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Students flex political muscle in a forum with Pa.'s first lady

By **Daveen Rae Kurutz**

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Tuesday, September 15, 2009



A town hall meeting where officials challenged students to think critically about politics became an opportunity for those same students to voice their displeasure with school policies and the way their voices are heard.

"We learn about all of these rights, but can we really use them yet?" asked Paige Morrison, a senior at Chartiers Valley High School.

About 1,000 area high school students attended the session Monday morning at the Carnegie Library of Homestead in Munhall with Judge Marjorie Rendell of the 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals and Gerald Zahorchak, state secretary of education.

Students from three counties, 33 school districts and three technical schools participated in the meeting, which marked the kickoff to Rendell's Civics Bus Tour.

"Citizens are made, not born," said Rendell. The judge, who is the wife of Gov. Ed Rendell, took her message to South Park School District in the afternoon. "The opportunity to change the world for the better is right before our eyes."

The teens pushed Rendell on educational issues including the emphasis on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment and the potential of school consolidation. Rendell didn't answer their questions directly.

"Democracy balances things," Rendell replied to a question about how and whether standardized testing teaches students to be good citizens and good people. "There are a lot of standardized things in life. ... We don't like it, and we rail against it. It's a part of life."

That outraged Moon Area High School senior Desiree Mosura.

"I didn't like how she ignored our questions," said Mosura, 17, of Moon. "She wouldn't take on the controversy."

Not all students at the town hall meeting felt that their schools -- or the state's first lady -- were blocking them out. Courtney Seronka, a senior at Springdale High School in the Allegheny Valley School District, said students have rights, but they

Photo Gallery

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Student reception

Jasmine Goldband/Tribune-Review

About the writer

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need rules.

"So many people have fought for our rights, as women, as Americans," said Seronka of Springdale. "We're so blessed to have the rules we do. We can't just go out into the world and have no rules -- that would be chaos."

When it comes to politics, Sean Brady wants to be able to make an informed decision -- even as a teenager. As an Advanced Placement Government student, Brady said the best way to get teenagers involved in politics is to let them make their own decisions.

"We need to talk more about the issues and have more debate rather than being spoon-fed what people want us to think," said Brady, 17, of Whitehall, a senior at Baldwin High School. "Let us discover information, not just sit back and be manipulated."

Rendell and Zahorchak encouraged the students to become active citizens by taking action on those things that aggravate or outrage them.

"Think now about what you might do about these problems," Zahorchak said. "What can you do as this generation that would be pivotal?"

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