



2010
KidSpeak
A youth public forum

Foster Kids Speak Out on Educational Success

A project of Michigan's Children In partnership with Western Michigan University's Seita Scholars Program
and Michigan State University, School of Social Work, Foster Youth Alumni Services Program

2010 KidSpeak Listening Panel Members

"Students in out-of-home care are about half as likely as other students to have graduated within 5 years."

Smithgall, et al. (2004)
University of Chicago, Chapin Hall

Western Michigan University July 29, 2010

Beth Bennett, Chief of Staff,
Representative Douglas Geiss,
Michigan House of Representatives

Dr. Janice Brown, Executive Director,
The Kalamazoo Promise

Dr. John Dunn, President,
Western Michigan University

Dr. Cindy Green, Assistant Superintendent
for Student Services, Kalamazoo
Public Schools

Dr. Julie Guevara, Associate Vice
President for Academic Affairs,
Grand Valley State University

Dr. Denise Hartsough, Director,
Community Investment,
Greater Kalamazoo United Way

Representative Robert Jones,
Michigan House of Representatives

Dr. Bruce Kocher,
Vice President for Academic Services,
Kalamazoo Valley Community College

Jack Kresnak, President and CEO,
Michigan's Children

Tim Liggins, Kalamazoo County DHS
DHS Liaison, WMU Seita Scholar Program

Yazeed Moore, Program Officer,
Charles Stewart Mott Foundation

Dolly Roselip, Director,
Youth Opportunities Unlimited

Mayor Pro Tem: Ed Sackley,
City of Portage

Representative Tonya Schuitmaker,
Michigan House of Representatives

Dr. Sandy Standish, Superintendent,
Comstock Public Schools

Tim Terrentine, Southwest MI First

Ken Toll, Executive Director,
United Way of Jackson County

Dr. Sarah Westfall, Vice President for
Student Development/Dean of Students,
Kalamazoo College

Michigan State University August 6, 2010

Diana Algra, Executive Director,
Volunteer Centers of Michigan

Marcie Alling, Michigan Rehabilitative
Services, Department of Labor,
Energy and Economic Growth

Dr. Gary Anderson, Director, School of
Social Work, Michigan State University

Representative Joan Bauer,
Michigan House of Representatives

Beth Bennett, Chief of Staff,
Representative Doug Geiss,
Michigan House of Representatives

Keri Bennett, School-Community
Health Alliance of Michigan

R. Cole Bouck, Legislative Liaison,
Michigan Department of Corrections

Alethia Carr, Director, Bureau of Family,
Maternal, and Child Health, Michigan
Department of Community Health

Paula Cunningham, President,
Capitol National Bank

Tom Freeland, Department of Treasury

Leisa Gallagher, Office of the Superintendent,
Michigan Department of Education

James Gale, Director, Bureau of Children
and Adult Licensing, Michigan Department
of Human Services

Dr. Toni Glasscoe, Director of
K-12 Initiatives and Career Preparation,
Lansing Community College

Mike Hanson, Director, Michigan
Community College Association

Kelly Howard, Director,
Child Welfare Services Division,
State Court Administrative Office

Joan Howarth, Dean, MSU Law School

Paula Kaiser VanDam, Director, Michigan
Community Service Commission

Joshua Kay, University of Michigan
Law School

Jack Kresnak, President and CEO,
Michigan's Children

Tobin Miller, Legislative and Policy
Liaison, Michigan Department of
Human Services

Ann Rossi, Permanency Planning Unit,
Michigan Department of Human Services

Verlie Ruffin, Children's Ombudsman,
Michigan Department of Human Services

Vivek Sankaran, Director,
Detroit Center for Family Advocacy,
University of Michigan Law School

Kevin Sherman,
Foster Care Review Board

Carol Siemon, Director,
Child Welfare Training Institute

Cecilia Smith, Chief of Staff,
Representative Mark Meadows,
Michigan House of Representatives

