

2016 National Dropout Prevention Network Conference

Detroit Marriott at the Renaissance Center, Detroit MI

Youth-Led Sessions, Tuesday, October 4, 2016



Public policy
in the best interest
of children.

Who better to help us power the students' education agenda than young people themselves? In addition to youth participation in several traditional breakout sessions throughout the conference, we have set aside two hours to learn from them, and only them. These sessions include young people who have experienced significant challenges to their educational success, and young people who have been able to access the kinds of educational and life supports that have improved their trajectory. Participants will hear first-hand from young people who are or have been homeless, live with mental health challenges, experience the foster care system, faced suspension, expulsion and other exclusionary school practices, and young people who just needed more supportive services or a different environment than a traditional high school can provide. These sessions allow young people to tell us about what is essential to power their educational success.

Each extraordinary young person sharing their insights at the conference is supported by an organization or organizations making a difference in their lives and the lives of many others in their communities. This group is representing the many, many other organizations who support young people in Michigan and around the country every day.

OZONE HOUSE, ANN ARBOR/YPSILANTI

Listen to Homeless Youth SpeakOut: Homelessness impacts a young person's success in school in numerous ways (such as attendance, falling behind on assignments and bullying). Teachers and other school staff can provide a crucial role in connecting youth to resources and providing other needed support. Join members of SpeakOUT for an interactive workshop on how educators can better identify, approach and support homeless students. Composed of young adults who have directly experienced homelessness and/or other crisis, SpeakOUT's overall goal is to raise awareness about the needs of and advocate for homeless youth. Through this workshop and other efforts, SpeakOUT aims to shed light on the barriers faced by homeless youth as well as offer strategies to increase support.

Ozone House is a community-based, nonprofit agency in Washtenaw County, Michigan, that helps young people lead safe, healthy, and productive lives through intensive intervention and prevention services. It offers high-quality housing and support programs and services that provide support, intervention, training, and assistance to runaway, homeless, and high-risk youth and their families. Through these 24/7 support services, Ozone House helps youth develop essential life skills, improve their relationships, and enhance their self-image so that they may realize their full potential for growth and happiness.

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FOSTERING SUCCESS MICHIGAN AND THE MICHIGAN YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES INITIATIVE, STATEWIDE

Partnership for Persistence: Young adults with experience in foster care share examples of successful partnership between students and professionals to support them as they navigate their way through the education pipeline. This includes understanding the education challenges unique to the experience of foster care and the role that educators and community partners can play to keep students on track and in class.

Youth voice is not only important to our work, it is the central driving force for the work we do. To be successful, we must include the voices of the students we serve. FSM engages students in a variety of ways. Some examples include: writing blogs for our FSM website Student Stories page, reviewing our FSM Guides and website toolkits, participating as peer leaders in FSM Summits, and co-presenting at conferences. FSM is always seeking feedback from the students we serve and adapting our projects to reflect the knowledge we gain through the insights they share with us.

FSM also engages students with experience in foster care in the development of a variety of our projects. This means that students have input on the development of our FSM Guides series, FSM website toolkits, and networking activities that FSM hosts in the community. In 2015, a Student Advisory Board helped guide the direction of the FSM Statewide Summit. In 2016, FSM worked with a variety of professional partners, including the Enterprising

From Foster Care to Entrepreneur: He Found Success with Help from Enterprising Youth Program

Andre Foster, at 24, acknowledges he is facing a much different future thanks to the support and friendship he received in his teen years from his “second family,” the youth and adults associated with the Enterprising Youth Program (EYP) in Macomb County. Without EYP’s influence, he said he wouldn’t have had the professional mentoring and support he needed to prepare him for the lucrative business career he now faces.

As a youth, he entered foster care when his mother was unable to care for him and when he went to live with his grandparents in Sterling Heights. While most youths from foster care struggle with educational and career attainment, Foster found hope and help when he was referred to EYP, a program for teens 14-25 from foster care designed to help teach youths about business development, self-employment, job training and developing social capital. Through EYP, he was able to access educational programs to help him plan a future as a business owner in the trucking logistics field. Program staff and adults also helped him find the job he has now, with Detroit’s Greendoor Initiative, a nonprofit.

