

***KidSpeak* – Bringing Youth Voices to the Capitol**

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Believing that youth have a right to be heard in their community and by their government, Voices member Voices for Michigan's Children created *KidSpeak*[®], a program which allows youth to advocate on their own behalf. Created in 1996, the program brings youths before listening panels composed of legislators, other public officials, and community leaders to talk about the issues that concern them. *KidSpeak* forums are held in policymaking settings such as the State Capitol, to provide youths with an authentic experience, and to provide policymakers the best opportunity to hear the voice of young people. Michigan's Children organizes a statewide *KidSpeak* every year, and also assists in the development of community *KidSpeaks*.

Key Elements

- Youth recruitment begins one month before an event. Michigan's Children reaches out to local youth-focused direct service organizations such as schools, child welfare providers, and after-school programs, to find youths from a range of backgrounds. Around 20 youths are given the opportunity to speak at each statewide *KidSpeak*.
- Michigan's Children provides skill-building guides to recruiting organizations to help them assist the youths in developing testimony and working on presentation skills. Written testimony is requested prior to the event from each speaker, to simulate the experience of testifying in a government hearing. Typically, there is no topic identified for a statewide *KidSpeak*, but, at times, pressing policy requires a theme.
- During the youth recruitment process, Michigan's Children also recruits a listening panel of 20 to 25 people. Invitations are sent to legislators, government administrators, the state board of education, representatives of major private funders, major business interests, and other opinion leaders from Michigan's Children's board and elsewhere. During campaign cycles, candidates for office and office holders are invited.
- The organization sends a press advisory to its media list and works with the Capitol Press Corps—the major 50 or so outlets that typically cover the Capitol and policy-related events. It also targets TV media, and the event often gets good coverage.
- *KidSpeak* is generally held in the State Capitol, and sometimes in legislative hearing rooms in other Capitol complex buildings—the same places to which adults go to testify before the legislature. The rooms are reserved through the government administration at no cost.
- At the event, Michigan's Children's President/CEO provides an overview of the *KidSpeak* concept, introduces the listening panel, and calls up the youth speakers one at a time to testify. Michigan's Children now schedules a half hour at the end of the proceedings to allow the listening panel to ask questions or clarify a speaker's point (not to make statements of their own!). A reception for policymakers, the press and young people follows.



- After the event, the youths receive written thank you notes, professional photos of themselves speaking, and a copy of the printed report that includes their testimony.
- Michigan's Children often assists with community *KidSpeaks* by providing training for groups interested in sponsoring a *KidSpeak* and with testimony writing. Michigan's Children also assists in developing local listening panels, when requested.

"We will occasionally call upon young people to testify throughout the legislative process. In fact, the afternoon of last year's *KidSpeak* (we hold them in the AM and over lunch), a young woman testified before the House Committee on Family and Children's Services about a related issue to her *KidSpeak* testimony. We facilitate that when we can."

- Michele Corey, Voices for Michigan's Children

Costs and Staff Time

- Cost is minimal. Michigan's Children provides lunch for youth participants and mileage reimbursement for those unable to afford transportation.
- Preparation for a state *KidSpeak* requires about 20 hours weekly of staff time for the months prior to the actual event. After the statewide event, staff work at a lower level of intensity, i.e., assisting at local level *KidSpeaks*, or reporting to policymakers on testimony given at the state *KidSpeak*.
- On the day of the event, four or five staff are on hand to man registration tables, do prep work with the young people on the order of events and etiquette, coordinate the flow of speakers, direct foot traffic, create relationships with the listening panel, and facilitate media coverage of specific youth speakers.

Things to Think About

Find a Diverse Group

When recruiting students for *KidSpeak*, include youth from a range of ethnic, economic, and geographic backgrounds. It is essential to incorporate youth who can relate to various issues facing their communities and state, and helpful to inform the recruiting organizations about this need very early.

Provide a Structured Program

It is crucial to have a solidly planned program. A stringent process and agenda helps policymakers by providing the information in a structured manner.

Authenticity

Today there are a lot of programs which allow youth to speak out on issues. Michigan's Children provides an authentic experience where young people testify in the same manner as adults—in the same place, to the same people and in the same format.

Outcomes

- Youths are empowered by the experience, which enables them to express their thoughts on issues affecting them. It improves self-esteem and promotes future civic involvement.
- *KidSpeak* allows Michigan's Children to "put a face" on the important issues members of government address. Officials appreciate hearing from their youngest constituency, something atypical in their busy schedules.
- The program keeps Michigan's Children, an organization that does not provide direct services to youth, in tune with what is occurring in the lives of youth in the state.
- Michigan's Children records and uses the testimony shared at *KidSpeak* in materials sent to supporters and to government officials.