Honorable Judge Leslie Kim Smith,
3rd Circuit Court

Janet Snyder, Exec. Director, Michigan
Federation for Children and Families

Peter Spadafore, Assistant Director,
Government Relations, Michigan
Association of School Boards

Thomas Summerhill,
Assoc. Dean, College of Social Science,
Michigan State University

Mary Sutton, Executive Director,
Michigan After-School Partnership

Maxine Thome, Executive Director,
National Association of Social Workers

Jennifer Wallace, Outreach Manager,
Michigan Education Trust, and Board
Trustee, MSU College of Social Science

Jessica Weston, Staff, Sen. Martha Scott,
Michigan State Senate

Sandra York, Director, Michigan
Parent Teacher Student Association

"Less than three percent of the foster care population graduates and obtains a bachelor's degree vs. 33 percent of the general population."

Dworsky & Perez (2009)
University of Chicago, Chapin Hall



listening panel

"As a state, we have an obligation to provide a quality educational experience for ALL our children."

—Jack Kresnak, President and CEO

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2010 KidSpeak Forums

Michigan's Children has long recognized the importance of giving youth a voice in the public debate, providing opportunities for youth to talk about issues concerning them and how they believe these issues might be best addressed. Foster care youth represent a group that is overrepresented in high school dropout statistics and are grossly under-enrolled at post-secondary institutions. As this population is greatly impacted by many state, federal and local policies, foster youth can offer valuable suggestions for improvement in K-16 educational success. A total of 43 youth ages 15-23 presented testimony to two separate and distinguished listening panels comprised of members of the Michigan Legislature; state department officials, representing Energy Labor and Economic Growth, Corrections, Human Services, Education, and Treasury; representatives of private and corporate foundations, and other public officials and community leaders. Youth engaged in these events were attendees at one of two pre-college programs in the state that specifically target foster care youth, Western Michigan University's Seita Scholars program and Michigan State University's Foster Youth Alumni Services Program. These youth represented 13 different counties including, Bay, Barry, Ingham, Jackson, Kalamazoo, Luce, Macomb, Midland, Muskegon, Oakland, Ottawa, Washtenaw, and Wayne. Not only did youth share their concerns, they also provided suggestions that state leaders could use to begin to address their issues, and they expressed their willingness and eagerness to help.

Quotes from youth participants are taken from actual transcripts of the Kidspeak forums. We have made every attempt to ensure the accuracy of their words.

Michigan's Children gratefully acknowledges the



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MOTT FOUNDATION

for sponsoring the event and supporting the dissemination of information gathered from the 2010 Kidspeak® forums.

Michigan's Children is an independent organization that accepts no government funds. We rely solely on foundation grants and contributions from individuals and corporations to support our work. To learn more about our programs and how YOU can be a voice for children, contact Michigan's Children.

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Foster care teens have the desire to have and maintain permanent and stable caring adults and programs in their lives. These formal and informal social relationships, when non-judgmental, are key to maintaining a happy and healthy lifestyle.

"I need quality relationships, mentors..."

– Cherish, UofM Student

"I just had my daughter two years ago, I didn't have a mother to tell me how to be a mother to my daughter, but I'm trying. I didn't have a father to be there for me. There's no one there that I can depend on. I have to rely on my caseworkers that actually care. There's not many of them. We need role models."

– Natalie, MSU Student

"Caseworkers who have played a positive role in a young one's life should continue to play a positive role. I had a couple mentors when I was placed in the system, but when I got out, I didn't have those mentors anymore."

– Brandon, WMU Seita Scholar

"I have been in foster care for a year and a half. My grandmother has custody of me and my brother. She took both of us in and we are living together. Through that help and support, I was able to maintain my school grades. I did my homework every night, and I attend classes every day and I have a 3.8 GPA now."

