

Students share how COVID-19 has impacted their mental health with community leaders, elected officials

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On Friday, April 30, the Grand Rapids Mayor's Youth Council with Our Community's Children hosted KidSpeak 2021: Beyond the Virus. The two-hour event was in partnership with Michigan's Children, City of Grand Rapids and Grand Rapids Public Schools. (MLive File Photo)BPN

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GRAND RAPIDS, MI – More than a dozen students from schools across Grand Rapids spoke Friday about how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted their mental during the annual KidSpeak forum.

The Grand Rapids Mayor's Youth Council hosted the 10 a.m. virtual event with Our Community's Children that gave young people the opportunity to speak to a listening panel of elected officials and community leaders. Students also spoke about the toll remote learning and racial injustice has affected their health.

"Mental health deterioration in Grand Rapids and nationwide has been a separate pandemic on its own. It's the cold harsh truth we are facing two pandemics at the same time," said Alex Miranda, the youth council president and an 11th grade student at Grand River Preparatory High School.

Fifteen community, city and state leaders heard from students in sixth through 12th grade during the two-hour event.

Related: [Mental health struggles are surging in Michigan families during the pandemic. Here are their stories.](#)

East Kentwood High School freshman Kennedy Williams talked about the stress of remote learning and being isolated from his friends during the pandemic.

"I felt like I was trapped in a big box. I needed to talk to other people than my mom and my sister who are essential workers, so they were not there as I needed to fill that void," Williams said.

The listening panel included Grand Rapids Mayor Rosalynn Bliss, state Rep. Rachel Hood, D-Grand Rapids, Grand Rapids Board of Education President Jen Schottke and Matt Gillard, president of Michigan's Children Matt Gillard.

Joshua Beckford, a sixth grader from Gerald R. Ford Academic Center, highlighted the challenges students faced adjusting to remote learning and made suggestions to school board leaders.

“If they make a decision to send students back to school full time, for example, maybe hiring tutors for youth who need help,” he said.

Officials say the shift to remote learning, requiring students learn from home and pausing extracurricular activities, affected the mental health of [students across Michigan](#).

With students having been separated from school support systems for so long, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer announced in February a [new Student Recovery Advisory Council in February](#). The 29 members will make recommendations on how to help students recover. Those recommendations will include addressing students’ academic, physical and mental well-being.

Related: [The pandemic’s psychological toll on our children](#)

The KidSpeak forum also heard from local youth on racial injustice issues — from the disparities in COVID-19 cases in minority communities to last year’s movement against police brutality and systemic racism following the death of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, two Black people killed in separate police incidents last spring in May and March, respectively.

Former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, who is white, was recently found guilty in the death of Floyd, after kneeling on his neck for more than nine minutes. Taylor, a Grand Rapids native, was fatally shot in her Louisville, Kentucky home by police executing a search warrant for a suspect who did not live in her apartment.

Anna Kalumbula, a 10th grade student at CA Frost Environmental Science Academy, asked how the community can move forward in the wake of those incidents.

“How are we helping prevent prejudice here in Grand Rapids, Kent County and in the state of Michigan when it comes to police targeting one ethnic group over others,” she challenged the listening panel.

A couple of students also discussed how the pandemic had a positive effect on their mental health. City High senior Jordan Orr said a pause at the beginning of March 2020 provided a much-needed break from a “tremendous workload.”

Members of the listening panel applauded the students for having the courage to share their thoughts and experiences publicly. They also mentioned that past KidSpeak forums had result in changes be made by state legislators and school boards.

“Young people have a real impact on the decisions that are made that affect them in their everyday lives in their communities,” said Gillard.

The full KidSpeak 2021 virtual event can be seen on the [City of Grand Rapids Facebook page](#).