

Kalamazoo Teens Focus Candidates on Community Challenges for Youth

KALAMAZOO, MI (October 14, 2020)
– With questions serious and probing, a dozen teens from the Kalamazoo-area faced candidates for the state Legislature and Congress on a virtual platform this month and asked how they would tackle a number of community ills impacting teens' lives if they were elected.



The youth represented community organizations – [STREET Afterschool Program](#), the [Boys and Girls Club of Lake Street](#), [ASK Family Services](#), [Men of Purpose](#), [Communities in Schools](#), [El Concilio - Kalamazoo](#), and the Equity Group - and they came prepared to talk about pressing issues. Conversations turned to gun violence, ending the school-to-prison pipeline, restorative justice over punitive measures, mental health, services for students with IEP's, school safety in the COVID-19 era, income disparities, environmental protections, and mass incarceration of men of color. The forum was sponsored by [Michigan's Children](#), the [Kalamazoo Youth Development Network](#) (KYD Network), and the [Michigan Center for Youth Justice](#), highlighting October as Youth Justice Action Month.

Participating candidates were Democrat Jon Hoadley, candidate in the 6th Congressional District; Julie Rogers, a Democrat in the 60th House District; Christine Morse, a Democrat in the 61st District; and Democrat Stephanie Moore, a write-in candidate in the 60th House District. All listed and known candidates in those races were invited. Congressman Fred Upton, the Republican incumbent from the 60th House District; Republican candidate Gary Mitchell in the 60th House District; and Republican candidate Bronwyn Haltom in the 61st House District were absent.

The forum was moderated by Stacy Jackson, Out-of-School Time Program Coach, for the KYD Network.

“Young people formulate questions that authentically represent their lived experiences,” said KYD Network Executive Director Meg Blinkiewicz. “They have fundamentally different concerns from adults. They ask direct questions and expect equally direct responses. They aren't looking for politically correct answers, just straight talk.”

Blinkiewicz's point was underscored by a teen named Percy who wanted to know how the candidates, if elected, would hold schools accountable if they were not providing students with an IEP (Individual Education Plan) accommodation in virtual learning platforms, an issue that's raised criticism of school responses during the pandemic. Percy, a participant in the Boys and Girls Club, said he has an IEP but felt he was offered no help in his freshman year in high school. Now he worries about online learning accommodations. “Can we clarify that or get together at a later time?” he asked.

“I’m sure each district is doing it differently, so if I was elected to be a representative, I would certainly reach out to them all, and see what methods they are using. I’m here to learn, listen and figure out a way that we can make sure those needs are met,” Morse pledged.

Rogers, a physical therapist, said a patient of hers brought the issue to her attention. “I think we needed to give the schools a little grace for that first month, but now that we’re into the semester and they’ve gotten their bearings, we need to make sure they’re giving options that are meeting the child’s needs.”

Moore, a current Washtenaw County commissioner, said the state mandates schools to provide eligible students with an individualized plan that meets their needs, circumstances and what they need to accomplish. That means adequate support is required whether a child is learning in school or at a distance. “We have to work with organizations like KYD Network and every organization around the table right now to have those ongoing supports for students and parents, and hold the school district accountable, so that those plans are being followed every day consistently.”

Hoadley, currently serving in the state Legislature, said students whose needs aren’t being met are entitled to an independent, third-party mediator with the Department of Education. “If anyone needs help accessing those services, just call my office and we can help figure out what you need to do.”

Issues around youth justice and mental health services were top of mind for a number of the students. A teen named Jake asked the candidates how they would make youth justice and mental health programs more therapeutic and restorative, rather than criminalizing.

Prevention, adequate funding, and more mental health professionals are critical to better access for mental health services, Rogers said. She also blamed Republican-led efforts that added work requirements to Medicaid health plans for cutting benefits to many local families.

“You have to hear the voices of the young people . . . to better understand the needs of the young people,” Moore said, adding that safe spaces and peer groups where teens can talk is important. “The other biggest thing is understanding trauma. Adverse childhood experiences should be embedded in everything that we do, especially when we’re talking about access, mental health services, as well as therapeutic ways to do things.”

Morse agreed more resources are needed for mental health services, particularly in schools. “Our kids are there every day, and a lot of what they’re going through arises during school.” To another student’s question about engaging youth in discussions for solving the nation’s mental health crisis, she said she recognizes that in the age of COVID-19 youth are under inordinate amounts of stress and anxiety. “If I’m elected, my job as a representative is to be here to listen, and I will be ready to do that and put some funding where it’s needed.”

Hoadley said he supported a recent legislatively approved increase in school funding for mental health amounting to \$5.6 million, though he called it a “drop in the bucket” compared to what’s needed. “The first question for so many of these issues is how we enter into the criminal justice or mental healthcare system period,” he added. “We should be making sure that we are informing or encouraging trauma-informed policies, but also making sure that we’re backing it up with laws that encourage people to work with students, instead of pushing them aside.”

In other questions, a teen named Ja’Various asked how lawmakers would ensure he would be safe from the COVID-19 virus when schools reopen to in-person learning.

Rogers said additional funds must be appropriated in an equitable manner to schools that need it most. “It ultimately comes down to funding. We want to make sure that our kids, teachers and staff are safe, but not everyone has the same access to resources,” Rogers said.

KaQuan, a youth from the group, Men of Purpose, wanted to know how the lawmakers would “shrink the wealth gap” that devastates communities of color.

Hoadley said a high-quality public education is the key to future success, adding that he supports a living wage to ensure that working people can take care of their families. “If you want to move into skilled trades, some sort of career-tech focus piece, awesome,” he added. “If you want to go to a community college or higher education, we need to make it so you’re not then mortgaging your future for decades paying off student debt.”

A student from the STREET Afterschool Program said many of his peers are exposed to gun violence daily and asked how to stop the spread.

Moore said she hears the gunfire from her home. “I see the bodies when they fall. I have to go out and grieve and support the mamas and daddies, and even you all as young people, as we are experiencing this high level of violence.” She said funding and sound policies are needed to fight it, as well as attention to the people whose communities are struggling with gun violence daily. “We’ve got to know the community, the people that live in it, and support them,” she said.

A teen named Darquan posed a question about prison reform. “What is your plan to curb the trend of prisons being filled with 60 percent of people who look like me?”

Morse said a starting point is diversifying the field of new hires in police departments, addressing the personal biases of those involved in law enforcement, and focusing on community policing programs where relationships are built with community members. If elected, she would work for criminal justice reform. “I look forward to being part of that continued work.”

Matt Gillard, Michigan’s Children CEO & President, said the forum offered an important platform for office-seekers to hear first-hand from the young people they may represent one day. It’s an important conversation because the state fails many of its young people, particularly those struggling with daily challenges, he said

“It’s our top priority at Michigan’s Children to ensure that all of our state and federal elected officials – and during this election season, candidates for office - understand the need behind urgent action to better serve and protect our most vulnerable children, families, and communities. Then, after the election, it is our continued priority to make sure that those who won their seats continue to hear from young people and families and are held to account for their actions.”