– Justin, Warren



Foster care teens need competent teachers who are aware of their personal challenges and an opportunity to connect with a caring adult during the school day

"The teachers [need] to be able to take note of what's going on with their kids. I didn't find out that I was dyslexic and had testing anxiety until my junior year in college. I'm having severe problems in college because you have to know how to write. I barely know how to comprehend. That's a problem. Nobody tested me for dyslexia, ADHD, for nothing. I don't mind being diagnosed, but I want the treatment. ...I was told by my teachers all the time I have to rewrite this. ...It turns down your confidence. It tears you down because you actually tried, and it took a lot just to get what you got on that paper written...."

– Cherish, UofM Student

"Every time I went to school, the teacher was talking, I listened, but I didn't understand. I asked questions, but I still didn't understand. It took until I was 14 when someone saw what was going on with my family and called protective services. I had to start learning then, because there were people in front of me like, ok, I will show you how to do this, and I started learning."

– Orlando, Detroit

"I have had two teachers, and they really helped me to realize that I could go to college. I never really planned on going to college until this last year. My GPA went from like a 1.0 to a 3.1. My teachers really helped me out and changed my attitude. I want to go to college so that I will be able to support a family, because I will have money. I will be able to give my kids everything I didn't have."

– Isaac, Midland

"I attend Catherine Ferguson Academy, a school for young teen parents. Having my son at school with me is really nice."

– Cheyenne, Detroit

"I've been moving from foster home to foster home, which is why it's a little hard for me in school and stuff. Every time I change from one home to another, it's hard for me to adapt to that living space, I have to learn how to act different. It's hard to not be able to act like yourself. It's really stressful to worry about school, trying to get a job when I don't even know if there's anyone else out there that is going to be taking care of me."

– Devey, Detroit

"I was in two foster homes, but now I am happy because I am with my Auntie. She cares about me. I graduate next year. I had a 1.5 GPA my sophomore year, and now this year I have a 2.5 because my Auntie is real hard on me."

– Bedina, Detroit

"I am in a foster home right now, they are strict, but they care about me. And all I really wanted throughout my whole life is love, and I finally have it. Before coming here [current foster care home] I told myself I wasn't going to add up to much...now I'm going to have the chance to go to college and become what I have always wanted to become."

– Rose, Barry County

"I have a daughter who just turned three. People discourage foster care youth who have children in their teenage years that they won't be anything, and that they won't make it to college. We need more advocates and people to be there for teenage mothers."

– Sharelle, WMU Seita Scholar



Foster care youth face great educational challenges, and too many aren't succeeding through high school graduation or have difficulty making the transition to college or work. Failure to graduate from high school leads to a wide range of personal and social costs, some of which are borne directly by the public. In addition, high school dropouts face a labor market in Michigan that is becoming more and more difficult to successfully manage. Because they have often been in multiple placements and many times lack traditional supports, managing homework assignments, meeting teacher expectations, trying to understand class work and achieve good grades are particularly stressful for foster youth. Many have unmet mental health needs and they are often concentrated in low-performing schools ill-equipped to help. Foster care students suffer from the highest poverty rates and the deepest concentrations of economic distress, adding barriers to program participation.

Foster care teens need to be taught the mandated high school curriculum in a variety of ways to better avoid falling behind; those that do fall behind need to be afforded opportunities to recover missing/lost credits.

"Some kids learn slower than others which causes them to fall behind. I believe you can help resolve this, to have more programs for students, you know, so people can learn, and they won't be left behind. So enforce the 'No Child Left Behind' concept."

– Shonetta, Detroit

"I feel a lot of teachers don't teach to the students. Students of today need more movement in their classes. The need hands on experiences. I must move and see things. I cannot just hear something to learn it. Educators need to use multisensory techniques."

– Nicolas, Detroit, WMU Seita Scholar

"School has been difficult these past four years because the academic standards have been raised. This is part of the reason why the drop-out rates are just increasing. Kids are upset because they can't do the work; they get frustrated because they can't do the work. Others [students] care but they don't have the support from school that they need to do the work on a subject."

