



No Debate: Youth and Candidates Agree Michigan Needs to Step up Mental Health Support for Kids, Families

Kalamazoo – When candidates for state House and Senate gathered with youth from the Kalamazoo Youth Development Network and ASK Family Services, there was *no debate* over what needed to be done.

Candidates agreed with students over the need for more counseling and mental health services in schools, and that youth and their families were entitled to health care including mental health regardless of their ability to pay. Candidates also agreed that the state should take action to make that happen.

All candidates for the 20th State Senate District, and 60th and 61st State House districts were invited to the forum on Oct. 29 at Western Michigan University. Attending were candidates Sean McCann, 20th State Senate, Jon Hoadley, 60th State House, and Alberta Griffin, 61st State House. Two of them were elected on Nov. 6: McCann, the Democratic challenger to incumbent Sen. Margaret O'Brien, a Republican, won the Nov. 6 general election, and incumbent Democratic State Rep. Jon Hoadley won re-election to a third term. Griffin, a Democrat, narrowly lost to incumbent Republican Brandt Iden.

Tina Robbins, Executive Director of ASK Family Services, said the forum gave students the opportunity to see candidates in an approachable and safe environment.

"Opportunities for youth to be involved in events like this reinforce that their voices are important and develop leadership skills for their future," Robbins said.



Issues raised by students included how the state could better support youth transitioning out of foster care, educational issues such as standardized testing and special education, health care affordability and reducing infant mortality. All the questions came from the youth themselves.

Some questioners, like Diamond, were too nervous to ask their own question, but had a friend ask for her. "I took interest in infant mortality after my mother's baby died, she had to ride the bike to get groceries. It's a passion of mine. I asked that question because it's important to me, and I want to know."

Other questioners, like Mia said that her questions about homelessness and bullying came directly from "past experiences with my friends". She was ecstatic to meet one of her

candidates for office. "To hear them say they're actually going to do something about it makes me really happy."

A dominant theme in the questioning was mental health. Youth worried openly about the mental health needs of their peers, wanted more training for educators in areas addressing the mental health of students, and raised issues including school bullying and suicide by gun.

"With mental health problems and suicide rates rising, what will you do about it?" Asked a student named Justice.

Rep. Hoadley acknowledged mental health is a growing concern among young people, praised those with the courage to openly discuss it, and added the state isn't doing enough to help people. "When you look at the funding Community Mental Health programs receive, we give them a pot of money and say, go with God and make it work, regardless of the number of people who need those services. We have to make sure the way we align our budget meets the needs of the people. The way we're funding mental health isn't working."

Sen.-elect Sean McCann agreed the state needs to step up support to agencies that are helping people deal with mental illness. "We need robust supports to help people struggling with these issues," he said. In practical terms, McCann said it is less costly to treat people early than allow untreated illnesses to worsen. "If you don't have a good mental health system in Michigan then it will lead to worsening mental health issues and higher suicide rates," he said.

Hoadley said he's been in the minority in the state Legislature in wanting more state funding for mental health care. In contrast, he said he is pleased to see Kalamazoo as a community invest more in tackling suicide. "So many who survived suicide attempts talk about how happy they were that they weren't successful. We need to talk about forms of intervention. The goal should be a suicide-free county, state and country," he said.

Griffin agreed that there has been a stigma against openly discussing mental health illnesses. "That's been part of the problem and risks increase if someone doesn't have a place to confide in someone," she said. Griffin advocated for more treatment for those suffering from mental health conditions and for comprehensive care for those at risk of suicide.



A student named Korie asked the candidates how they would advocate for mental health supports for young people in schools and better educate teachers in helping suffering students.

McCann said a lot is being asked of local school systems which often push back by saying they don't have the resources to cover the cost of everything they're expected to do.

Meanwhile, funding cuts have reduced valuable positions such as school librarians and nurses, he said. "I want to reverse that and give more resources to public schools," he pledged.

Both McCann and Hoadley said that educators not legislators are the experts in how school programs should be designed with Hoadley saying, “That’s partly the wrong thing for someone like me to be doing.”

However, Hoadley said he “absolutely supports education” and wants to make sure schools have the ability to pay for professional development for teachers. “When school counselors talk to us about having the highest counselor-student ratio in the country, please hire a few more counselors. When we talk to teachers who say so much is being put on their plates, how are they supposed to (assume) more professional development? When we talk to mental health providers who say there are a number of effective interventions we would do in schools but there are not enough resources. These are all the things we need to do,” Hoadley said.

Griffin likewise said this issue is personal and of great concern. She agreed the stigma over mental health should be eliminated and more training for teachers and students is needed. Griffin added it needs to be understood that teachers are tasked with many responsibilities and that makes providing more supports to help youth with mental illness even more critical. Meanwhile, she said the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the law that makes available appropriate public education for eligible children with disabilities, is under attack.

Following the forum, student Khaneja had a message for elected officials. "Keep interacting with youth. I hope they keep in contact with us. If we have ideas and propositions for something, they should listen to us"

This was our final in a series of nine forums before the November General Election sponsored by Michigan’s Children, a statewide advocacy and public policy organization, with partners including ASK Family Services and the Kalamazoo Youth Development Network (KYDNet).

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