When his grandfather died while Foster was in high school, he took jobs wherever he could find them -- in construction, retail and in call centers -- to help with household expenses. But through EYP, he found scholarships that enabled him to focus on a career plan and enrolled in an auto technical degree program in a school in Ohio. Recently, another Fostering Success scholarship helped him cover the cost of taking a freight brokering license course at Central Michigan University that he needs to open his own business. Foster is in the process of transferring to a University of Michigan program in Macomb County to complete his college course work.

“If I didn’t have these resources to finish a degree, I probably would be in rough shape,” he said. “Not all kids have access to these groups. But EYP opened doors for me to further my life.”

In addition, the relationships he developed with staff and students at EYP created the valuable network of support necessary for his life today. “We treat each other like brothers and sisters. We are like family for each other,” Foster said. “It is a community.”

Youth Program, and alumni of foster care to host the Michigan Young Leader Advocacy Summit which featured breakout sessions led by young leaders with experience in foster care. We also have a student ambassador on the FSM team who participates in our team meetings and works closely with us to ensure student voice is integrated into our various projects.

The title of our session is Partnerships for Persistence. We believe that partnerships with students and between the various professionals and supportive adults involved in the life of a student are critical for success in education. Without these partnerships, students are often left in the role of interpreter between the silos of education and child welfare. We want attendees of our session to leave with not only a deeper understanding of the complexity of the systems that students in foster care are navigating, but also strategies that educators and education staffs can use to effectively partner with child welfare professionals and strategies to effectively engage and partner with students who experience foster care.

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SWARTZ CREEK ACADEMY, SWARTZ CREEK

Empowering Students With Technology: Students will explain the benefits of utilizing digital portfolios to empower their position within the global market. This includes demonstrating the ways in which a digital portfolio professionally showcases their interests, skills, and talents; advances the development of 21st century skills (specifically effective oral/written communication and digital literacy); and fosters sharing and collaboration. Examples of digital portfolios and electronic resumes/curriculum vitae will be shared.

Swartz Creek Academy is an alternative education high school within Swartz Creek Community School District in Genesee County, Michigan. The Academy's educators believe that building a positive and safe culture is the first step to being successful, both inside and outside of the classroom.

Alternative education typically serves students who have been unsuccessful within the traditional model of education; for a number of reasons, they could not conform to or navigate the expectations of the established system. For all students to be successful, it is imperative to design a system flexible enough to meet the needs of the individual rather than the needs of the system.

The Swartz Creek Academy has evolved from serving as a restrictive "last chance or you're out" model to one that encourages students to take responsibility for their own education. Students have the challenge and opportunity to advance academically at their own pace through a program of their own design, as well as develop strong character and leadership skills. Each student's individual plan incorporates goals for course completion, career and technical skill development, and opportunities for personal enrichment. Although supported by teachers and mentors, the student voice serves as the primary source and guide for the overarching educational plan. By transitioning to online course platforms, providing opportunities for service, requiring students to articulate a plan with goals and benchmarks, and incorporating mechanisms for accountability, students are empowered to take responsibility for their own educational path. Although graduation requirements provide a framework, the "how" requirements are completed is entirely individualized and student led.

The Swartz Creek Academy is proud of its Key Club, sponsored by the Swartz Creek Kiwanis Club. The Key Club holds weekly meetings, operates using Roberts Rules of Order and has elected officers. Membership is open to all and includes representation from each student club. Fundamentally the Key Club is service-oriented, but the Academy also uses it as a place for students to share ideas and provide feedback and input to the Academy administration and staff.

Students will be speaking specifically about the benefits of utilizing digital portfolios to professionally showcase their interests, skills and talents. Through the presentation, conference-goers will have an improved understanding of digital portfolios and their application, and ideally envision how they can be used in their own school or program.

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CROSSROADS HIGH SCHOOL, KENTWOOD

At Our Crossroads: This workshop provides participants with a student panel discussion where Kentwood Public Schools' Crossroads High School students share their personal experiences and perspective about the obstacles that may lead to students dropping out of school. Students will present strategies that help to engage, motivate, empower, and allow students to stay in school. Students will highlight relational capacity, showcase service-learning, and student leadership.

Crossroads High School is an alternative education high school in Kent County, Michigan, providing an educational opportunity for students who may want a smaller, safe and respectful environment. Using a variety of approaches – including Capturing Kids Hearts techniques and built in academic accountability through a day program, night program and ARCH program – Crossroads provides appropriate educational opportunities while guiding and encouraging the non-traditional learner toward graduation and meaningful employment.

