

The Augusta Chronicle

Teens get to voice their concerns

Source URL: http://chronicle.augusta.com/stories/2008/06/27/met_463621.shtml

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Friday, June 27, 2008

Local teens were not talking about the drought or who might be president. They had their own concerns.

For James Pinder, cell phone use at school topped his list of concerns at the Dream Builders' Student Ambassador Board's second annual youth political discussion forum Thursday evening.

"I don't think adults understand that we need our phones like when I have to call my mom in the afternoon," the Glenn Hills High School junior said. "We just need to get our point of view out, because people think we're just along for the ride."

Dozens of youth involved in the Dream Builders of America's Youth program and their parents gathered at Lucy Craft Laney Museum of Black History to hear what local and state officials had to say about the hot topics of concern Augusta-area youth.

The main goal of the forum was to allow teens to learn about their community leaders, said Tanya Jeffords, co-founder of the organization that offers educational and character-building workshops to youths 13 to 21 in Richmond, Columbia and Aiken counties. Students asked questions about the costs of standardized tests, the quality of school lunches and the issue of prayer in schools.

Juvenile Court Judge Ben Allen said panel members also gained from the forum.

"In my setting, I can't listen to what's going in young people's minds," he said. "This allowed us to learn from them and maybe re-think some things."

After listening to the youth, Mr. Allen said he thinks it might be a good idea to allow students to bring cell phones to school, something Richmond County school board members voted on Thursday night. Board members approved changing the 365-day rule for students caught with cell phones, opting instead for a three strikes policy. On the first offense, the phone will be taken for 10 days. It will be taken for 30 days on the second offense. The phone will be immediately discarded, recycled or donated to charity on the third time or if the phone isn't claimed within 10 days of the first or second confiscation.

Aminah Walton, a John S. Davidson Arts Magnet School junior, said she hopes Thursday night's forum will push youth to take action on the issues that concern them.

"Young people ask questions and they never really get an answer," she said. "Tonight, I think we really got the answers."

Staff Writer Greg Gelpi contributed to this article.

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