

Youth Leaders Build Relationships with State Officials Next Step: Pushing for State Leadership on Critical Local Issues



KALAMAZOO, February 23, 2015 -- Sitting across the table from a handful of local state lawmakers, Lauren, 16, a local high school junior, and her friends were captivated by the adults' answers to questions her team posed – questions related to big issues of the day: how the state decides to spend our money, including on education and college affordability; and addressing the lack of voter turnout and public engagement in elections and policy making.

Lately, the Kalamazoo teen says she's been "freaking out" about college expenses, even though she'll have support from the Kalamazoo Promise when the time comes. She worries, however, about area friends who aren't eligible for the scholarship program. Among them is a friend and athlete willing to switch high schools for a better chance to play his sport and maybe score an athletic scholarship to pay for college.

The intimate gathering of a dozen students and legislators on the campus of Western Michigan University was a collaboration between Michigan's Children and Jeter's Leaders, a youth leadership and social change initiative funded by Kalamazoo native Derek Jeter's Turn 2 Foundation. The event brought together students and politicians who met for the first time on the campaign trail in the fall when local teens led a candidate forum sponsored by Michigan's Children.

The plan is for these and other young people from area programs to meet quarterly with their state lawmakers representing areas in Kalamazoo County to share stories, priorities and concerns. The lawmakers present on Monday included Sen. Margaret O'Brien, state Rep. Jon Hoadley and state Rep. Brandt Iden. State Rep. Aric Nesbitt was represented by his legislative director Jennifer Humphries.

Vice President for Programs Michele Corey said connecting youth and policy-makers creates opportunities for making youth's voices heard, leading to possibilities to reshape policy priorities in the best interest of youth. "Young people's voices have changed the trajectory of policy conversation and have resulted in additional champions for youth-drive solutions in the Legislature, several departments and other local policy-making bodies," Corey said.

The teens in the room on this particular Monday night came away with an understanding of how the daily experiences of ordinary people could shape policy decisions, but only if they speak up. Rep. Hoadley shared the example of an upcoming appropriations hearing where Legislators were going to hear from university presidents who would be urging them to lift tuition caps proposed by the Snyder administration to contain rising college costs, a topic of keen interest for the youth.

Hoadley, a newly elected Democrat representing Kalamazoo and Kalamazoo Township, used the incident to illustrate the need for legislators to hear from all sides on an issue – particularly the perspective of young people. “When we have more college debt than consumer debt, that’s a little messed up. We’ve got to fix that,” Hoadley said. “Decisions are made based on who is talking to us. You are now part of the conversation.”

O’Brien, a first-term Republican senator who previously served in the state House, urged students to become involved in the election process. Answering a question about general low voter turnout in Michigan and nationwide, she shared a personal experience about the importance of showing up at the polls. In one of her campaigns, she lost the election by a single vote, and her recent Senate race was decided by fewer than 50. “I would tell friends how important it is to vote,” she urged them. “Get active. Get engaged.”

Humphries agreed. “The best thing to do is explain to your friends to register to vote. Explain how their vote truly can count,” she said.

Hoadley said lawmakers should enact new ways to make it easier for people to register to vote. An appropriate place to debate those issues is in the legislative committee process. He currently services on the House Elections Committee.

Daylin, 16, said he appreciated Iden’s description of how the legislative process works and how budget decisions are made at all levels of government after he delineated the roles of townships and cities, counties and state government. Iden served as a Kalamazoo County Commissioner before being elected to his first term in the House of Representatives last fall. “I liked how they were so open with every question. I acquired so much knowledge from that,” she said.

Zhi Xin, 17, said she enjoyed hearing “behind the scenes” stories of life at the Capitol. O’Brien said she regularly bakes cookies for colleagues to break the ice and create friends on both sides of the aisle. “If you want to be a public servant, it’s really all about relationships,” she said.

As members of Jeter’s Leaders, the youth serve as role models in the community, participating in a four-year program that promotes healthy lifestyles, academic achievement and social change activism.

YOUTH VOICES CHANGING PUBLIC POLICY: BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS IN 2015

Thanks to the organizations sponsoring the young people leading 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 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. We focus on influencing public policies that can reduce disparities in child outcomes such as the academic achievement gap. Michigan’s Children provides forums for legislators and other policymakers to hear young people describe the problems facing children and youths from their own perspective. Michigan’s Children has been creating opportunities for young people to share their stories, concerns and suggestions directly with policymakers since 1996, and continues to find new ways to provide young people and the supporting adults around them with the tools they need to advocate on their own behalf.