Experience teaches us to put together student groups that include those perceived to be leaders as well as those who need something extra to help empower them. Through service learning and reaching outside of yourself, you realize you can have an impact. When students have a voice in what the program is, they take on leadership roles in reaching out, getting donations, and really shaping where it goes. Students, for example, exhibit true ownership in our literacy project, which involves mentoring elementary school kids. Even though it's been running for several years, students feel like it's their own personal project. Years later, students have shared what a difference service to others has made. It helps them to reach outside their personal woes and make that connection.

Our service-learning has not only changed our high school in this way, it has changed the entire district's view of alternative education. People change their perspective when they can see that students can drop out for many, many reasons. This has led to our school, district, and community now having a strong focus on helping others. Every student participates in service, including drives and mentoring. They decide how these projects operate -- from reaching out and fund-raising to deciding who participates or how responsibilities get divided.

Personal Connections Strengthened Her Resolve

The headline in the school bulletin reads “From Troubled, to Leader, Award Winner.” Under it is a picture of smiling Alexis Sell, wearing a floppy, Cat-in-the-Hat style hat, and reading a storybook to a group of young children. Alexis is a happy senior with ambition and drive, thanks to the supportive relationships she found at Crossroads Alternative High School in Grand Rapids.

But it wasn’t always that way. As a freshman in a nearby traditional high school, Alexis was suffering from anxiety and other mental health issues without family support. A straight-A student in middle school, she admits she “messed up” in high school, lacked motivation and finally stopped attending school. A guidance counselor nudged her to take online courses, but Alexis knew she needed more structure in her life – structure that comes from attending school every day. Near the end of her freshman year, a friend attending Crossroads, an alternative school, suggested she give it a try.

At Crossroads, she was able to work at her own pace and found teachers willing and able to offer support and understanding whenever she needed it. “The staff knew that I had a difficult home life and they did what they could to help me,” said Alexis, now a member of the school’s Student Leadership Team. “They see the potential in you and try to help you make something out of it.”

“Everyone you meet at Crossroads at some point was close to not succeeding in high school, dropping out, or being pushed someplace else,” she added. “As a kid, I had no parental support, was doing everything on my own. Some kids go through so much and it’s hard for them to focus (in school).”

Alexis said she understands that teens are often difficult and disrespectful with teachers, making it hard for teachers to help them. At Crossroads, she found teachers willing to offer her help despite her personal struggles. She advises teachers to “connect with students on a personal level and make sure they know you’re there to help them.”

Now looking at various Michigan colleges, Alexis is considering studying law but is open to finding a career “that makes a difference.” Her teachers say she already has.

Read more about Alexis:

<http://www.schoolnewsnetwork.org/index.php/2015-16/i-want-to-something-big/>

Students taking on leadership roles, having their voice heard, and participating in service-learning impacts them in a positive way, and ultimately attendance improves. If people count on you, you make sure you’re there that day. Teachers can’t do everything; we have to empower students to do it themselves, and we do that through community leadership, service, and relational capacity. If we could have other organizations take a closer look at service in addition to building relational capacity (starting a relationship in a way that makes everyone feel acknowledged and valued), we will add to our success.

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MARION SCHOOL DISTRICT; HENRY FORD HIGH SCHOOL, DETROIT SUPPORTED BY NEUTRAL ZONE, ANN ARBOR/STATEWIDE

Students Directing Real School Change: This session will highlight two successful student advisories in two very different communities. In rural Marion, Michigan, Marion's Peer Advisory Council of Teens (MPAT) has been running for four years, leading several projects throughout the district around school climate and improvement. In Detroit, Henry Ford High School's Student Advisory formed in the 2015-16 school year and has led initiatives on increasing positive behavior and attitude across the student body, including work supporting the positive behavioral intervention supports program.

Henry Ford High School in Detroit and Marion High School in Marion have implemented their own Youth Advisory structures as part of an initiative supported by the Neutral Zone. The Neutral Zone, headquartered within a diverse, youth-driven teen center based in Ann Arbor, Michigan, has supported nearly 25 high schools across the state in developing Advisory groups. Through this work, students have participated in school consolidation efforts, helped lead the work of school-based health centers, worked on improving student-staff relationships and even help craft a \$3 million school bond proposal. Students who participate in Advisory have made gains in several areas, including becoming more engaged, feeling empowered to have a voice in their school reform and developing 21st century skills (goal setting, communication, collaboration, planning, reflection and leading).

