



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

*Congratulations to forum attendees Rep. Margaret O'Brien, who won her campaign for the 20<sup>th</sup> Senate District and Jon Hoadley, who won his campaign for the 60<sup>th</sup> House District.*

### **'You Kept Us on Our Toes' Candidate Tells Kalamazoo Youths at Teen-Led Forum**

*Candidates who appeared at this forum were 20th Senate District candidates Sean McCann, Margaret O'Brien and Lorence Wenke; also, 60th House District candidates Mike Perrin and Jon Hoadley. Invited but unable to attend were candidates in House Districts 61, 62 and 63.*



**KALAMAZOO** – The audience at Michigan's Children's first Student-led Candidate forum last week heard much more than the standard campaign questions about the state's crumbling roads or the source of candidates' financing.

The spotlight for this candidate forum, featuring office-seekers for the 20th District Senate seat and the 60th District House seat, included tough issues most troubling to Kalamazoo-area youths. Among them: remedies for the teen drop-out rate, teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases; the need for more and accessible after-school programs; families impacted by social services cuts to programs like food stamps; and available mental health services before teens encounter run-ins with the juvenile justice system.

The public forum, "Youth Voices Changing Public Policy," at Mt. Zion Baptist Church on Sept. 25 was sponsored by the Kalamazoo Youth Development Network (KYD Network), Michigan's Children and Michigan Radio's State of Opportunity Project.

"**Your questions** were very well researched, thoughtful and broad, and you kept us all on our toes," said Margaret O'Brien, the Republican 20th District Senate candidate. She addressed teens from the youth groups, Jeter's Leaders, Advocacy Services for Kids (ASK), Calling All Youth (CAY) and the Douglass Youth Advisory Committee. "You've asked questions not a single adult asked us on the campaign trail." Mike Perrin, a Republican candidate in the 60th District House race, called the forum refreshing and informative. "This is one of the best forums I've ever attended in my life. A lot of times you hear the same questions over and over again."

He added: "You are the people who are going to succeed and make America what it is for tomorrow. Keep that thought in mind."

More than one candidate was moved to solicit the students' help on the campaign trail.

"You should come work for my campaign (and) see how all this stuff works. I invite you to get involved," said Democrat Jon Hoadley of the 60th House District race.

Tyronisha Williams, 17, of the Douglass Youth Advisory Committee, said afterward she thought the candidates as a whole could have done a better job of answering her question about policy brutality by specifically addressing ways law enforcement receive better training and improve community relations. Despite that, she said she was pleased that they made the effort to attend and hear the young people's concerns.

"I feel we got our point across. Not a lot of kids are able to tell legislators what they want," Williams said. "I came here to hear what they had to say. I thought it was neat they came to see what issues we had."

Aside from their answers on issues, the candidates scored points for unexpected life advice they gave the students, said KYD Network Director Meg Blinkiewicz. "Several young people told me they especially appreciated that," she said. "Young people appreciate it when an adult says, this is my belief system, take it or leave it. "

Libertarian candidate Lorence Wenke, seeking the 20th Senate seat, was among them. "Life is not fair . . . that's one lesson I learned. And government has a role in making it more fair. Some of you won the education lottery (scholarships through the Kalamazoo Promise program). Some of you will have to work

your way through college or higher career education. The key to success is to take advantage of your free K-12 education. Go onto some kind of career education. Get married before having a child. If you have a family, bring them to worship at some religious organization and be a part of it. You can have a very successful life.”

Blinkiewicz said the forum is part of youth development opportunities taking place in Kalamazoo County and a movement toward a countywide youth cabinet in which teens will continue to discuss issues and possible solutions. KYD Network, among others, is helping to shape a youth master plan for the region. “It’s all about youth voices and leadership,” Blinkiewicz added.

### **Q & A: Keeping an Open Line of Communication With Local Teens**

Among a dozen questions teens asked was this one: If elected, how do you plan to seek input from youth on policy decisions? It was followed up with a related question by moderator Jen White who asked how the candidates would also reach out to the state’s disenfranchised youth who don’t have easy access to government offices.