– De'onte, Jackson

"A lot of classrooms are so structured and you are sitting there listening for hours and students need breaks so they can move, stretch, to get their brain back in focus."

– Richard, WMU Seita Scholar

In addition to teachers, foster care youth need caseworkers, judges, and foster parents that know how to support their educational success.

"There was no one there to make sure I went to school or did my homework. Nobody cared, so I eventually started skipping, I didn't do my homework."

– Lydia, North Dickinson

"I have experienced over ten caseworkers. I can't even tell you their names. I actually looked over my case files, and said oh, this person was my caseworker? How do they even know about when I am at school because I don't remember seeing them."

– Cherish, UofM Student

"My caseworker, he doesn't want to listen to what the kids got to say, he's more about what the parents say."

– Isaac, Midland

"The one person who actually helped me was the judge I had when I was 13. If you say you want to quit, he won't let you quit. I am going to graduate from Cass Tech this year, and I am going to go to Wayne State for my bachelor's degree."

– Joseph, Detroit

Foster care teens are concerned that there is a lack of adequate resources, including access to basic needs, that are necessary for learning in the public school system.

"I am living with my foster parents now, who are really nice people, but I am wearing clothes that are three years old, and I have holes in my shoes, and kids make fun of me because we don't have any money to pay for anything. School is less than a month away, and I want to get ready for school but I can't."

– Lydia, North Dickinson



"I went to a high school in Detroit, and we just didn't have the resources that other students have. And when I came to Michigan State, I had a chance to compare stories and different things with different students, and they just had a totally different high school experience that I had. We didn't have books; we didn't have certain things, and teachers that cared."

– Mercy, Detroit, MSU Student



"Yeah, I want to learn, but I don't have a way to get to school. Detroit has closed over 15 schools. There should be more transportation to get the kids to school. Without transportation, students miss a lot of days of school. The school district only allows 20 days to miss or you will automatically fail. How do we promote them to graduate if we don't give them the resources they need to get here and to get the education to succeed?"

– Marida, Detroit

"Schools should try to link up with libraries. At my school, they closed the library, so we are no longer able to read books, or check out books or to even research things."

– Camp Participant, WMU

Foster care teens are concerned about the limited opportunities available to engage in extra-curricular and after-school programs.

"I'm currently attending my 17th high school. I have not been allowed to participate in school activities, go to dances...I have never played a high school sport. I have moved around a lot- like over 20 times."

– Isaac, Midland

"When I was in [residential home] I played sports to keep me busy. I played football, linebacker in 10th grade. My caseworker took me away from sports- it's like she didn't want me to do good."

– Shante, Detroit

"I want to sit there and honestly just be in a classroom just to get away from home. So school is a refuge to a lot of kids. It was my refuge. I stayed in school. I stayed in after school activities: basketball, boxing, volleyball, track and field. I did it all, anything to keep away from home as late as I could. School was home for me. In school and in education we need to create a home-like environment, meaning the support."

– Cherish, UofM Student

"Despite all the stuff I was going through, I got up and went to school every day and kept over a 2.8. I'm a survivor; I'm going to finish school and I'm going to go to college because I want to show everyone no matter what you've been through or where you come from, you can do whatever you put your mind to."

– Minyanna, Detroit

"I am class treasurer and I do three sports, volleyball, soccer and basketball. I'm ranked 4th in my class right now, but I want to be number one."

– August, Grand Blanc

"School is one of my biggest things. I just love going to school. It was the only place I was able to go to get away."

– Michaela, undisclosed location

"I never had a problem in school; I was always a star student because that is where my safe haven was, school"

– Richard, WMU Seita Scholar

Foster care teens are concerned about their personal safety; feeling unsafe impacts school performance.

"If we don't have good grades, we have a reason. If my mom is beating me every day, I wouldn't want to go to school and do any work... because I can't keep up straight because my back hurts."

– Cherish, UofM Student

"The foster home I was in was not good; the girl I was sharing a room with threatened to kill me."