At Henry Ford, youth voice is important simply because if decisions are going to impact students, we need to hear

Student Advisors Help Change School Culture for the Better

When high school sophomore Judy Richey-Johnson was contemplating a move from her Detroit neighborhood, she also started making inquiries about high schools in the region. A former elementary school teacher of hers that she admired was working as a principal at Dearborn's Henry Ford High School and that prompted Judy to take a look.

Desiring a learning environment different from the one she was leaving – fueled by fights and conflicts – Judy was encouraged by what she saw at Ford. The school was working hard to improve its educational climate by engaging students in organized club activities for positive change. She liked what she saw in Ford's Student Advisory organization, one of 25 in Michigan, which she described as a school development group.

"My classes were challenging enough. I needed to keep my focus (on learning)," said Judy, now 17 and a senior at Ford.

The program was noticeably creating opportunities for students to demonstrate good behavior like in a school talent show Judy helped organize. While improving school climate, the experience also helped her find her own voice. "Student Advisory for me really changed my high school experience," Judy said. "I used to be a loner, kept to myself. Student Advisory required me to interact with my peers and teachers. It opened my mind to new things. And it opened doors."

Today, Judy is the president of Ford's Student Advisory, while juggling school work and an afterschool job at Little Caesar's. Upon graduation, she plans to join the Army and go to college to become an anesthetist. Judy also credits her grandmother, an accountant, and role model for encouraging her by her strong work ethic and drive. Judy says when parents are invested in their children's school, as her grandmother is, children benefit. "Parents need to know what's going on in their student's lives – go to parent-teacher conferences—be more involved. If parents are not engaged, then maybe teachers can fill that role as a role model."

their view points and take all things into consideration. Working with the Student Advisory Action Team at Henry Ford has only solidified staff beliefs that youth have incredible ideas and very real experiences that lend to understanding how to support certain problems. Teachers, administrators and security guards have all supported youth-led events, developed by the students themselves, that reward positive student behavior. We've benefited from a big culture shift using a student created system for our entire school as a school wide PBIS system.

At Marion, the students feel empowered when they have a voice. They "own" this group, have high expectations for themselves, and hold each other to those expectations. Before MPACT, it seemed that students just had leadership titles without responsibilities. Today, they constantly reflect on their Mission Statement and whether or not they are reaching their goals. Student members make a serious time commitment and are held accountable. The students meet with our principal once a month to bring him important suggestions from their peers. Likewise, he talks to them about what concerns him and runs ideas by them. This valuable communication results in recommendations for the student handbook and many other areas of school operations. The Board of Education has agreed to allow a student liaison to attend board meetings to give their opinion on Board of Education matters.

At Henry Ford, we want conference-goers to take away that the student voice has POWER! The youth that are part of the Student Advisory Action Team are the ones chomping at the bit to get it started this year. They came asking for our first meeting and then planned the rest of them out. They are the driving force behind every movement, idea and event. Adult supporters are honored to be working with such intelligent, caring and innovative young adults.

For MPACT, conference participants must take away how powerful a small group of dedicated students can become. MPACT is the "pulse" of our building, and have truly embraced this opportunity to have their voice heard not only by their peers, but also by staff and administration as well. They run almost all of the school activities as well as the school store, implemented a grant writing process enabling other student-led groups to write grants for MPACT to fund their projects, and moved to recognize all senior members at graduation with Student Leadership Cords for the contributions they have made to Marion High School.

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OAKLAND OPPORTUNITY ACADEMY, OAKLAND COUNTY

***Supporting Opportunities:** This workshop provides participants with a student panel discussion where Oakland Opportunity Academy students share their personal experiences and perspective about the obstacles that may lead to students dropping out of school. Students will discuss how different learning environments serve to support them, or contribute to their disengagement, and will make suggestions about how traditional and alternative middle and high school settings can better serve challenged learners.*

The Oakland Opportunity Academy (OOA) is an alternative education high school in Oakland County, Michigan that offers a unique environment for students to receive their diplomas, plus the technical, academic, and workplace skills necessary for career and college preparation. OOA offers personalized academic instruction as well as career-focused training opportunities to provide the highest level of curriculum, meet the needs of a diverse population of students, and maintain the highest level of quality possible.

