

Southwest Michigan

MARK WEDEL | THURSDAY, OCTOBER 25, 2018

What happens when youth get a chance to ask politicians the questions?



From right, clockwise, Rachel Cochran, Tyler Lynch (in blue), Michelle Kudzia, Denika Dunning, Kori Sonnevil, Grace develop their questions to ask legislators.

One can't blame teens from wanting to stay out of the contentious, hostile, and downright bullying atmosphere of politics in the current era.

Recently, the youth in an ASK Family Services' meeting had just learned that they've been invited to ask questions directly to politicians running in the Nov. 6 election.

"There's an election?" 16-year-old Samantha Marcotte asks when she hears the news. She makes a disgusted gagging noise. "Do you know who's our president? The Big Orange is our president!"

Candidates for Michigan's 60th and 61st state representatives and 20th state senate seat will be at a Kalamazoo youth-led forum Oct. 29 at the Fetzer Center on WMU's campus. The state-wide forums are organized by non-partisan Lansing-based policy group Michigan's Children; the Kalamazoo Youth Development Network (KYD Net) is inviting local youth, including those at ASK, to participate.

ASK -- Advocacy Services for Kids -- is a support organization for youth and their families struggling with mental health challenges. They provide peer support and work toward the destigmatization of mental health issues.

The meeting during which questions were youth were to draft questions to pose to candidates was one of ASK's regular gatherings of C.A.Y. M.O.V.E. (Calling All Youth Motivating Others through Voices of Experience). The mission of the group is to seek "to educate and empower youth who have mood, emotional, or behavioral challenges to advocate for themselves, and use their experience and voice to improve the system of care of children's mental health services," ASK's site states. Also at the meeting were older peer-support members.

Some younger members emphatically declared the subject of the election "boring!" But once peer support specialist Rachel Cochran explained that this forum will be with politicians who'll go to Lansing, not Washington D.C., and the state politicians will have a more direct connection with Kalamazoo-area schools and issues, the conversation got rolling.

"I think the state of Michigan needs more mental health funding because a lot of our funding has been cut by previous acts and legislation and stuff. Especially for young adults," youth participant Grace Barrett says. "It's like, a gap."

Is Barrett old enough to vote? "Yes!" the 18-year-old responds with enthusiasm. And she reveals she wrote a paper on the subject of mental health funding, "Closing the Gap," for her English class.



From left, Denika Dunning-Calling All Youth Member, Kori Sonnevil-Calling All Youth Member, Lacey Ruble-Youth Involvement Coordinator prepare for an upcoming forum with state legislators.

Cochran points out the difficulty for young adults between 17 and 25 in getting assistance for mental health care -- lack of insurance can be a huge problem.

Barrett adds that "ages between 15 and 35 are the most at risk for suicide. And suicide costs the nation, I don't know the exact number, but it cost so much per suicide death."

Marcotte jumps in to bring up the subject of suicide, bullying, and how teachers should get training in helping students with mental health issues.

She would like "an advocate for people in need of mental health" in schools, "instead of, like, just posting posters saying 'Suicide's Not the Answer.'... In the school I'm at, they put posters up, like it's going to stop kids from committing suicide," she says.

But training teachers or hiring new staff would mean getting more state funding, another teen points out, and that's always a challenge.

Fixing public schools' difficulty with addressing students' mental health concerns is a big and complex issue -- but, peer leaders at the meeting say, at this election forum, students could at least stand before people who want to be our representatives and ask them what they would do about it.

Marcotte would have to speak to a politician, face to face? She breaks into tears at the idea. "I'm kind of hesitant, because, you (politicians) haven't done anything in the past, so why are you going to do it now?... It's scary!"

"But everything you have said is extremely important," Cochran says, comforting her. "I want suicide rates to go down, I want less bullying in school, I want people to be more educated in mental health."

Cochran tells Marcotte, that when speaking up, "probably seven out of ten times you're going to get shut down and people aren't going to listen to you, but what's important is those few times that someone hears your voice. You could cause something to change."

Why would politicians care what youth think?

Michigan's Children is an independent policy organization "working to ensure that public policies are made in the best interest of children from cradle to career," according to its website.

This is the third election cycle that Michigan's Children has organized non-partisan youth and family forums with candidates. It's grown to six parent-led and five youth-led forums around the state for 2018.

