



White House Young Americans Roundtable

May 23, 2011

Vista Maria

The White House's Young Americans Roundtable Project provides opportunities for young people to develop roundtable meetings using any media format to discuss issues of concern for the youth and their communities. The purpose of this project is to generate ideas and express those ideas to the White House. Vista Maria's Village of Hope was selected as one of only 100 host sites from across the county selected by the White House to engage in the federal administration's "100 Youth Strategies for Winning the Future" initiative.

The **Village of Hope** is an innovative school/community partnership model developed by **Vista Maria**, a nonprofit residential and community-based treatment agency for abused and neglected children. The Village of Hope offers a full continuum of services and programs including education and job training, access to child care, behavioral health services, substance abuse treatment, and schools that meet the needs of learning disabled students.

The Village of Hope is built on the premise that:

1. Education and vocational training are critical components for self-sufficiency.
2. Children need access to basic resources to stay healthy and in school. These include access to healthy foods, affordable housing, and health care.
3. Children need access to permanent, supportive and lasting relationships to sustain their recovery from abuse and neglect.

The roundtable followed a standard format including a facilitated discussion among the students as well as participation from an appointee of President Obama's Administration, Ms. Christine White, State Executive Director for the Farm Service Agency at the United States Department of Agriculture.

This report is a compilation of the working solutions identified from the roundtable.

Thirteen young people between the ages of 15 and 18 participated in the event. The majority of student participants were female and African American. Eight of the students are enrolled at Clara B. Ford, an all-girl, alternative education charter program for young people who are wards of the court. The remaining participants were enrolled in Vista Meadows, another alternative education charter program designed for suspended and expelled students and other students who, for various reasons, have dropped out of a traditional education program. Students who participated in the Roundtable were selected by the principals of each respective school. Five of the 13 students were formerly enrolled in the Detroit Public School system.

The students were asked to respond to several, semi-structured questions:

1. Briefly compare the neighborhood school you attended before Village of Hope Academies with your school at Vista Maria. Briefly describe how Village of Hope Academies are different than previous schools.

Students mentioned that the major differences between the traditional school environments where they were previously enrolled and the environment provided under the Village of Hope included smaller class sizes, teachers provided more in-depth instruction, the lessons taught were more in tune with real life decision-making, teachers made the course material more interesting, and that the teachers at Vista seemed to care about their education. “The teachers here (at Vista), when you have bad grades, they try to help you understand no matter how long it takes.”

The facilitator summed up the responses by stating that at Vista, it sounds like the students have both rigor and relationships. “Differential instruction is the key to 21st century learning.”

Students commented that in their previous schools, they struggled with large class sizes; teachers didn’t have time to deal with students on a 1:1 basis to assist youth with questions. There is a lack of relationships with teachers. One student mentioned that she was “afraid to ask for help.”

Also, traditional schools provide more distractions. At Vista, you don’t have to worry about “popularity”. Large schools foster competition. Bullying was mentioned as the largest issue faced by the students on the panel. “We faced a lot of negative peer interaction; it was better to be a follower instead of an individual.” Another student remarked, “You are trying to fit in with the crowd and you are ashamed to be yourself.” “If you try to be a leader, other students think you are trying to be too good. You feel degraded by peers instead of rewarded for leadership behavior.”

“Vista Maria offered me an opportunity to start over- a clean slate”. Another student mentioned that at Vista they were not worried about “peer pressure.”

Ten of the 13 students on the panel reported that they had previously been in a fight at school. Three students mentioned that they had not felt safe at school. All the students reported that they have felt safe since being enrolled in school on Vista’s campus. When asked why, the students said, “male staff”, “security guards”.

Two of the foster care students mentioned that school, both before and after placement at Vista Maria was “a get away”. Both of these students mentioned that they have had to depend on themselves, rather than the support of parents in their educational process. One student in the juvenile justice system mentioned that her placement made it hard to focus on education. “There’s a lot of people in your ear giving you both positive and negative feedback.” “You have to have faith in yourself when no one else does.”

2. We know that many of you are interested in graduating and attending college, and have career goals that require a college degree. Can you tell us what you need from your school and/or the community to support you in this goal?

