

News

Vista Maria students discuss education issues with White house representatives

Friday, June 24, 2011

By Carly Matkovich
Press and Guide Newspapers

DEARBORN HEIGHTS — Students from the Village of Hope Academies at Vista Maria got to tell the White House like it is recently.

The Dearborn Heights schools, Clara B. Ford Academy and Vista Meadows, were two of nearly 400 schools in 47 states, Washington, D.C., and Guam, that ultimately participated in the White House's "100 Roundtables with Young Americans" Discussions.

The discussions, which concluded earlier this month, were aimed at hearing young peoples' opinions regarding education and public policy.

President Barack Obama stopped by to listen to some of the discussions around the country.

"The president considers young Americans to be one of his highest priorities," said U.S. Dept. of Agriculture-Michigan Executive Director for the Farm Service Agency Christine White, who served as the White House's representative at the roundtable at Vista Maria.

"We bring young people to the policy makers, the people that are making decisions," said Jack Kresnak, president and CEO of Michigan's Children. Of policy directed toward the youth, he said, "Nothing about me without me."

Each of the 13 students who participated in the discussion was selected by Vista Maria's staff based on their exemplary performance in the classroom, their leadership skills, and also their wider perspective.

"If you have a good perspective on what's going on in Michigan, you were selected," said 15-year-old Zotora Hall, of River Rouge.

Goals at Vista Maria

Vista Maria helps at-risk teenagers overcome past victimization, while providing them with an education tailored to each student's needs. The organization operates on three pillars of education in the community, according to Cameron Hosner, president and CEO of Vista Maria. They are alternative education, basic needs, and a life-long social connection in the form of a life coach.

"Differ-entiated instruction is important in 21st century teaching," Brooke Franklin of the Detroit Regional Chamber of Commerce said. "America needs talent built, and I often wonder, 'What if there is that talented child out there that isn't getting the education they need?'"

It is the one-on-one instruction, which is typical at Vista Maria's academies, that is lacking in many other schools. When Franklin,

who moderated the event, asked the students what other public schools were like, 18-year-old Tyreia said the large classroom sizes made it difficult for teachers to meet with students individually.

“Here the teachers are more in depth with their lessons,” Tyreia said. “They are interested and they actually care.”

Tracey, 17, echoed that sentiment, saying, “Teachers want to know what students want from them.”

Safe schools concern students

Another issue that students discussed was safety in school. According to a report by the National Center for Education Statistics, 8 percent of students enrolled in school in 2009 reported being threatened or injured with a weapon, such as a gun or knife, on school property. During the 2007-08 school year, 75 percent of public schools reported one or more incidents of violent crime.

“I felt unsafe at school before I came (to Vista Maria),” 17-year-old Chelsea said.

Seventeen-year-old Torey agreed, but said, “The staff and security guards make me feel safe (at Vista Maria).”

Many of the students felt that one reason for the high incidence of violence and crime in school was the lack of extra-curricular activities. Chelsea said, “Part of the reason kids get into trouble is because they have nothing else to do after school.”

“What happened to art classes,” Zotora asked? “It had been a while since I saw an art class until I got (to Vista Maria).”

“Extracurricular activities are something that everybody deserves,” Tyreia said.

When the students were asked if they could be principal for a day, many brought up safety, and activities, but 17-year-old Susan brought up transportation. She said her old school, located in Southgate, had alternative students from a wide range of cities, such as New Boston and Dearborn, and that sometimes the kids couldn’t make it every day.

“If you had five absences, you got kicked out, or dropped from the class,” she said. So her solution would be to provide free transportation.

All the topics discussed at the White House’s “100 Roundtables with Young Americans” event at Vista Maria are not unique to the schools discussed at the roundtable, such as the Detroit Public School District, which has for decades struggled with transportation, safety, and class sizes.

Other issues that were brought up at roundtables in high schools and colleges across the country included racial equality, LGBTQ justice, environmental policy, and jobs for young people.

The issues and solutions presented at the Vista Maria event, sponsored and broadcast by Comcast, will be reviewed by The Office of Public Engagement’s Youth Team, headed by Associate Director of the OPE, Kalpen Modi, or “Kumar” from the “Harold and Kumar” movie series. Officials from across the White House administration plan to follow up with each participating school.

URL: <http://www.pressandguide.com/articles/2011/06/24/news/doc4e04dc0046e64574091296.prt>

© 2011 Press and Guide, a **Journal Register** Property