



Students query Youth Cabinet

BY TAMARYN WATERS • DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER • APRIL 2, 2008

The questions were tough, some even stumped the panel.

But that didn't stop a selected group of middle- and high-school students from challenging members of the state's Youth Cabinet during the first "Kids Only" town hall meeting Tuesday at the Capitol. The event coincided with activities for 2008 Children's Week.

The 12-student panel quizzed the cabinet, which included Lt. Gov. Jeff Kottkamp, Florida Education Commissioner Eric Smith and Department of Children and Families Secretary Bob Butterworth.

Glenn Sapp, a junior at Chiles High School, wanted to know what the state was going to do to prevent children from joining gangs.

The answer — continued prosecution of those involved in gang activity and increasing partnerships with groups like the Boys & Girls Club so children will have more positive options.

One by one, the students rolled out questions on topics such as child abuse and neglect, health care for uninsured families, early childhood education and pre-natal care.

"They seem to pinpoint things like gang violence and family intervention," said Maureen Dinnen, a School Board member from Broward County. "They really hit some of the major issues that are out there now."

Twelve out of 30 Florida students were picked to participate based on nominations. The panel included five students from Tallahassee and Monticello, including moderator Diane Grant, a junior at Chiles High School.

Ann Rowe, the media coordinator for Children's Week, said the students came up with the topics on their own. She and her staff helped them with development, but she said the questions "came from their hearts."

Miami senior Elliott McCarthy felt compelled to challenge the answer given stemming from what the state plans to do to ensure neighborhood safety. Dinnen said students should go to their school administrators and guidance counselors if they feel threatened.

"If I may be so bold," McCarthy said. "Saying go to your guidance counselor is not sufficient." He felt many students get lost in larger schools, and they may not get the help they need.

"I felt the boat needed to be rocked, and there were things that needed to be said," said McCarthy, who attends New World School of the Arts.

Although cabinet members said the state has good intentions on helping students and families, money is an issue. Kottkamp said this is the first time the state has seen a drop in revenue two years in a row, but he hopes things will soon rebound.

"It's an unfortunate situation, but this, too, shall pass," he said.

After the event, many of the students talked with one another about their questions and members of the Youth Cabinet.

Jasmine Holmes, a sophomore at Rickards High School, said she felt the event was "OK."

She said, "If we continue to do this, students will actually understand that their opinions are important."

Here's a list of some of the local students on the panel:

Diane Grant, 11th grade, Lawton Chiles High School (Moderator).^u

Carly^u Fahey, 12th grade, Leon High School.

Tishawne Hedrington, 5th grade,^u Metropolitan Christian Academy.

Jasmine Holmes, 10th grade, James S.^u Rickards High School.

Glenn Sapp, 11th grade, Lawton Chiles High^u School.

Kaiya Shapiro, 8th grade, Wakulla Middle School.^u

Jazmuan^u Hall, 12th grade, Jefferson County High School.

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