



Fremont Area Youth Turn Center into Political Arena, Hosting Candidates for State Senate and House

Fremont, Mich. – Dang Le, a 17-year-old Newaygo High School senior visiting from Vietnam, said he had never seen anything like it in his home country: Students directly questioning politicians about the issues of the day. “I was surprised to see the way they talked. It was really outstanding,” he said. How else could a representative understand the issues of young people or what they really want in life? Dang reasoned.

That’s exactly why the Dogwood Center for the Performing Arts in Fremont was converted from an entertainment venue to a political arena for a candidate forum on Friday morning (Oct. 19, 2018) when students from Grant and Newaygo High Schools, and the Youth Advisory Committee of the Fremont Area Community Foundation, gathered to pose questions to candidates for 34th State Senate and the 100th State House District.

Michigan’s Children President & CEO Matt Gilliard summed up the purpose of the forum before an audience of students, community leaders and area residents. “It’s important for candidates to hear from students and learn what they should focus on in Lansing,” he said.

Attending candidates for the November General Election were Republican Jon Bumstead, Democrat Poppy Sias-Hernandez, and Libertarian Max Riekse in the Senate race; also Republican Scott VanSingel and Democrat Sandy Clarke in the State House race.

Fifteen youths posed questions of topical interest. Among them were education-based ones: Arming schoolteachers with guns in school, the rising costs of colleges and trade schools, and plans for improving the state’s education system. Others focused on different societal issues: teen vaping, abortion/women’s rights, and legalizing cannabis in Michigan, environmental protections /the Great Lakes, and rising auto insurance rates.



But there were a handful of value-based questions that hinted at how candidates would conduct themselves, if elected. For example: If you believe one thing but your party believes something else, do you follow ethics or your party? What is one issue that you would like to work with the other party on during the next session? Candidates often list the things they support; what is something you don’t support? What are your goals for our state if elected? Why do you want this job?

Jenna Salazar, 16, of Newaygo High School junior, said she was proud of how the students conducted themselves. “It was a good opportunity and a good way to be involved,” she said. While she and many of the others are too young to vote, Jenna said she planned to share her up-close impressions of the candidates with her parents.

Her classmate Sam Toth, also 16, said she attended an earlier candidate night to prepare for the student-led forum. “It’s harder to decide now that we’ve seen them in person and heard their personal story,” she said.

Toth asked one of the top questions of the campaign season: How will you improve our schools?

Clarke, and adjunct professor of political science at West Shore Community College, said student performance measures need to be studied, and teachers should be certified in the subjects they teach. In addition, paraprofessionals and aides should be placed to assist in larger classrooms. "It's very difficult for teachers to teach five or six classes with 40 students and without anyone helping that person," Clarke said.

Generated the only applause of the morning, 100th District Incumbent VanSingel, who runs a rental property business, said the state should reduce the emphasis and time spent on standardized testing in schools, provide more instructional time, reduce class sizes, and push skilled trades training and careers. "As the economy grows, we will be able to put more money in schools, and that breaks down class sizes," said VanSingel, seeking his second term. Large class sizes impact education quality -- through no fault of the classroom teacher, he said. "We also need to make sure teachers are trained with the skills needed in the classroom." To do so requires coordination with college teaching programs which determine how teachers are educated, he said. VanSingel also referenced skill trades as career path that many students could benefit from.

Bumstead, a long-time home builder and term-limited state Representative in Michigan's 100th District, said improving education begins with returning all decision-making to local boards and administrators. "Teachers, principals and parents know best how to educate you and your peers," he said. "For years in this state we tried to push all kids toward a four-year degree. I went to career tech training and made a good living for me and my family, and employed lot of people."

Sias-Hernandez, a Muskegon area community activist, shared the view that "standardized testing is a real problem. What I think is interesting is that it's one issue that Republicans and Democrats agree on, but Republicans have had the majority (in the Legislature) and we're still not doing it," she said. She added that teachers need thorough professional development and training, classrooms should be staffed with additional aides and paraprofessionals, and they should be properly funded.

Riekse, a retired U.S. Army lieutenant colonel and perennial candidate, said the state should discontinue its support of the Common Core curriculum and reduce standardized testing. "One thing is there's too many tests. That's something that needs to be addressed, and (we should have) have more focus on the skilled trades," he said. Riekse added that he toured a school where active shooter training was in place, and that should be available in other buildings.



Afterwards, adults who participated in the forum highly praised the student questioners. The youth created their own questions. "I thought it was wonderful how they took responsibility and ownership" of the event, said candidate Clarke. "I came early and watched the students. They were very much in control in how they were going to ask the questions."

Richard C. Wheeler, Sr., the editor/publisher of the Newaygo County's newspaper, the Times Indicator, was in the audience. A journalist for 35 years, entirely spent in Newaygo County, he said he was impressed by the sophistication of the students' questions. "They're concerned about the same things we're all concerned with," he said. "They have the same desire to be part of the solution as anyone. That was reinforced here."

This was the fourth in a series of forums before the November General Election sponsored by Michigan's Children, a statewide public policy and advocacy group working on behalf of kids and families from cradle to career. Other sponsors were the Michigan Afterschool Partnership, the Fremont Area Community Foundation, Newaygo High School, Grant High School, True North Community Services, and Project FOCUS from Hart and Walkerville.

Michigan's Children is the only statewide, independent voice working to ensure that public policies are made in the best interest of children, from cradle to career, and their families.