All 13 students who participated on the panel expressed an interest in attending college. Only four of the 13 students reported that the traditional high schools they attended talked about college. As one young man put it,

“College leads to a better future.” Another student stated that he wanted to attend college to “learn more stuff”. Many of the students, including those in out of home care, reported that their parents had high expectations for them to go to college. One young woman mentioned that her experience in foster care has inspired her to become a social worker. Another young person stated that college was a place “to find out who you are and a place to express your knowledge to the world”. “Knowledge is power”. One young woman stated that college was important to her because “more doors open up for you than with a high school diploma. I am going to be the first person in my family to go to college.” One young man stated that going to college is important because “it makes you more mature”. “It’s about getting help to get to the career you want to do- it’s not about just getting a job; it’s about doing something you want to do.” One young person frankly stated, “We all want money, and you need to go to college to get it.”

Students talked about college as a way to give back to the world, the economy and their neighborhoods. Nine of the 13 students reported that they wanted careers that would allow them to help their communities. The young people at Vista have had to overcome trials and tribulations. These personal experiences, coupled with a formal education, makes these students uniquely positioned to mentor other youth and work in professions that foster relationship-building. “I want to be an example for others”. Another young woman stated that she wanted to be “a role model for those that don’t have one.” One young woman stated she wanted to become a probation officer “to get kids off the streets” like her probation officer did for her. Another young woman stated she has struggled with addiction in her past, and that she hopes to “let others know her story”. One young woman remarked that she hopes to enter the army as a way to help her community.

When asked what the students needed from their school and community to support their goals of attending college, one student stated that she would like to see the current high school curriculum foster “real world experiences.” This is important because “we are the future; we need to know what’s going on the world.” Another student stated that she has an impactful math teacher whose teaching philosophy is “learn one, do one, teach one.”

Another student remarked that teachers and other school officials need to motivate students to keep going. When parents are not around to instill self-motivation in their children, they need to get it another way. Students suggested that schools could hold assemblies or bring in motivational speakers. Other ideas included holding writing fairs to support a student’s creative side, and providing other activities that support students’ goals and aspirations. “Adults need to be more responsible in engaging with youth.” One student suggested that schools should have suggestion boxes to allow them to provide feedback to principals and teachers on what students expect from them. Students need the same opportunities to share as teachers and principals do with them. One student remarked that it might be helpful if schools were more purposeful at hiring teachers from at-risk backgrounds. Another student remarked that school administrators need to hire teachers that “care” and not those that “take the job for a paycheck”. Students need 1:1 attention; they need to feel that they are “not stupid”. This means that teachers are engaged not only during the school day, but are willing to engage in the student’s personal lives. “Staff/student counseling” should be encouraged. In the classroom, teachers need to keep a positive attitude. One student stated that she needs her teachers to “love me when I least deserve it.”

Students also expressed a desire for schools to have high expectations, but coupled with opportunities for students to participate in credit recovery, tutoring, and conflict resolution programs. Schools should “be accountable, but be fair.” Students also asked for transportation assistance to reduce school attendance issues.

Another student reported that extra-curricular activities should be available in all schools. “They keep students busy; all kids have talents, they need to have something they are good at. Kids get in trouble because they don’t have access to extra-curricular activities.” “Extra-curricular activities can’t cost money. All kids deserve to participate.”

This Roundtable was made possible due to partnerships with Michigan’s Children, the Detroit Regional Chamber of Commerce and Comcast.

Vista Maria’s mission is to help Michigan’s victimized young girls and women with best-practice treatment programs designed to meet their unique needs while serving other vulnerable children and families in the community. More at: www.vistamaria.org.

Michigan's Children is a statewide, independent voice for children and their families. We work with lawmakers, business leaders, and communities to make Michigan a place where all children have the opportunity to thrive. We believe that it is critically important to provide forums for children and youth to share their perspectives on the problems that they face directly with leaders who have the ability to impact their situation. Michigan's Children is eager to work with you on public issues affecting children and youth. More at www.michiganschildren.org

The **Detroit Regional Chamber** has long been a vocal advocate of higher academic standards and more accountability in public education, recognizing that education issues facing today's youth have a direct effect on businesses success. More at: <http://www.detroitchamber.com/region/Work-in-Detroit/Education>
View a video on U-Tube for more information on this Roundtable Discussion at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3ffUm7LwuY>

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