– Tiffany, Holt

"When you place us, can you just place us someplace where you all know we'll be safe? Inspect the home. Make sure the people who are there will love us. Don't just push us off because they have open space. An open space isn't a love space."

– Joseph, Detroit

"I got put into foster care because my parents physically beat me. When I started to tell people, CPS, no one listened, so I ran away four different times. I was gone for a good month, and missed a lot of school, eventually when I got caught; I went into an alternative education program."

– Michaela, undisclosed location

"I want to talk about bullying. I used to get picked on almost every day. Statistics show that 77% of students are verbally and physically abused. 14% of students who have experienced bullying have bad reactions to this abuse. We need more hall monitors. I want bullying to stop."

– Alan, Ypsilanti

"If a school is not safe, why go to school? School is supposed to be a safe environment. Instead, teachers are afraid of students. Having a public safety officer in the school is always important."

– Camp Participant, WMU

Foster care teens need adults to recognize unmet mental health needs and to ensure early access to mental health services.

"Students drop out of school because of depression, low self esteem, students suffering from bullying or other people talking about them. Students stop caring because of family problems, which also tags along with low self esteem. Distractions are a problem at school, trying to fit in, I experienced teen pregnancy. Some kids have learning problems, have ADHD and teachers don't point that out."

– Shonetta, Detroit

"When me and my sister got placed in foster care... I got there, people put me down. They told me no a lot. They put me on medication because I was sad, I was depressed. I never ate or slept. I was voiceless and I didn't like it. I am glad I have a voice today. We are all dealing with something. We are dealing with depression, we are dealing with loneliness. What we are seeing running across our minds is all the problems that are going on in our lives. That's all we see. We need someone to tell us, 'we'll try'. That's all I wanted to hear, at least... have someone say, 'I'll try.'"

– Carly, Fraser



"I didn't know what suicide was until I was in middle school and we were reading a story. It was like the answer I was searching for. It's like a cheat code you play video games- a ticket to getting out of that [foster] home."

– Joseph, Detroit

"Being in the system has given me all this stress and it's hard to focus on what's important. Stress messes up how to learn and how others learn. I face frustrations with not being able to pay attention in class because of all the obstacles I've had to overcome in my life. My grades have suffered and I am still working to overcome. Teachers could pay more attention to students when you are seeing their grades dropping and you can ask, 'what is really going on?'"

– Cheyanne, Kalamazoo



"I never did want to go to school or have an interest in school. And when I did, I was late; I was depressed, stressed out. When I did finally get the urge to go to school, I'd be kind of down, so I'd be in my own little world. Sometimes I would do my work, sometimes I wouldn't. Teachers and counselors should get more involved in a student's life. To see what's really going on and help them succeed in life."

– Shari, Kalamazoo

Many foster care youth have had care giving responsibilities in the home that have taken precedence over school and homework obligations.

"My mother left us when I was 11 years old. It was hard with me pumping gas and bagging groceries at 11 years old, staying up till 3 o'clock in the morning, so that my little brothers could eat. Living in abandoned houses and stuff like that, out in the streets."

– Orlando, Detroit

Frequent placement and school changes often mean that foster care youth are falling behind, repeating courses and are thus old for their grade; this practice can lead to hopelessness with students often making the decision to drop out.

"There was a lot going on in my life... I graduated middle school at the age of 15. I dropped out of school after that"

– Amber, Detroit

"I was a junior last year in high school, and I'll be a junior this year because I have to catch up on some of my grades."

– Nicholas, Ferndale

Suspension policies are pushing foster youth out of school.

"Why are they [principals] giving kids so many days out of school; it affects their work and leaves them behind. What happened to me was they gave me 10 days out of school at a time. I would miss out on work, get behind, and I would have to cram, try to hurry up and do my work, not really learning nothing. Because of the suspension, I only have so many days to catch up. I think they [schools] should do in-school suspension or detention so kids can still get their education and it will help them stay out of trouble too."