It has to be for and about the students at every step of the game. We can create systems that allow student needs to be served, but we must listen to the voices of the individual students to hope to achieve the success we measure, i.e. retention, graduation, courses completed, attendance, behavior issues. Students tell us what they need, and what is critical to their lives at this moment. It is our job to listen, and to put the systems and people in place to address these needs.

Specific examples in OOA include:

1. Curriculum and instruction delivery, moving away from an on-line format into direct instruction, amplified with subject area tutors. Students behind in credits said, "I can't learn from a computer! I need a teacher!" We agreed, and we put a real teacher in place for them.
2. Student trauma: For students who have not attended school in the past year, severe anxiety prevents them from entering a school building. We find these voices are especially hard to hear. Therefore, our focus is on meeting students where they are, seeking to understand their trauma, and providing them with small steps to begin resolution. This work requires very careful listening to student voice, albeit so very quiet.
3. Attendance requirements: We listen to students who cannot get to school for their complex reasons and life circumstances. We provide a potential attendance waiver for these students for the required time and circumstance, while still holding them accountable for achievement, communication with teachers and course completion. Student voice for this variation is essential in formulating the path to successful high school completion.

Students at OOA may be involved with the Student Leadership Council, creating service projects, student activities, and participation in county-wide leadership events. SLC serves as a voice for the student population, and determines annual events, fundraisers and outreach activities.

Conference attendees will leave the session understanding that the students who participate in our program are amazing. They are striving to survive and complete high school in spite of multiple risk factors. They are the real heroes in our story, and deserve our total respect, support and admiration.

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YOUTH ACTION MICHIGAN, DETROIT, YPSILANTI AND JACKSON

Youth Leading Action: Student Advocacy Center of Michigan's (SAC's) Youth Action Michigan (YAM) is a space for student organizers, supported by caring adult allies, to make change within their own school, and at the policy level. Join YAM members and allies from Detroit, Jackson and Ypsilanti, Michigan as they lead participants through interactive dialogues and activities that address the real impact of zero tolerance policy on our nation's students. The session will culminate with an opportunity for participants to critically examine their role as potential allies to our communities' most marginalized students, and to identify steps they can take in the immediate future to support the youth in their lives.

Overcoming Obstacles, His Drive to Succeed is Strong

As a sophomore at Lincoln High School in Ypsilanti, DaQuann Harrison was bullied by other students from his football team to the point of tears. Scared and depressed, he asked a school security guard what he should do. The guard, also a coach for the team, warned him about the consequences of fighting – if he retaliated, he would lose the privilege of being on the team. Yet, DaQuann received no help for the bullying.

Today, he regrets the action that led to his arrest in 2015, expulsion and nine-month probation – the result of the school's Zero Tolerance Policy. DaQuann, who described himself as a “hyper individual” then, had put an empty BB gun into his backpack to use to scare the boys who were bullying him. “I was wrong,” he said.

Since then, DaQuann has turned his life around. Through the Student Advocacy Center of Michigan (SAC) and its “Check and Connect” program, he received an advocate's help during court proceedings and was referred to a year-long, alternative education program nick-named WAVE (the Washtenaw Alliance for Virtual Education) to continue his education. He's built strong relationships with peers and program staff. Advocate Anell Eccleston is a huge supporter. “He has been working very hard to better himself in almost every aspect,” he said.

DaQuann said the program helped him stabilize his life. With his father in prison and his mother not in his life, he was living “back and forth with family members.” The center helped him to establish a home base with his grandparents. He got a job as a federal liaison for SAC in Michigan and the national Dignity in Schools campaign, focused on the school-to-prison pipeline. “Honestly, they just gave me hope,” he said of SAC. “It's had a great impact on me, helping me grow educationally and professionally. They helped me grow as a human being and helped me find my self-worth.

Returning to regular school in spring 2016, DaQuann, now 17, will graduate from Ypsilanti Community High School in a few weeks. Popular with students and staff, he is recognized for overcoming obstacles and for his motivation to earn a diploma. His future plans include earning a doctorate in social work and working in law enforcement.

