

Community Youth Shared Vision: Issues and Solutions

On Saturday, January 27, 2007 community youth residing within several Houston neighborhoods came together in a Community Youth “Town Hall” meeting at Wheatley High School. The youths were from several neighborhoods including Denver Harbor, Gulfton, Quail Valley, and the Third and Fifth Ward communities. They represented various schools including, Atascocita, Wheatley, Houston Prep, Presbyterian, St. John’s, Smith, Fleming and Key Middle Schools. Following is a summary of the prioritized issue areas and the respective recommendations agreed upon by the youths assembled that day.

The discussion centered on the following three issues:

- Improving Education
- Building Community
- Strengthening Families

In each issue area, community youths were asked to arrive at their top 2-3 priority recommendations for both community initiatives as well as for public policy initiatives. Community initiatives are goals and actions that youth, community residents, and neighborhood organizations can undertake, while public policy initiatives were described as goals and actions where public officials and elected leaders should undertake.

Improving Education

Equal justice, through the fair application of rules and regulations as well as the assertive prevention of student drop outs were identified as the two priority issues for public education. Recommendations included emphasis on continuing education training for teachers and school personnel that help them be more effective in responding to diverse learning styles, cultural dynamics and social challenges which face youth of today. Further, the body overwhelmingly requests revision of school conduct and dress code policies, rules and regulations to equitably govern students and school personnel alike.

Public Policy Initiatives

- Raise expectations for student achievement
- Better training, screening and placement of teachers
- College/continuing educational awareness
- Support for more student activities including cultural diversity, student organizations

Community Initiatives

- Health Awareness through community activities, i.e., bulletins, loud speakers, etc.
- Peer leadership development/support and usage.
- Life skills and lunch tutorials

Building Communities

Solutions developed included more constructive outlets and alternative activities need to be supported and provided by our lawmakers. There was a consensus that communities are too limited in resources, opportunities and there was far too much talk but little action. Youth and community organizations that support youth development need additional funding and more support from public agencies

It was agreed that promoting cultural history and the various ethnic histories and heritages is the key to reducing prejudices and stereotyping. Multimedia tools, including participatory theater ought to be utilized more in that regard. Interracial relationships, friendships and inter-organizational forums ought to be encouraged.

More youth summer employment opportunities need to be created. Youth training programs for trades, vocational and technical jobs need to be created as well as opportunities for youths to attend and complete college education. Standards related to youth labor, which support the continuing academics of student employees, should be explored

Public Policy Initiatives

- Increase public safety by focusing more on the *prevention* (of on home burglaries and injuries due to gang violence).
- Direct school counselors to provide more drug education and counseling as friends.
- Promote multicultural activities, racial tolerance

Community Initiatives

- Promote youth involvement in civic affairs, voting, and awareness.
- Providing youths with rewarding alternatives to gang involvement.

Strengthening Families

Discussing ideas and the means for strengthening families (within the Town Hall format) proved to be a difficult and personal task. Nonetheless, the youths developed insights and priorities for helping families to become more cohesive, viable and stable. An important factor noted in the status of families was the absence of one or more caregivers in the home, especially absent fathers. Economic forces, especially the lack of adequate employment opportunities proved to be a central theme. Mothers most often bear the brunt of the pressures. Therefore, the initiatives cited for strengthening families included:

Public Policy Initiatives-

- Provide support for early parenting skills training.
- Develop fatherhood initiatives which increase economic uplift, family structure and social supports.
- Provide supports for older siblings who must take on more responsibilities in caring for younger siblings.

Community Initiatives-

- Increase family counseling/ support programs within the faith based organizations
- Developing and implementing proactive supports which address family issues, e.g., early warning systems for signs of abuse/neglect, older sibling support systems, and early childhood initiatives.