



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

Congratulations to forum attendees Curtis Hertel, who won his campaign for the 23rd Senate District and Rep. Andy Schor, who won his re-election campaign for the 68th House District.

Teens Voice Concerns over Jobs, Education and the Foster Care System

Republican and Democratic candidates in state House Districts 68, 71 and 93 and state Senate District 23 and 24 were invited to attend the Lansing Youth-led Candidate Forum. Attending were Curtis Hertel, Jr., Dawn Levey, Andy Schor and Josh Derke.



LANSING – Charlotte Wilks and her husband came from Mason to hear Lansing-area youth share what was on their minds with state House and Senate candidates at Peckham Inc. on Monday night. After listening to concerns about shortcomings in classroom education, the need for mentors, lacking opportunities for after-school employment, and a first-person account of the shortage of good foster homes for teens, she was visibly troubled.

Lawmakers should hear more often from the people, especially youth, impacted by social policies, she said. "I was wondering if legislators ever get a presentation like this," Wilks said after hearing. "All the issues that were brought up. . . This was amazing."

Sponsored by Michigan's Children, Michigan Radio, Peckham, and the youth group, Peace and Prosperity Youth Action Movement, the event offered an opportunity to help youths talk to elected officials and candidates they typically feel disconnected from, said Francine Francis, a Peckham youth advisor. Many were from local high schools including Ingham Academy for at-risk teens. "That's the first step to

making future decisions,” Francis said. “I just wish more people were here from the community to hear this.”



“I was nervous but I calmed down. It turned out nice,” said a 15-year-old named De’Lante. De’Lante had asked the candidates what they would do to promote mentors for teens. “They (the candidates) did good for the most part. If they keep their word, I’ll believe in them more,” he said.

Candidates said the students’ anecdotes and questions had an important impact on them.

“I know what it’s like for some people to get forgotten by the system,” said Josh Derke, a Democratic candidate for the 93rd House District seat. “I want to be a voice for the child who took the time to get up and speak because their worries should be all of ours.”

Dawn Levey, a Democrat seeking the 24th state Senate District seat, praised the students for their “pertinent questions. Children in my opinion are our greatest resources. We need to fund your education and be there for you.”

Curtis Hertel, Jr., a Democrat seeking the 23th state Senate District seat, called it the “most enjoyable forum” he’s attended during the campaign. “I really appreciated the tough questions and hopefully when I’m in the Senate I can come back,” he said.

The account of a 15-year-old girl, Desiree, who has been in and out of foster care in two states her entire life, left many among the audience and office-seekers moved.

Desiree said she returned to Michigan from Florida two years ago hoping to be adopted. Instead, she’s lived in three homes and is now staying in a group home. “It’s not fair to be bounced around, back and forth,” she said. “I just want people who will care about me,” she said afterward.

Moderator Jen White, referring to a recent Michigan Radio series about teens “aging out” of foster care, asked the candidates what programs they would champion to help teens bridge opportunities between the foster care system and independent living.

Hertel called it a complicated issue, not easily answered in a two-minute format, but one that needs a lot of work and study to find solutions to benefit those involved. “And I’m committed to do that,” he said. During the public discussion, he asked Desiree if she would speak privately after the meeting. “It’s a very difficult story. We can talk to your caseworker,” he offered.

Too often, desperate teens are left to their own devices to finish school and end up couch surfing in friends’ homes, said Levey, a teacher in an alternative school in Elsie-Ovid. Some girls decide to have a baby in the hopes of “staying in the system,” she said. “We need to take care of our own, our state’s teenagers, who have so much to offer,” Levey said.

Derke said programs that assist teens in foster care, such as a Genesee County program mentioned by White, should be looked at for other communities.

Q & A: The struggles teens have finding work

James, a 16-year-old attending Lansing Academy, asked the candidates how they would support expanded job opportunities for teens that need and want to work after school.

Levey said school-to-work programs, such as those available to her alternative ed students, should be expanded to more schools, she said. “Thirty-six percent of my students are from a lower economic scale and it’s necessary for them to work for a number of reasons,” she said.

Derke said the state Legislature should negotiate with business people to make more jobs available to teens. “I’m 26 and I’m still trying to get my career up and running,” he said.

State Rep. Andy Schor, of the state House 68th District, said if teens are struggling to find jobs, it’s because they’re not there. “I think more help (is needed) for small businesses to create those jobs and there will be more opportunities for you.”

Hertel, who worked in a movie theater and sold zoo memberships as a teen, said Michigan’s shift from a largely manufacturing to service-based economy has resulted in former laborers taking the service jobs once held by teens. Investing in youth, developing “proper apprenticeship programs,” could help offer teens hope and money to go to college, he said.

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

The Peace & Prosperity Youth Action Movement for Social Justice (PPM) is a coalition of youth organizations that promote positive outcomes and advocate for policy for Ingham County Youth such as peace, diversity, inclusion, healthy lifestyles, dropout prevention, preparation for higher education, and entrepreneurship.



Peckham, Inc. is a nonprofit community rehabilitation organization that values quality, diversity and performance. Our mission is to provide a wide range of opportunities to maximize human potential for persons striving for independence and self-sufficiency. We embrace collaboration, effective resource management and innovative approaches to achieve world-class excellence

Michigan's Children, One Love Global, PPM and Peckham, Inc. present this youth-led candidate forum as a non-partisan activity.

Michigan Radio's State of Opportunity project, Good Girl Radio and Equity Equals are our media sponsors.