



## **Bullying, Addiction Recovery, Family Instability among Topics Youth Discuss with Candidates in Lansing-area Races**

LANSING, MI – In a rare encounter, youths from the foster care and juvenile justice systems met with candidates for state House and Senate at Lansing Community College last month to shed light on issues that candidates don't typically hear about on the campaign trail: Family instability during traumatic events; cyberbullying and teen suicide; help for youths on probation and with addiction recovery; the struggles of teenage parents; and gun reform.

The six participating youths came from the Lansing Community College Fostering S.T.A.R.S. program, Peckham Youth Services, and Lansing Academy, a youth treatment program and school operated by Lansing Schools and the Ingham County Circuit Court. Michigan's Children, which sponsored the forum with the other groups, invited all candidates from the 8<sup>th</sup> Congressional District, the 23<sup>rd</sup> State Senate District, the 24<sup>th</sup> State Senate District, and the 68<sup>th</sup> State House District.



Attendees were Democratic State Senator Curtis Hertel, Jr., the 23<sup>rd</sup> State Senate District; Libertarian Katie Nepton, the 24<sup>th</sup> State Senate District; and Democrat Sarah Anthony, the 68<sup>th</sup> State House District.

The youths shared raw stories of personal loss and family tragedies, crowded schools and overwhelmed teachers, fears of unsafe drinking water, and feelings of abandonment.

Eighteen-year-old Rachelle Fidler launched the question-and-answer session with a heartbreaking story about the loss of her best friend to suicide in January 2015. She and her friend were bullied in school but didn't garner the support from teachers or counselors who may have interceded. "We eventually gave up," she said. "I didn't feel safe."

Rachelle asked the candidates how they would prevent tragedies like hers from occurring. "How are you going to invest and support students before, after, and during bullying?" she said.

**The father of four** children, Hertel said Rachelle's story was scary for a parent to hear. As the second highest cause of death in students, suicide is a topic that society must address openly and schools should be required by law to teach suicide prevention, he said. In addition, bullying is much harder to escape after school because of the omnipresence of social media and text messaging. "We need to update our bullying policies in Michigan," he said referring to social media.

Nepton agreed that bullying is a serious problem that could be helped by teachers advocating for students. “I think there needs to be a big push against the stigmatization of mental health,” she said.

Anthony said she has four nieces who are students at Lansing’s Everett High School and they’ve shared their own stories of bullying. The candidate said she has deliberately worked to boost their self-esteem after learning they were harassed by classmates about their appearance. She agreed that teachers should be required to undergo professional training in ways to intervene when students are bullied. She pledged to advocate for such a requirement and for students’ input and solutions to be included in that training.

Kim Emerson, an Ingham Academy student, told about his families’ struggles with heroin addiction. His mother died from an overdose in 2013 and his father has struggled with heroin addiction for Kim’s entire life. As a result, Kim said he has been in and out of foster care for most of his life, beginning at age four. He recalled being removed from his home for the first time by police officers who dragged his body out the door while he tried to resist, screaming and clinging to the walls of the house. “Being ripped away was really traumatizing,” he said. He continues receiving therapy to deal with the trauma and hasn’t seen his sister for five years.

**Kim, 17, asked:** What can be done to help these families deal with their addiction and to help keep these families intact?

Nepton, who revealed she too was a child from foster care, said schools should talk to students about mental health at an early age to prevent youth from using drugs to self-medicate. Education would help stem heroin usage, she said. She added that “the war on drugs,” society’s prosecution of drug use, should end and society’s focus should instead turn to mental health supports.

Anthony said hearing stories like Kim’s is so valuable for candidates to witness because these first-person accounts do drive change among decision-makers. She agreed that the issue of drug addiction should be viewed through the lens of providing health care and the state should do a better of offering more resources and services that would help people. Instead of cutting the state’s Community Mental Health program as it’s done, more resources should be invested in these services that help people, she said. “We have so many people across the state battling the same level of addiction with kids being traumatized,” she said. “If you hear these stories and don’t apply them to laws and bills proposed you are doing a disservice to so many people in our state.”

Hertel said the opioid epidemic doesn’t get the attention it deserves. He’s met many people in his work at the Capitol alone who have lost family members to heroin addiction. “It’s a growing crisis and we in the Legislature have just put Band-Aids on it.” He said a major problem is the lack of treatment facilities that allow people to get care at home while holding on to the jobs and families. “We have detox centers that are a good solution for 48 hours, and long-term care is good for someone with a lot of money. But if you have a family and want to keep that job we do not have options for you in the current system,” he said.

Marissa Cole asked the candidates how they would reform schools with smaller class sizes and greater individualized attention by teachers. A student who is thriving today at Ingham Academy, she said she was frequently suspended from school because of behavioral problems – arguing with teachers and cutting class. At 16, she is today a teen mother raising a toddler. “If you was elected, what solutions

would you propose to get class sizes back down to a manageable number that would support teachers and students?” Marissa asked.



**Hertel said it** is important to invest more in students and public schools. Given the state’s teacher shortage crisis, he said it’s important for the state to invest in young people interested in becoming teachers. The state doesn’t currently invest enough of its resources in education today, he said. In recent years, the state spent \$1 million for a study on how Michigan should invest in education and learned that it was underfunding its schools on average by \$1,000 a student. The study looked at comparisons with other states and the cost of meeting its own stated education goals. “The reality is all schools are struggling to get proper funding.”

Referring to charter schools, he said: “We tried the free market approach in education and it doesn’t work. In fact, it’s just made a lot of problems worse.”

Nepton said families should make their own decisions about the kind of education they want for their children and that should happen at the neighborhood level. “I believe families should have the freedom to decide for themselves and to have more controls for themselves,” she said. She said she wasn’t familiar with the court-run Ingham Academy but called Marissa lucky for being in a school with a low teacher-student ratio. She said she was skeptical of government actions “forcing things on other people.”

**Anthony said decisions** about school funding should take an equitable approach with schools receiving what they need to provide a quality education to all students based on their circumstances. “I think it’s criminal that some schools look like community colleges, very fancy, than other schools look like they’re barely surviving and don’t have the resources despite having high needs,” she said.

Matt Gillard, President and CEO of Michigan’s Children and a former state lawmaker, said it is critically important for candidates to hear directly from youth to learn what they’re dealing with.

Nate Burmeister, the coordinator of the Right Turn Program at Peckham, said the students felt empowered by the process of preparing for the forum and then speaking with the candidates even though they wrestled with the pain of telling their stories. “They were given a platform to be vulnerable without fear of judgement and with the authority of one speaking up for others,” he said. “They proved to themselves that they are not defined by their past and have the ability to improve someone else’s future.”

This was the second in a series of nine forums before the November General Election sponsored by Michigan’s Children, a statewide advocacy and public policy organization, with partners including the Lansing Community College Fostering Stars, Ingham County Circuit Court’s Ingham Academy, Peckham, Inc, and Fostering Success Michigan.

**Michigan’s Children is the only statewide, independent voice working to ensure that public policies are made in the best interest of children, from cradle to career, and their families**