– Sharonda, Ypsilanti



"I want to go to college. I'm 20 years old and am again on the streets. I have at least gotten a diploma and I graduated with a 2.7 GPA. I want to be safe. I am trying to figure out what to do next."

– Orlando, Detroit

"Where am I going to go until college starts? What am I going to do when I turn 18 in January, graduate in May? College doesn't start until September. What am I going to do all summer long? I don't like sleeping in the cardboard boxes. It doesn't sound fun to me. Who is going to show me how to own a house or pay my taxes, how to fill out my bills and my paperwork? I don't know any of that stuff. Where am I going to go for that help? Who am I going to turn to when I graduate to help me out? When I turn 18 the court says, 'goodbye, see you later, have fun, you're an adult, figure it out yourself.' What it should say is, 'you need help? Come talk to us.'"

– Isaac, Midland

"Coming to college has made life a lot better. I'm thankful for this program [Foster Youth Alumni Services Program] and this camp, this is something I wish I had when I was graduating, when I was leaving high school and going to college...When I turned 18 the lady was like, your money is stopping, I don't have anywhere for you to go. I didn't have anyone to say, yeah, let's go shopping for stuff for your dorm or bring you up to college. We need to establish programs, hands on programs to help these youth learn these different things. Not only learn how to go to college, but also how to take care of themselves."

– Natalie, MSU Student

"Nobody in my family from my great grandmother had a high school education, or more or less passed their junior year of high school. Not one, not my siblings. [going to college] I'm actually creating and breaking cycles within my whole family history."

– Cherish, UofM Student

"I came to college alone. I came here, close to dropping out my freshman year because I didn't have any support. Now there are wonderful people here [MSU] who have come into my life. I can't really say there was a lot of structure within the foster care system that helped me to get to that point where I am today. I don't see enough programs that are specifically directed at foster youth so that they can go to college or so they can find a good job."

– Sarai, Lansing, MSU Student



Foster care teens are concerned about the lack of college preparation and assistance they receive in transitioning from high school to post-secondary education.

"For the last 3 ½ years I spent most of my time at residential treatment, my teenage years, so I really didn't get to see the world."

– Ashante, Detroit

The testimony of our 2010 KidSpeak participants clearly illustrates that foster care youth from around the state very much want to learn and excel in school, live healthier and more stable lifestyles, and live in homes where they feel safe and cared about. They tie these goals to suggestions for what is needed to achieve them – quality teachers; caseworkers and foster parents who care about them; adequate resources for learning, including access to transportation and school supplies; school stability and safety; and college preparation and assistance with the transition from high school to post-secondary education.

Learn more at www.michiganschildren.org



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Kidspeak is a youth public forum that empowers young people to advocate on their own behalf. Operating on a statewide and local basis, Kidspeak brings youth before listening panels comprised of legislators, other public officials, and community leaders to talk about issues of concern to them. Kidspeak forums provide young people with authentic civic engagement experience and to provide policymakers the rare opportunity to hear the voices of young people. Given the opportunity, in ways both poignant and powerful, youths can change the way adults make decisions. Michigan's Children, a non-profit 501 © (3) organization, presents Kidspeak as a non-partisan activity.

Michigan's Children is an independent, multi-issue, non-partisan organization in Lansing working to make Michigan the best state in America to be a child. To do that, Michigan's Children informs policymakers and the public about children's issues, and provides communities and young people with the tools to influence policy decisions.

As an outgrowth of Kidspeak forums, Michigan's Children's **Youth Policy Leadership Program** (YPLP) continues to empower young people by providing them with opportunities for meaningful participation in civic life. YPLP connects young people to policymaking through statewide and local Kidspeak forums, Youth Legislative Day activities, and Youth Voices Changing Public Policy Forums. In addition, through YPLP, Michigan's Children alerts communities to public policy issues affecting youths and provides technical assistance to communities to build capacity for youth-led policy forums.

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