

Youth Congress Forum Report Out

1. What key thoughts about youth development and engagement emerged from the discussion?

The youth identified seven major challenges regarding youth development and engagement: youth involvement, peer pressure, transportation, desire for instant gratification, need to collaborate, negative media coverage, and community service as a priority. There was a general consensus that there was a lack of involvement among the majority of the youth in our community. Although opportunities may be present, students may not be inclined to participate unless it is required by a program or their school. However, they will most likely participate if encouraged by a peer. According to the youth participating in this forum, peer pressure is the issue that encompasses drugs, alcohol, violence, pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, drop out rate, and other barriers to success. Peer pressure also lead to discussion on the desire for instant gratification and popularity. Students asked for more collaboration among students who were involved. Community service was viewed as a priority and many students felt that it is an integral part of their leadership development.

2. What was the shared sense of future direction that the community should take?

Many of the ideas and issues brought forth by the delegates displayed a common concern for how we meet the needs of the youth in our community. The delegates were not only good at identifying the issues but they were also full of ideas on possible paths forward. The recommended future direction included getting students involved at an earlier age, training students on how to be good leaders, emphasizing individuality, increasing tolerance, providing more fun activities, increasing positive media coverage, finding new ways to engage youth, providing information on all youth programs and activities, asking adults to listen to and value the youth perspective, and stressing the importance of a community investing in its youth with time and resources.

3. What were the areas of disagreement, if any?

We did not have any areas of disagreement emerge throughout the discussion.

4. What were the possible actions or next steps?

Within the two focus groups of delegates and one focus group of advisors, we identified possible actions including increasing youth involvement in the community, promoting more activities for youth, promoting more service opportunities for all ages, partnering with other organizations, encouraging youth to speak up and unite their voices, and encouraging adults and the media to highlight youth achievement and participation.

As a result of this forum the Youth Congress of South Alabama will focus on the following areas in 2008:

1. Create a central information center for all youth programs that will include links to each organization's website and a calendar of events. (The

Community Foundation of South Alabama offered to host the youth information center at www.communityendowment.com)

2. Share program information on activities, mission, etc. within the Youth Congress.
3. Address possible solutions to peer pressure within program design.

5. What unique information came out of the forum that our leaders need to know?

In addition to the responses on youth development, values and community building, delegates at the forum identified racial profiling, domestic violence, and lack of communication between adults and youth as problems that they would like to see addressed. Delegates also mentioned that they would like to see more positive adult role models who set examples by being good examples and who are interested in the development of youth and betterment of our community.

6. Participants

Students who participated in the forum were members of the Youth Congress of South Alabama sponsored by the Community Foundation of South Alabama. All 47 Students are in grades 10-12 at various high schools in Mobile and Baldwin Counties. Each student was selected by a youth organization to participate in this youth forum. Thirteen youth service programs sent representatives, and ten program advisors participated.