DaQuann speaks out routinely at high schools and college campuses on the need for educational reform and the dangers of the school-to-prison pipeline, including with the national group, My Brother's Keeper. “I really want a change, and I'm doing all this because I want to make an impact on this world,” he said. “I'm tired of seeing so many young black men go through the cycle of suspension and expulsion – and black male incarceration.”

Youth Action Michigan is a student-led, youth organizing, social justice initiative in Ypsilanti, Jackson and Detroit, Michigan, that builds self and collective power to create positive change in schools and communities with the support of caring adult allies. A part of the Student Advocacy Center of Michigan, YAM's focus is to address school push-out and the school-to-prison pipeline in collaboration with the national Dignity In Schools Campaign. Following the research-based "teen advisory council" model of the Neutral Zone and the Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, the program aims to give youth more support in their lives, equip them with 21st Century Skills, and create positive change in the community and school. SAC works to ensure that students are aware they have rights and those rights are spoken for in serious situations and circumstances.

As a program, SAC implements youth voice in a number of ways, but one that stands out is our integration of Youth Action Michigan, our youth-led community organizing program, and Check & Connect, our evidence-based education mentorship program. By integrating youth services and youth organizing, SAC ensures that young people most in need of support (Check & Connect prioritizes students who are most excluded from school, including those who have been suspended multiple times, or expelled from school) are the ones leading the agency's work for policy change. The same youth who receive mentorship through Check & Connect, who have been referred to our agency due to a lack of engagement in school, are those representing SAC in Lansing, when we meet with policymakers and execute actions designed to push change. This approach ensures our work is always guided by the experiences of youth with the greatest stake in campaign outcomes.

In Youth Action Michigan, students are encouraged to guide discussions and formulate their own ideas about strategy, with support from adult staff, interns and volunteers. This year, our members have elected to build an arts- and media-based, long-term campaign to address the impact of the school-to-prison pipeline. Youth are the people who are most directly impacted by the school-to-prison pipeline, and so they have the greatest reason to directly invest in a solution. Youth decided they wanted to take this approach because it incorporated the arts, which is something each of them is passionate about. This is how we organize. Youth decide on the issue they want to prioritize, and pick an approach that gets them excited. Adults support with execution.

We would like conference-goers to understand what the school-to-prison pipeline is in a broad sense, and take away that school push-out affects all kinds of students, impacting the dropout rate. We'd also like participants to be able to better understand how each of them can take specific steps to address the impact of the school-to-prison pipeline with the youth they serve. Participants should each leave with at least one short-term, manageable commitment.

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LANSING COMMUNITY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA COMPLETION INITIATIVE, INGHAM, EATON, CLINTON COUNTIES

Partnership for Second Chances: Young people participating in Lansing Community College's (LCC) High School Diploma Completion Initiative (HSDCI) will share their experiences that highlight the power of community college and business partnership for dropout recovery. HSDCI classes are LCC courses where students earn college credit concurrently while completing diploma requirements. While HSDCI courses are mainstream college courses that are part of curricula at LCC, instructional methods at HSDCI are customized to maximize the learning opportunity for high school students. HSDCI graduates have options to seek employment, further education, or a combination of both as they complete their college studies. A team of partners, including LCC, Ingham Intermediate School District (IISD) and other business and industry leaders are committed to developing college-level curriculum for diploma completion as well as advanced training for work in high-demand technical careers.

The High School Diploma Completion Initiative (HSDCI) is a unique opportunity located in Lansing, Michigan for mid-Michigan students who have disconnected from their high school to jump-start their education and career preparation. HSDCI is designed to provide students with the tools to be successful in a demanding society and career. HSDCI classes are Lansing Community College courses where students earn college credit concurrently while completing diploma requirements. While HSDCI courses are mainstream college courses that are part of curricula at LCC, instructional methods at HSDCI are customized to maximize the learning opportunity for high school students.

Youth voice is particularly important because too often students feel as if things are done "to" them rather than "with" or even "for" them. In order for youth to be invested, there need to be opportunities for them to regularly and meaningfully contribute.

In the HSDCI program at LCC, we use a few tools to help ensure we hear our student's voices and help them to build advocacy capacity. Reflection is one pillar of our program. We ask for individual and group reflections after any program event, and based on students' input we incorporate changes. For example, we are now working to further improve our new-student orientation process. Orientation will change from a full-day, week-long event to a three-day event. This system regularly encourages students to let us know about things that they feel positive about, items/processes that should be improved, and questions or issues they are having. Our job is to receive and incorporate their input to the best of our ability.