O’Brien said she would draw on her personal experiences to help her ask good questions of the young people who surround her in her large extended family. “I have kids around all the time. I like asking them questions, and finding out what they’re thinking.”

To White’s question, she said the state cannot single-handedly solve any problem. “We need to partner with churches, schools, those people who best deliver services to make sure we’re listening to people trying to serve people who aren’t connected,” she said. Though communications technology makes reaching out easier, she added “sharing one’s story face to face” has lasting impact.

Wenke, a former Republican member of the House, said he learned a lot from serving as chair of the Higher Education and Career Preparation Committee. “I’m constantly asking my three grandchildren what’s good, what’s bad about school. How can we improve it?” he added.

Wenke added that public officials should also stay in contact with parents of young people to learn more about their concerns.

Sean McCann, Democratic candidate for the 20th state Senate District, said it’s important to connect with youth on a regular basis. That can happen by maintaining a downtown service office. He also urged youths to be proactive and seek him out at school visits and events he attends.

Perrin agreed that youth should seek out public officials and those who run for office. "Tonight we're here for you, to listen to what you have to say, and to listen to your answers. It doesn't matter if you're not 18; get involved. Make a call."

Youths should also reach out via various communications technologies.

Hoadley encouraged the teens to reach him via Facebook or Twitter if they're unable to travel to a district office. "The other way we get input is we gotta show up. I'm really excited about having you in the conversation, so reach out."

He agreed with O'Brien that public officials learn best through a variety of outreach methods, including talking to groups and organizations that work with youth, but that today's youth are masters at online connectivity. "The most reliable way to reach students 18-24 is through YouTube," Hoadley said.

Thanks to the organizations sponsoring the young people who led this conversation:



[Advocacy Services for Kids \(ASK\), Calling All Youth \(CAY\)](#) is the Youth Advisory Board for the Kalamazoo System of Care; a community collaboration effort that seeks to improve mental health services for youth and their families. Young people involved in CAY are between the ages of 15 – 17 and are dealing with the day to day stress of having a mood, emotional or behavior challenge. ASK is a non-profit (501c3) organization dedicated to supporting families and improving the system of care for children’s mental health. Through collaboration with families and community partners, we hope to guide this system toward becoming more family-driven, youth-guided, and culturally competent.

**Douglass Youth Advisory Council** provides the youth perspective to Douglass’ leaders for developing activities that reflect their interests and allow them to express their creativity. DYAC’s mission is to inspire, equip and mobilize youth to take action that can change the world and themselves through service. DYAC has 15 diverse members from middle and high schools throughout the county.



[Jeter’s Leaders](#) is a youth leadership, social change program named by the captain of the New York Yankees, Derek Jeter, and is the signature initiative of his Turn 2 Foundation. The program is designed to promote healthy lifestyles, academic achievement, and social change activism among high school students. Throughout the year, members of the Jeter's Leaders are involved in projects that offer opportunities for them to learn more about themselves and their community. The Leaders are expected to model positive behavior and deliver a message to their peers focusing on staying in school, remaining drug and alcohol free and giving back to the community.

[The Kalamazoo Youth Development Network \(KYD Network\)](#)

mission is to ensure that all Kalamazoo County youth have access to high quality out-of-school time programs that are well coordinated and use resources efficiently so that all of our youth are college and career ready by age 21. KYD Network supports a system of quality and accountability to produce the best outcomes for youth who participate in out-of-school time programming. We seek to ensure that all youth have access to a full array of enrichment and learning opportunities that prepare them for college, work, and life.



**Michigan's Children** has worked through our Sandbox Party to listen to what candidates are saying and try to engage more informed voters. Michigan’s Children is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization, and presents the 2014 youth-led candidate forums as a non-partisan activity. Michigan Radio’s State of Opportunity project is a media sponsor of these events around the state.