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Monday, Dec 13, 2004

The Charlotte Observer

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Posted on Sun, Dec. 12, 2004

THE ZERO TO 21 PROJECT

Agenda for children: Healthy, safe, educated

LIZ CHANDLER
Staff Writer

Mecklenburg residents come together to craft 14 goals for children. The next step: How, and if, those hopes will be put into action.

In a remarkable town hall meeting, more than 1,000 Mecklenburg residents came together Saturday to set an agenda for helping children.

Now comes the hard part: Action.

There's no price tag yet, but the agenda goes to public and private decision-makers in a campaign to influence spending.

It aims to ensure the county's children are safe, healthy and well educated.

"It is a day of hope -- hope for a new beginning, hope for a change in the way we address issues affecting our children and youth," campaign co-chair Shirley Fulton told participants in opening remarks.

A diverse group of teens, parents and child advocates from across the county spent eight hours debating issues, then voted on those they deemed most pressing.

At the top of their agenda:

- Require higher standards and provide better pay for teachers and assistants -- including mentoring programs.

IMAGES AND RELATED CONTENT



GARY O'BRIEN, Staff

More than 1,000 people attended a meeting on helping children Saturday at the Charlotte Merchandise Mart. Here, Maricela Cabrera (center) joins other participants in a stretch break led by David Camp (on screen) of America Speaks, the Washington, D.C., nonprofit group that conducted the meeting.



- Provide health care services where children are: home, school and day care.
- Prepare parents for parenting and hold them accountable for child safety.

The agenda included 14 recommendations and was met with mixed reaction.

Most politicians were cautious, saying they must study the costs and weigh other priorities facing the community.

"It's a map, not a mandate," said county commissioner Jim Puckett.

Charlotte Mayor Pat McCrory called the agenda "one more piece of feedback we receive."

James Pughsley, superintendent of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, wished the group had addressed the tension between the growing classroom space needs in suburban schools and the danger of creating increasingly re-segregated, high-poverty schools in the inner city.

"I felt as though the actions with regard to education were a bit soft."

Saturday's meeting combined technology and conversation. Participants broke into groups of 10 to review data, discuss issues and rank priorities through high-tech keypad voting that instantly gave them the room's results.

America Speaks, a Washington nonprofit group, conducted the meeting. It's the same group that helped New York revamp initial plans for redeveloping the World Trade Center site.

"If we don't stand up for children, then we don't stand up for much," AmericaSpeaks founder Carolyn Lukensmeyer said, citing South Carolina's Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund.

Michael Covington, 18, turned out Saturday to represent some of Charlotte's most vulnerable kids. He grew up in 14 different foster homes after he was taken from his family's home, he said.

"I want to encourage people to think about giving foster homes to teenage kids, not just younger children," said Covington, who's on track to graduate from Independence High next spring, and hopes to go on to college.

Niya Thames, 20, who grew up in Lakewood, one of Charlotte's severely distressed neighborhoods, says, "I had some of my opinions changed, and I think I had things to say that changed the opinions of some people at my table.

"They were worried about what's going on in school, but I think they should worry more about what's going on in homes and in neighborhoods. If you don't pay attention to what's going on in kids' everyday lives, they are not going to do well in school."

Participants in the town hall meeting represented a variety of backgrounds from across the county but did not match the county's population exactly. Women outnumbered men two-to-one, and low-income residents were also underrepresented. Blacks and whites were equally represented, at 44 percent each.



GARY O'BRIEN, Staff

Leonard Maxwell, 18, a senior at West Charlotte High, listens to Spanish translation from facilitator Arthur Sosa (right). "I feel like I'm giving a lot of positive input," Maxwell said of the meeting.

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"Is this a cross section of Charlotte? Sure. I don't know if it's completely representative of Mecklenburg County," said county commissioner Bill James, who left shortly after noon. He said the discussion led him to believe Republicans were underrepresented at the event.

"What I've heard is that the problem is money, which I disagree with. I think it's moral and behavioral."

Organizers didn't ask party affiliation, they said, because the question tends to create more divisiveness than exists.

Others participants said the room reflected a strong cross section of citizens and that government ought to listen.

"I believe this event will push children's issues up on our agenda because they clearly have support from the community," said county commissioners Chairman Parks Helms.

Latin American immigrants sat together at two tables, and translators made sure all participants understood the discussions. Sergio Rocha, a bilingual Charlotte Realtor and native of Peru, commended his tablemates for attending: "We shouldn't have an attitude of only receiving, but also of giving. It's important that we get involved."

The town meeting is the first step of a three-year, \$1 million campaign called the United Agenda for Children. The campaign is supported by more than 40 child advocacy groups, and facilitated by the Lee Institute -- a Charlotte nonprofit group that aims to build collaborative leadership to solve problems.

A final report from the day is scheduled for January. Charlotte leaders and grass-roots groups will then gather for a retreat to decide which groups should take responsibility for which priorities. Action teams will work for the next two years to put recommendations in place.

"I'm going to stay the rest of the day," Bill Brawley, a Matthews resident, said about halfway through Saturday's meeting. Last week, Brawley told the Observer he was concerned conservative suburban voices wouldn't be adequately represented and would leave if he felt people weren't listening to him.

"It's not all I hoped but better than I feared. They had a basic agenda of health, education and safety they started with, but rather than tell us this is the agenda, we had an opportunity to mold it."

-- Carrie Levine, Eric Frazier and Cristina Bolling contributed.

-- LIZ CHANDLER: (704) 358-5063; lichandler@charlotteobserver.com

TOWN MEETING BREAKDOWN: The Three Themes

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Children need greater access to health care, particularly in the schools, participants say.

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