There is a need for communities to provide opportunities for students to do education differently. Online learning and credit recovery can help SOME, but not all, students for whom the traditional education system does not work. Small learning communities foster rapport, relationships, communication and accountability. While full wrap-around support is the ideal, there are ways to help ensure that needed services are available for students in many communities. Finally, providing a systematic introduction to how college works, such as we do in our small learning community at LCC's HSDCI is particularly important and very valuable for most any transitioning student.

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THE CHILDREN'S CENTER, DETROIT

Advice from The Experts: Young people involved with the Children's Center mental health, foster care, and after-school services will be sharing their experiences and recommendations for how systems can and must work together to better serve students and families with mental health challenges. They will share the importance of utilizing community partners to build allies in order to push reform, change and investment.

The Children's Center (TCC) is a nonprofit organization in Detroit, Michigan, committed to helping children and families shape their own futures. It is recognized as one of the largest, most diverse, and comprehensive frontline child-serving agencies in Michigan. The Children's Center offers a variety of specialized services, including programs in autism treatment and support, bereavement, psychiatric services, teenage parenting, foster care and adoptions, and outpatient treatment.

So often adults format services for the benefit of youth, without giving youth a meaningful voice. At The Children's Center, youth are treated as subject-matter experts. For example, Youth United and the Detroit Youth Move Advisory Committee, have conducted focus groups and are conducting surveys at TCC and other community locations with youth, asking their opinions about whether or not the agencies from whom they receive service are youth-friendly and welcoming. That information is considered in the planning and evaluation of services, environmental structuring, etc.

Youth are involved in the governance of The Children's Center at every Level. Youth sit on committees with fiduciaries, with the TCC Board of Directors, and with Consumer Council acting as consultants. They act as active agents of TCC with community partners and engage other youth in leadership formats. Youth go to college classrooms and conferences to present about their work, and how engagement of youth in governance of various efforts is value-added. Youth are part of the week-long agency orientation of every staff person, new to TCC.

Youth have conducted a candidate forum where the hopefuls learned that the young audience asked thought-provoking questions and wanted serious answers. They educated the candidates on some potent concerns of the youth. Additionally, they conducted a voter's registration drive to additionally empower and motivate other youth who were of voting age. At TCC, we don't limit opportunities for youth to just change the agency, we support them in efforts to extend their reach to effecting change in the world.

The most critical learning points for conference-goers to take away are: youth often have an intensity of experience that can inform important processes for which they will be end-users; youth are more than just figureheads, they have opinions and function; if youth feel heard and positively utilized within a process (like the educational process), that in itself could be a tool for retention, as well as for distraction from negative involvements; and engagement takes into consideration the youth reality as well as the adult reality.

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DEVELOPING K.I.D.S., DETROIT

Getting to the Grassroots: Young people involved with Developing K.I.D.S. in Detroit will share their recommendations for change with conference participants, including ways to engage youth, parents and other community resources in supporting high school graduation. Developing K.I.D.S. works with young people, families, churches and other community partners to strengthen Detroit neighborhoods by guiding youth in their mental, physical and educational growth; helping to strengthen and empower young adults; and providing opportunities for all to become strong contributors to their community.

Developing Kingdoms In Different Stages (Developing K.I.D.S.) is a nonprofit organization in Detroit, Michigan, that aims to strengthen urban communities by guiding youth in their mental, physical and educational growth; helping to strengthen and empower young adults; and providing opportunities for all to become strong contributors to their community. Developing K.I.D.S. services its community through three servicing areas: Prevention, Family Management and Community Support. Based on the philosophy that leaders will be developed and nurtured in every community, Developing K.I.D.S. understands that each Kingdom (community) will be developed in a different stage or pace based on the needs and risk factors of that community. The mission is fulfilled through efforts to reach out to families instead of individuals. While there is support for individuals, the focus is on working together as a group/family to bring about change; therefore, building strong communities.

