

Local high school students gather to discuss civics

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By Vivian Nereim, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Robin Rombach/Post-Gazette

Marjorie Rendell, left, first lady of Pennsylvania, speaks to high school students in the music hall at the Carnegie Library of Homestead yesterday. At right is Gerald Zahorchak, state secretary of education.

Airing grievances about the public school system to resounding cheers, about 1,000 high school students from across Western Pennsylvania gathered yesterday to discuss civics with Pennsylvania's first lady, Judge Marjorie Rendell, and Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak.

As microphones were passed around the crowded auditorium in the Carnegie Library of Homestead, some students said high school taught them to be submissive, while others argued that ineffective student governments were poor models for democracy.

The town hall-style meeting was attended by students from 34 school districts. Hosted by the Consortium for Public Education and the Allegheny Intermediate Unit, it was held as part of a bus tour Judge Rendell is making to promote civics education in the public schools.

Students took Judge Rendell's opening question -- "How does what you learn in school prepare you to be an active participant in your democracy?" -- in several directions.

"It teaches us how to individually voice our opinions, and to vote," said a student from Fox Chapel Area High School.

"You have to get up in the morning and go to school. This teaches you responsibility," said a student from West Mifflin Area High School.

But the energy shifted as the room began to fill with complaints.

"I feel like there is much needed change that can be done," said a student from Pittsburgh Peabody High School.

"We don't have enough debate," said a student from Baldwin High School. "We're spoonfed what people want us to believe."

A student from Bethel Park High School questioned how standardized tests taught active citizenship.

Some students suggested civics classes should be mandatory and taught in lower grades.

"I just started my first modern government class like two weeks ago," said one student, a senior at South Allegheny High School.

"I believe we should start in kindergarten," Judge Rendell answered.

Other students raised more serious concerns.

A student from McKeesport High School suggested schools would not improve until crime rates did.

"I just had a cousin die," she said. "Half the time, we're in the house because of fear."

Willette Walker, a 10th-grade world history teacher at Pittsburgh Brashear High School, said she was glad students were able to participate fully in the discussion.

"It's not what I expected," she said. "I thought it was going to be more like a panel."

Ms. Walker said that many of the students' criticisms arose from the difficulty of balancing order with personal freedom.

"I think some of them are legitimate concerns. I certainly have heard them before," she said, "especially when you talk about student government."

Cassie Vensel, an 18-year-old senior at Franklin Regional High School, said she thought some of the complaints, like one about school lunches, were "kind of pointless."

"You've got to be able to deal with what you have," she said. "You have people who are less fortunate."

Near the end of the discussion, a student from Moon Area High School stood up and said: "It was actually today, hearing other students, that I realized my opinion matters."

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