"We know there is huge power in that direct connection between decision-makers and young people for whom their decisions have huge consequences," Michele Corey, vice president for programs, says from Michigan's Children's Lansing office.

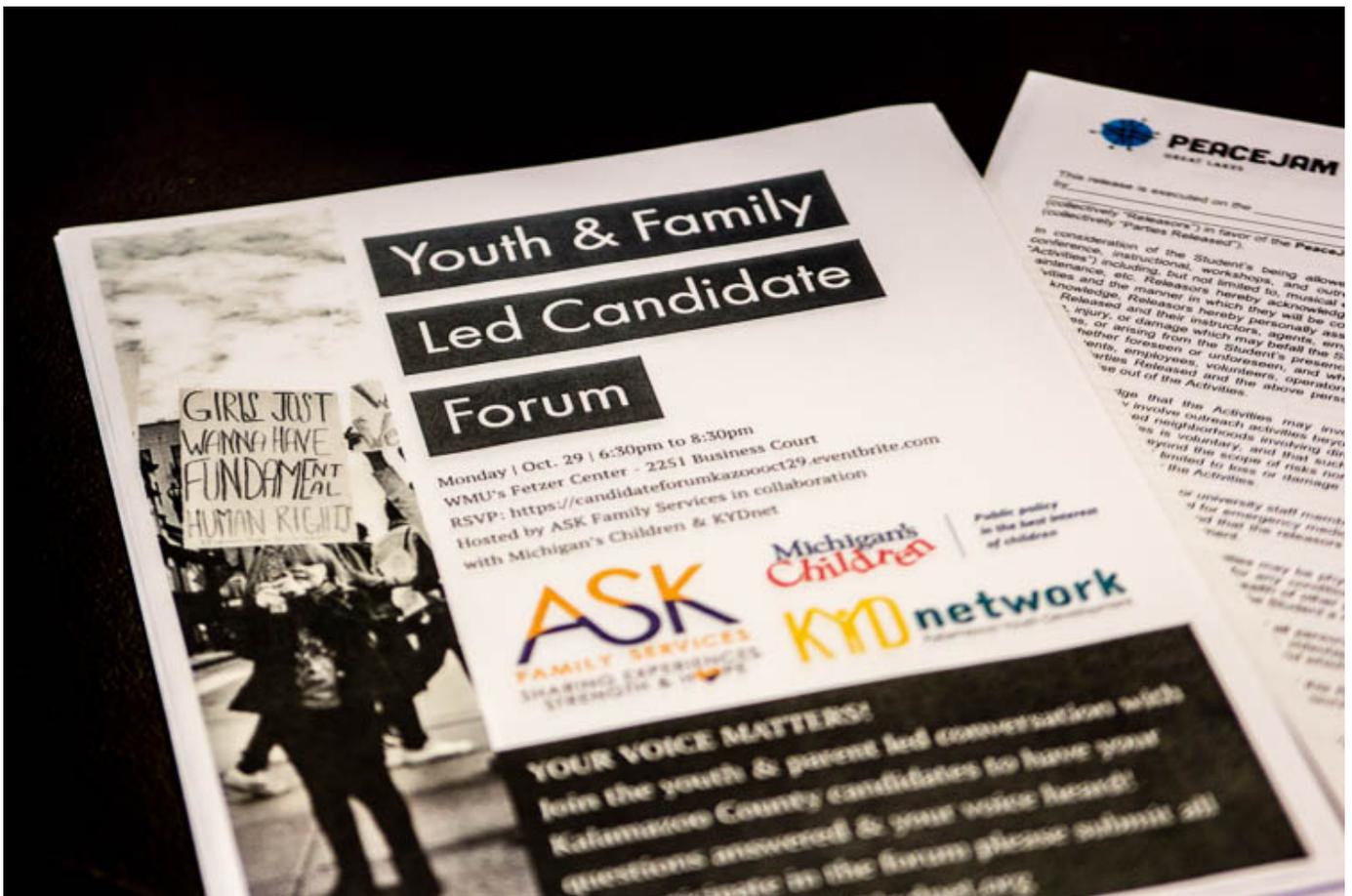
"Lots of decisions are made that impact the lives of kids under 18 and their families. They're also future voters. So if you think about a 16-year-old, it's not that long in the future before they will be voting."

Questions that participating youth ask of the politicians are "based on their own concerns," she says. "They aren't Michigan's Children's policy priorities that are being asked by young people."

