability of Kuna ACT and the Study Circles program.

## **Outcomes**

While it is difficult to directly attribute decisions and policies specifically to the outcomes of public deliberation, it does seem that participation in Study Circles has produced results. In the case of the school bond, it appears that the Study Circles provided leaders with the motivation to push on with their campaign for the school bond, while shifting some public attitudes on the issue. On the drug testing issue, Study Circles appear to have provided at least some of the justification needed by the school board to choose not to pass the new random testing policy. In another example, Study Circles were credited with convincing the planning and zoning board, and later the city council, to modify zoning requirements for the size and density of plots of land in order to provide a greater diversity of housing options.

Every community leader interviewed for this case study seemed to express a genuine interest in learning what the public thinks about community decisions. As can be seen in the two examples

detailed here, leaders in Kuna have a real interest in engaging the public in order to protect themselves from public attack. Additionally, several of those interviewed said they believe the public genuinely brings new information to the table that helps them to make better decisions. That being said, Study Circles do leave significant room for decision makers to ignore or spin the results of a forum. They may choose to adhere to only part of the results of a deliberation or – as was the case when the school board convened Study Circles on a level-pay policy for school bonds – they may choose to respond and then reverse their decision later when the public’s attention has shifted elsewhere.

It seems important to note that despite the prevailing view of elected officials, many decision makers in Kuna seem to be at least somewhat predisposed towards listening to what the public has to say and taking their priorities seriously. Several leaders spoke of what they learned from the public deliberations and the value that was added to the process. In part, this may have something to do with Kuna’s size and the voluntary nature of many leadership positions in the community. The only flagrant example of a decision maker disregarding the outcomes of Study Circles and choosing to oppose the public’s preferences was the school board’s decision to pass a level-pay policy for school bonds in 2003. The decision to pursue this policy, however, was only made a year after the Study Circles. Initially, the board headed the public’s preference, despite strong support on the board for moving forward. Only after a year of additional deliberation did the board return to the issue and decide that they needed to follow their own judgment.

*<<no conclusion written because this case will be integrated with others>>*

## **Appendix A**

Research for this study was conducted through two rounds of phone calls, a two-day site visit, and a review of relevant documents related to the Study Circles program and newspaper articles written about the events related to the program. The following individuals were interviewed at least once (and some two or three times) for this study.

1. Royleen Anderson
2. Tim Gordon
3. Ginny Gregor
4. Mary Hagy
5. Arnette Johnson
6. Zella Johnson
7. Rod LaFee
8. Matt Leighninger
9. Rodger Lowe
10. David Lyon
11. Earl Maggard
12. Jim McNall
13. Laurale Neal
14. Doug Rutan
15. Don Sealy
16. Beth Ann Schaffer
17. Greg Silvey
18. Gene Winchester