



Bay Area Students Press Candidates to Detail Their Support for Afterschool, Education Funding

Bay City, Mich. – Eighteen-year-old Bay City Central High School senior Darold Newton, Jr. kicked off the first in a series of youth- and family-led candidate forums across Michigan in the weeks before the 2018 General Election with a direct, no-nonsense question. Active in the local NAACP chapter, Darold wanted to know what candidates for state House and Senate would do to help families ensnarled in mass deportations at the southern border, the result of the Trump Administration's hardline immigration policy. He said he found the specter of parents and children forcibly torn apart painful to watch. "That's when my passion started to spark," he said of his local political activism.



His wasn't the only passion sparked among the 14 students from middle- and high- schools from the Bay City and Saginaw who faced state House and Senate candidates seated just passed arcade games and basketball hoops inside the auditorium of the Boys and Girls Club of the Great Lakes Bay Region. Attending were Republican Kevin Daley in the 31st Senate race; Republican Susan Kay Kowalski in the 96th State House race; and 98th State House candidates Democrat Sarah Schulz and Republican Annette Glenn, who arrived during closing statements.

Though the candidates deflected answering Darold's question saying state officials had no authority over federal policymaking, the candidates did field a range of tough questions – the most dominant ones focused on support for afterschool and other educational issues. They also asked the candidates if they would work to ensure that all youth had equal opportunity to achieve a strong future. Other queries shed light on the students' genuine concern for protecting students against mass school shootings, educating under-age young people on the effects of marijuana should recreational cannabis be approved for those 21 years and older, reducing instances of childhood abuse and neglect, supporting young people aging out of foster care, and helping the elderly pay for their prescriptions.

Several students posed questions meant to elicit support for if not awareness of the limitations of afterschool funding in Michigan, including whether the candidates would push to dedicate state funding to afterschool programs which Michigan currently does not do. The only significant government funding for after-school comes from the federally funded 21st Century Community Learning Centers grants which serve 21,467 students in 249 communities. Local partners also contribute money to make community programs operate. But for every Michigan student enrolled in afterschool, three more are waiting for funded slots.

Daley, a Lapeer County farmer who served in the state House for six years before being term-limited, said there are many competing interests vying for a piece of the state budget. "There only so much funding to go around. Obviously, it's important to have afterschool programs if anyone gets the money funneled to it."

Schulz, who works for a nonprofit helping young adults, said she grew up home alone after school in Flint in the '80s: "(Thousands) of kids are unsupervised after school. They're so important for the safety and learning of

kids and their families. They allow parents to have the time and space to have jobs and an education. I do not support cutting these programs.”

Kowalski, a retiree of the Bay City Water Treatment Plant and former student teacher, agreed afterschool funding is vital because most parents are working outside the home when school’s out. “The last thing we need are cuts in afterschool programs for kids. I definitely support more funding and bringing back anything that’s been cut.” She said she would look at the state’s Lottery Fund for funding afterschool programs.



On the question of ensuring all youth have equal opportunities to achieve a bright future, the candidates offered varying responses.

“That’s a bigger question than I’ve heard from many adults,” Daley said. He suggested that youth consider training in the skilled trade and vocational education programs that lead to good-paying jobs as an option to a college education.

“Most people are born with same potential, but we don’t all have the same opportunities,” Schulz said. The disparities are stark with students in Midland Schools each receiving a Chromebook laptop but students in nearby Bangor Township in Bay County sharing one laptop per classroom, she said. “In Detroit, they sit in their classrooms with their coats on. Those aren’t the same opportunity. If we can level that playing field – that’s where we start.”

Kowalski agreed that there are unequal advantages among school districts. “That’s up to the school districts, teacher, parents and kids and everybody” to remedy, she said, however.

Afterward, adults in the audience expressed pride in the youths’ performance.

“Getting kids involved in the political process at a young age really makes sense,” said Darold’s father, Darold Newton, Sr. “I’m very proud of Darold Jr. getting involved in politics early. In this way he becomes aware of issues affecting himself and his community.”

Jim Brennan, program director for the Bay City Public Schools 21st Century After-School Program, said he welled up with pride during the event. “They were all exemplary,” he said. “It takes a lot of guts to talk to people about these issues. Their afterschool experiences have provided these students with an opportunity to express themselves, to continue their learning, and to blossom into caring adults that can help our future.”

Michigan After-School Partnership Executive Director Mary Sutton said she was likewise encouraged for the future after witnessing the students’ enthusiasm, engagement, and hearing their insights. “They asked very thoughtful questions, not only about themselves, but you could really see they spent some time thinking about their communities and where they fall in the bigger picture. It was awesome.”

This was the first 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 Michigan After-School Partnership. Other partners were: The Youth Advisory Committee of the Bay Area Community Foundation; The Boys & Girls Club of the Great Lakes Bay Region; The Bay City Public Schools 21st Century Community Learning Centers; The Rock Center for Youth Development; The Clare Gladwin RESD 21st Century S.P.A.R.K.S.; The Great Lakes Bay Regional Alliance, STEM Initiative; The Bay-Arena ISD; The United Way of Bay County; The Michigan After-School Partnership; The Michigan Alliance of Boys & Girls Clubs.

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.