



*On the 2014 campaign trail  
for Michigan's children*

*Congratulations to forum attendees Rep. Brandon Dillon, who won his re-election campaign for the 75<sup>th</sup> House District and Rep. Winnie Brinks, who won her re-election campaign for the 76<sup>th</sup> House District.*

## **Students Query Candidates about Roads, Education and their Top Priorities if Elected**

*Candidates who appeared at the Grand Rapids forum were Deb Havens, Democratic candidate for state Senate District 28; Lance Penny, Democratic candidate for state House District 29; Democratic incumbent state Rep. Brandon Dillon, House District 75; and Democratic incumbent state Rep. Winnie Brinks, House District 76. All Republican and Democratic candidates in House Districts 75 and 76 and Senate Districts 28 and 29 were invited.*



**GRAND RAPIDS** – In a stylishly renovated art gallery in Grand Rapids' scrappy southeast side, home to one of the city's notable urban revitalization efforts, a dozen students as young as 14 came face-to-face with state Legislative candidates before parents and community members.

Luis Reyes, 14, with the SOL Peer Leaders Program, wanted to know what the candidates, if elected, would do about poorly maintained roads. "Honestly, most roads my parents are being taxed on aren't being salted or fixed," he said.

For nearly two hours the teens gamely led serious questions on adult subjects such as immigration reform, same-sex unions, road repairs, community revitalization, diversity, education and ways to involve youth voice in state policymaking. The candidates said the teens' questions were thoughtful and thought-provoking.

The candidate forum was sponsored by Michigan's Children and LINC Community Revitalization, Inc., the nonprofit organization responsible for pushing new investments in the largely Hispanic-American district. With 120 people in attendance, it was the second of four teen-led forums planned in Michigan cities before the Nov. 4 general election.

Luis said he participated in the forum because he wanted office-seekers "to know our needs in the state and to help us grow."

One questioner, Angel, a teen from the Cook Library Scholar Program, pointedly asked what the candidates intended to accomplish in office. Candidate Deb Havens, of the 28th state Senate District, said she would work to promote civil discourse, cooperation toward common goals, and becoming a "voice for people left out of the conversation." "We can believe in our government again," she asserted.



Incumbent state Rep. Brandon Dillon, of the 75th House District, said his list of desired accomplishments is long but his top choice would be to change the way Michigan schools are funded. "One of the saddest things to see is that districts that are most diverse are usually least funded. We need to spend more money in public schools that have unique challenges," he said to applause.

"Education is probably the single most important thing that state government does and much of our policies are decided at the state level. We can have an influence," said state Rep. Winnie Brinks, of the 76th House District. Addressing school finances, she said more information is needed to identify the real costs of educating students in each of the state's districts in order to appropriate corresponding and appropriate funding. In addition, the state should not move tax dollars collected for K-12 education to other parts of the state budget, she said.

Candidate Lance Penny, of the 29th state Senate District, also said education would be his top priority. He said Dillon and Brinks need "an ally in the Senate" to support issues they promote in the House. "Education, roads, the Elliot-Larsen (Civil Rights) Act, marriage equality – they can't get it done unless they have an ally in the Senate," he said.

Lynn Nederveld, the mother of a 5th grader in Grand Rapids Schools who recently moved to the neighborhood from nearby Hudsonville, came to the forum to experience student-run events her daughter might one day take part in. "It's my first candidate forum and I was curious. I was really interested in the kids and the questions they had. They did a really good job!" she said.

Candidate Havens agreed. "The students' questions were very thoughtful and looked at a broad variety of issues. I was very proud of them."

### **Q & A: Teen Asks Candidates to Address Bullying**

One issue – bullying – was close to the students' own experiences and generated strong and personal responses from the candidates. Israel Morales, 12, asked the candidates what they've done and would do to prevent it.

Havens, a university professor, said schools should bring bullies and their targets together in order for bullies "to understand the pain they are causing and then become responsible for that pain. Life is about respecting other life and it's important to learn that at an early age and learn how to resolve (conflicts) and not turn to bullying as an answer," she said.

Dillon said he supported legislation last session to require Michigan school districts to develop a comprehensive anti-bullying program, though he preferred that the final bill recognize sexual orientation in the adopted "OK to Say" anti-bullying program. That was not included because of opposition on religious grounds from other lawmakers, he said. "It's very difficult for anyone to get a quality education if they're afraid to go to school," he said. "I still think we need to do more to put stronger policies in place."

Brinks said adequate funding should be provided to schools to help train teachers and administrators to implement the new policy. "There are a lot of peer-to-peer options, too," she said.

Penny, a truck driver who has a long track record as a campaign organizer for other candidates, revealed he was bullied as a schoolchild. "I know what this is about. I have three daughters in elementary school and I watch real closely." Like Dillon, he objected to "religious exemptions" in the current law that denies the same protection to gays. "I strongly oppose that and want to get that changed. We need to constantly find ways for kids to feel safe at schools," Penny said.

Thanks to the organizations sponsoring the young people leading this conversation:



Grandville Avenue  
Arts & Humanities

**The Cook Library Center** focuses on the intellectual development of children and adults. After-school programs include homework help, computer usage, mind-expanding games such as chess and Scrabble, storytelling events, and field trips to cultural institutions, colleges, and universities. Adults use our library primarily for English as a Second Language classes, job searches, and resume writing. We offer weekly one-on-one computer classes for adults led by bilingual volunteers.

**Grand Rapids Ellington Academy of Arts & Technology (GREAT)** integrates the study of the Arts and Technology within a rigorous high-performing core curriculum, values all students and encourages them to realize their full potential and believes that the performing arts facilitate the learning process. Our academic curriculum will always be grounded in the arts and technology. The arts and technology will be used as the catalyst for academic accomplishments. Our curriculum will tap into artistic inspirations across the nation and across the globe.



**Grand Rapids Initiative for Leaders (GRIL)** GRIL U Faith-Based Leadership Program partners with area churches and youth ministries to challenge approximately 35 youth each year to become Christ-like, cross-cultural, servant leaders. Each adult invests in up to four teens, 16 and up, to encourage them as they grow as leaders who make an impact in their homes, schools, neighborhoods, churches, and cities. Teens must commit to 2-5 hours per week.

**Kent School Services Network** brings health and human services into the school building to serve students and families. This idea is called a "community school." Placing services at school removes many barriers that families have in finding services, and helps keep students in class learning and achieving. The KSSN was created in a broad, community-wide partnership including local foundations, service providers, the schools and the county. Currently, KSSN partners with 8 school districts in Kent ISD.



Kent School Services Network



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L I N C  
community revitalization inc.

*Michigan's Children and LINC Revitalization, Inc. present this youth-led candidate forum as a non-partisan activity.*



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