They make sure youth from a variety of backgrounds are invited, from high-performing students active in student government and interested in civics to youth facing various challenges, Corey says. "That's very intentional... to make sure the voices of young people who aren't typically heard, who aren't asked to come and share their stories, be a part of the conversation."

Students sometimes ask about general hot national topics, like school shootings, but often they are concerned about specific issues in their own schools, Corey says.

Candidates, not getting asked about the usual questions of the day, can be taken off-guard. "A lot of times candidates really want to answer questions about kids, they want to be able to show, on the record, publicly, some of the things they're supportive of that have to do with kids and families."



A flier announces a forum in which youth question state legislators.

Teri Banas, Ingham County Commissioner, and Michigan's Children's communications consultant, jumps in on the interview: "One good thing, and something I find bemusing, is that candidates tend to be on much better behavior at these forums.... There is something about being in the presence of these very genuine authentic young people

that puts them on their best behavior. And as a result, they (the politicians) have much more thoughtful responses to their questions."

Corey says they held a family-led forum with primary candidates in July, in Ottawa Co., with a handful of Republicans, a few Democrats, and a Libertarian taking questions.

"And at one point they were looking down the table at each other and they were like, wow, there's a lot of things that we all agree on."

When facing sincere, questioning, young faces, "They're sort of kind!" Corey says, and she and Banas break out in laughter.

Banas says, "I think there's a sense of respect for the young people who are willing to put themselves out there and be so vulnerable publicly."

Question time

Back at the C.A.Y. meeting, Lacey Ruble, ASK youth involvement coordinator, says she understands why some of the C.A.Y. M.O.V.E. youth members might not want to interact with politicians. "The scary thing about talking to candidates right now is, that there's no faith in the system due to what's happened. So it's like, 'I don't want to talk to a candidate! I can't trust them!'" she says.

"I think what you see is all the bad stuff that's happening, because it's all constantly displayed in front of us. Especially when you've grown up with social media in your face, it's bad thing after bad thing. Why would you trust anybody?" Ruble says with a laugh.

Next, ASK director of operations Jill Angell tapes sheets of paper to the walls, and asks for topics from which to form questions.

She quickly fills the paper with a marker: Homelessness, sexual assault, LGBTQ issues, education in general, teen pregnancy, sexual health, juveniles in the justice system, contaminated drinking water, polluted lakes and rivers, gun violence, continuing education for teachers.

One young man, Jabe Redner, says he wants to ask the candidates, "Will you remember any of these things" when in office?

Angell tells him, "Not all politicians are negative, or bad people. Also, I think we have to remember that things only get better if we approach it in a positive way, we're respectful,

and not in that win-at-any-cost" mindset.

They then write their questions on note cards. Among the completed stack are:

"How do you think the state of Michigan can increase funding for public mental health especially for young adults who can't afford the treatment they need?"

"In what ways can we reduce homelessness without arresting the population? (Including downtown Kalamazoo)"

"Mental health first aid training in the education system."

"Why isn't all healthcare free?"

"What are your plans to punish bullying, to lower the suicide rate?"

"Will you stick true to what you tell us, to what you promise to do?"

Who should feel intimidated at this forum, the young people asking these questions, or the candidates answering them?

Mark Wedel has been a freelance journalist in southwest Michigan since 1992, covering everything from The Beastie Boys to invasive species. For more information see his website.

Youth and Family Led Candidate Forum

Monday, Oct. 29, 6:30 p.m.

Western Michigan University's Fetzer Center

2251 Business Ct., Kalamazoo

Organized by Michigan's Youth, KYD Network and ASK Family Services.

Youth will question candidates for the 20th State Senate, 60th and 61st State Representative seats.

As of Oct. 22, Sean McCann, Democrat challenger for the 20th, and Alberta Griffin, Democrat challenger for the 61st, have confirmed they'll participate.

Republican Senator Margret O'Brian "let us know that she was regretful that she couldn't make it," Michele Corey of Michigan's Children says. Republican challenger for the 60th William Baker, and Republican incumbent for the 61st Brandt Iden, declined.

Yet to respond include Democrat incumbent in the 60th Jon Hoadley, and Libertarian challenger for the 20th Lorence Wenke.

Corey says they'll keep asking candidates to participate, "particularly since the young people are working so hard on their questions.... We will work hard to get more candidates in attendance for sure."



Read more articles by Mark Wedel.

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