

**ST. PETERSBURG TIMES**

**Bay teens find state politicians mostly talk**

By Ernest Hooper, Metro Columnist

April 3, 2009

The contingent of Community Tampa Bay teens went to Tallahassee this week to meet with leaders, present issues and impact the policies most affecting youth.

They came for action, but left with the harsh reality that being heard doesn't compare with being taken seriously.

"We are important. We are the future," said Chantelle Lake, a 15-year-old Robinson High student. "They say that a lot. I've heard it a million times in speeches, but what are they doing to help us?"

Lake and fellow Robinson student Allison Walsh joined Hillsborough Community College's Breanna Smith, Bloomingdale's Taylor Raye Curry, East Lake's Parker Heffernan and USF's Stephanie Coates for Children's Week in the state capital. They met with area lawmakers, attended dinners and toured Florida State and Florida A&M.

Most important, five of the six — Heffernan was an alternate — made up part of the official statewide Kids Only Town Hall contingent that presented to Florida's Children and Youth Cabinet.

Lt. Gov. Jeff Kottkamp, various department heads, governor appointees and other dignitaries comprise the 20-member cabinet, a creation of Gov. Charlie Crist.

Naturally, the kids thought this would be a group ready to not only hear them out, but to express a genuine desire to act on their concerns.

When Crist addressed the group, he unwittingly hinted at what was to come.

"The governor during his opening speech said he had two ears and one mouth that God gave him, and that he thinks it's really important to listen more than he talks," said Walsh, 15. "But he did a pretty lengthy speech and did not stay to listen to the youth. I just found that quite ironic."

Children's Week coordinators gave the teens a list of pertinent topics they could choose from to take to the cabinet. This was not kids complaining about cafeteria food or homework.

Walsh asked about creating more family-friendly neighborhoods. Smith spoke about the challenges facing foster kids who age out of the system at 18. Lake wanted answers about the growing trend of adults taking jobs traditionally held by teens.

Heffernan wants the law changed so a youth can serve on the cabinet. A teen from Jacksonville explained his family has gone 10 years without medical insurance.

Various cabinet members began their responses with, "That's an interesting question," a telltale sign they were about to dodge the question.

"The Tallahassee trip really opened my eyes to see all the things that were actually going on," Smith said. "They talk the talk, but they don't walk the walk."

Still, the group found glimmers of hope. Department of Children and Families Secretary George Sheldon often displayed genuine interest.

Department of Health Secretary Ana Viamonte Ros pulled Walsh aside to learn more about her issue. Overall, the group walked away eager to see the gatherings continue.

"I think dialogue between adults and youth is really important," Walsh said. "How better for them to understand how we feel? ... Hopefully changes will occur, but it's not an overnight process."

Added Lake: "It's going to take a lot for them to see we really mean business."

Now who said kids should be seen and not heard?

That's all I'm saying.