Our mission proudly states that we strengthen urban communities by guiding youth in their mental, physical and educational growth. We help strengthen and empower young adults and provide opportunities for all to become strong contributors. We take every effort to work together with our participants, their families, stakeholders and the community to bring about change. Our tag line is "bringing forth leaders of tomorrow." This would not be possible without youth

Confidence Grows When Others Believe in You

A quick and strong learner, Destyneee Nixon started school ahead of the game, skipping the third grade, and always having a strong desire to move forward. As a high school senior at Ferndale High School, her confidence had taken a turn, and she made a regrettable mistake involving a minor store theft. In response, she was court-ordered to attend Developing K.I.D.S., and apply herself to their career and college preparedness program after-school. Frustrated at first by the new demands on her schedule, Destyneee quickly found herself relieved and blessed by her new experiences. The welcoming reception she received from the staff and students, she said, gave her renewed confidence to challenge herself.

"The staff there accepted me. They were so welcoming. It became a valuable experience," she said. "It helped me figure out what I want to do career-wise. When someone believes in you, it makes you want to push harder."

Because of her leadership skills at Developing K.I.D.S., Destyneee started to lead workshops on life skills for younger children in grades K-3. She helped them learn about controlling emotions, the meaning of friendship, trust, and specific skills like learning to tie shoes. "I liked watching the kids grow and take something from my workshops," she said. "Watching them have fun, and bringing back what I taught them, I knew I made an impact."

They made an impact on her too. Now a graduate, she plans to begin online college courses soon to prepare for work in child care. "When someone believes in you, it helps you go far," she said of the staff at Developing K.I.D.S. "It makes you want to push harder. It makes a difference when you have someone on your side."

voice. We know that they vote with their feet. If they are not happy, they will not attend; needless to say, we listen. We serve youth ages 5-18 and our high school group continues to draw the largest numbers. Many days there is not an empty seat in the room.

The youth are an integral part of our organization. They serve as the youth voice on our board of directors. They are included in our planning process. We ask for their input on every aspect of Developing K.I.D.S. They set the group norms, as well as lead and mentor younger youth in the program. We are in the process of starting an advisory youth council. We have strong youth leaders that we are able to employ each summer. Many of these leaders are college students and are unable to work throughout the school year. We are training and building capacity within our current high school group. It is our hope that they are able to plan and lead with little assistance moving forward.

The most critical take-aways from our session are to: listen to what the youth need and want, and include them on implementing the plans; better understand the challenges that our youth face daily that impact their education; gain a better understanding of engaging young people and growing with them.

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WASHTENAW TECHNICAL MIDDLE COLLEGE, SOUTHEAST MICHIGAN

Building Successful Pathways: Students will share how their experience with middle college differs from traditional high schools, and how they have been helping to lead their own educational experience.

Washtenaw Technical Middle College was one of the first middle colleges in Michigan, and continues to build and change based on the experiences of its students.

Washtenaw Technical Middle College (WTMC) is a Michigan Public School Academy chartered by and located on the campus of Washtenaw Community College (WCC) in Ann Arbor, Michigan. WTMC students jointly enroll as full-time students at WCC, and are required to meet all pre-requisites, requirements and conditions of Washtenaw Community College students. WTMC students graduate with a high school diploma and a certificate and/or an associate degree from WCC. WTMC transforms high school students into successful college students by providing meaningful educational choices, individualized advising and skill-based instruction.

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TRANSITION TO INDEPENDENCE PROGRAM, WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY

Empowering Student Voices to Affect Change in the Foster Care System: The Transition to Independence Program at Wayne State University (TIP Wayne State) provides wraparound services to WSU students who are or have been in the foster care system. In addition to case management services, financial assistance and academic help, the program provides its students with opportunities to speak about their experiences in foster care and suggest changes to the current system. This workshop will explore the TIP Wayne State program and ways in which it has helped foster care youth advocate for themselves, most notably at legislative events like KidSpeak, an initiative of Michigan's Children.

Student voice drives TIP Wayne State's legislative mission. Events like KidSpeak allow foster care youth to voice their concerns about the child welfare system and suggest ways to improve it. It is through these types of events that TIP Wayne State can pursue policies that will make a difference to youth in foster care. For example, students at one KidSpeak event spoke about identity theft while in foster care and its effects on their credit and finances. As a result of student concerns, TIP Wayne State lobbied for a state law that would require foster care agencies to provide regular credit checks for children in foster care.

We want conference goers to know that by working closely with youth in an empowering way, you can build them up to make effective change in their lives and communities.

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