

News Service of Florida

**YOUNGSTERS HEARD, NOT JUST SEEN, ON CHILDREN'S DAY AT
CAPITOL**

By Mark Taylor II

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THE CAPITAL, TALLAHASSEE, March 31, 2009.....Students ranging from eighth graders to college freshmen grilled members of the Florida Children and Youth Cabinet Tuesday with specific questions ranging from how Florida helps victims of child abuse to why lawmakers aren't doing more to help prepare students for graduation.

And they did their homework – many came armed with statistics to back up their questions,

One high school senior challenged the adults on the panel, noting that less than two-thirds of third graders who took the FCAT last year are at or above reading level.

What could be done to boost early childhood education, with the economy in the shape its' in, the student, Nicole Spiegelman, asked.

Education Commissioner Eric Smith said Florida is working hard to narrow gaps in reading and working on new diagnostic approaches to better identify students that need help and what kind of help they need.

With Gov. Charlie Crist and other top officials there to listen, some of the students had some pointed questions.

Carol City High School senior Leonard Thompson asked why legislators aren't trying to develop programs to better prepare students for graduation and close education gaps before they increase graduation requirements.

Officials didn't use kid gloves either, though. Smith responded that making graduation harder has worked in the past to help improve performance.

"Florida students do well when we raise standards," Smith said.

The Children and Youth Cabinet was created in 2007 to help state agencies and advocates collaborate and to suggest legislation to better serve children's needs.

Some of the students also complained that the cabinet doesn't currently have a youth representative – despite the participants in last year's Kids Only Town Hall meeting asking the same question.

"The cabinet said they'd look into it," when students asked about a youth

representative last year, said Stacie Blake, executive director of Community Tampa Bay, a St. Petersburg non-profit that works on anti-discrimination issues. "There should be a youth representative or two — a constant youthful voice brings an original perspective and new ideas," Blake said.

Samantha Rogers, a freshman at Tallahassee Community College urged the panel to take young people's opinions seriously.

"The unbiased voice of a child is a valuable tool that should be used to its maximum potential when making legislative decisions," said Samantha Rogers, a freshman at Tallahassee Community College.