

2018 Florida League of Cities Annual
Conference Program for Youth Councils
Open Space Meeting Discussion Summaries
August 18, 2018

Introduction

On August 18, 2018, nearly 100 youth council members from across the state participated in a daylong program at the Florida League of Cities Annual Conference. The program began with an exploration of heuristic thinking (the mental shortcuts we use every day) and, in particular, the representativeness heuristic, a shortcut that prompts us to think our experience of something, however limited, is representative of all experience.

Sensitized to this source of bias, the young leaders set their own agenda for the balance of the day using the Open Space Meeting model. The organizing question for the day was, “How can we be heard?”

Throughout the afternoon, the young leaders formed informal groups to discuss the various topics they had placed on the agenda. Following the “Law of Two Feet” (“Use your two feet to get to the place where you can make a difference”), individuals moved in and out of the discussion groups based on their interests. Some groups were as small as two or three, some as large as forty or fifty.

The conduct of these young men and women was inspiring. Throughout the afternoon, lively conversations were taking place in various parts of the meeting room on a surprising array of topics (see table of contents). Despite the sensitivity of many of the subjects, and the diversity of opinions in the room, these conversations were accomplished in a positive and respectful manner.

Wrapping up the day, several spoke of how good it was to meet other young men and women who were passionate about issues affecting their communities, their schools and their peers. Many also mentioned the satisfaction of having listened to different points of view and having been able to share their own perspectives, all in an environment in which they felt respected.

The pages that follow contain the short reports (lightly edited for grammar and spelling) that each group drafted after their conversation.

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Addressing the “Snitches Get Stiches” Stigma

“Snitches get stitches” is a phrase that is commonly used in our schools. [The phrase is a threat indicating that those who snitch will be physically harmed, requiring stitches to close the wounds.]

At our meeting, we discussed how drugs are in all our schools (we had 7 different cities in our group). There have been many near fatal incidents and some fatal incidents that no one will speak out on, in fear of being targeted or discriminated against.

We also spoke on how this concept could affect mental health. You may think you are helping an individual by consulting with a professional or talking to someone who is close to that individual, but doing that could hurt them. We also mentioned that if we do say something to a professional or someone who is close to the individual, then we have become the “snitch”.

Our schools tell us “if you see something, say something.” But even if the “snitching” is done anonymously, it will still anger the individual who was “snitched” on and may lead to a tragic event. If schools want students to speak up, they must provide protection by assuring the students safety. Often, we feel unsafe to speak out. We must take away the power of the word snitch. It is the fear that gangs in our schools instill in us.

Arming Teachers

Over the past few months there have been many school shootings and some schools think arming teachers with guns is the solution. In my opinion, I do not believe that teachers should have guns in the classroom.

I strongly believe that when a teacher is armed, it could be a hazard for the students. If a student gets a teacher mad, that teacher may overreact and pull the gun on the student. Most teachers in school say, "If you mess with me in my class you pay for the consequences." Teachers normally give detentions and suspensions, but there's a possibility that a teacher could overreact and shoot the student.

Some people believe teachers should have guns. Their argument is that the teacher will be able to protect their students. Also, the shooter may not want to fight an armed teacher. The problem with this is the possibility of an accidental discharge, where the teacher or a student could be harmed.

Bullying

Everyone has been bullied, or has bullied someone. But it's not cool. So, what should you do if you are getting bullied or you see someone being bullied?

First, we talked about the reasons why people bully others. Reasons students get bullied may be because of how they look, what they like to do, or who they are. But, it's not fair that people get bullied.

So, why do people do it? There could be many reasons why. I believe one of the biggest reasons is because the bully wants to show off to someone. They want to show that they are tough.

Sometimes you don't know what to do if you get bullied. Telling someone is the best thing you can do. You may be scared or feel like telling is not an option. But most of the time, telling is an option. Someone, whether it is an adult or a friend, will be there to help you.

By: Wieman Emilus

Community Projects

We started this meeting to discuss different projects youth councils can complete. We also talked about how to conduct youth council meetings and how we could diversify our council. Some of the different projects that we discussed were:

- Car wash for community members
- Watch kids for adults during community events
- Repair houses in our community
- Beautify our city by planting trees
- Pick up the trash that has been thrown on the side of the roads and highways and recycle the plastic

The Dade City Youth Council shared some of the community projects that we do in the city. These include:

- Shop with a Cop (Christmas and Back to School)
- Movie in the Park
- 5k's
- Dog Day
- Art in the Park
- Market Place
- Health Fair
- Florida City Government Week

By: Dade City Youth Council

Consent

The meeting on consent began with a post that read, “Feminists say that if they walk around naked and get raped, it’s not their fault. Let me ask you this, if you owned a bank and left the doors wide open with no security and you got robbed in the middle of the night, is it the robber’s fault or yours?”

To us, the answer is simple. The robbers made a clear and conscious decision to steal, committing a crime. Rape is also a crime; however, society puts the blame on the victims, often because they are dressed in a scandalous manner.

We will continue to fight unjust actions instead of trying to teach self-control. We see this similar behavior appear in school dress codes. Young women are told to cover their shoulders while young men can participate in after school sports shirtless.

We also spoke on the actual definition of consent. Consent is about receiving validation from another person which sets up boundaries that each party is comfortable with. Unfortunately, it’s easy to put people in categories based on their looks and the attention they receive. It all comes down to the lack of respect for one another and the need to label another person.

Florida's Environmental Problems

Florida's unique geography, wildlife and ecosystem hosts many diverse animals and plant species. Its amazing biodiversity gives Florida many social and economic advantages but also presents potential risks. Among the risks include hurricanes, red tides, sea level rise due to climate change, and the rapid urban development that infringes on natural lands.

All Floridians know the danger and chaos that hurricanes can cause. During our discussion, we agreed that hurricane prevention and relief infrastructure must be updated. One idea that surfaced was the shift from above ground power lines to underground power systems. Due to the damage caused by storm surge and high winds, power lines and grids are constantly having to be rebuilt. On top of the crippling costs required to fix these power systems, many towns and cities lose the power they need to complete their recovery which further damages their economy. However, an upgrade to our existing power system would be to shift the power underground thus defending it from salt water corrosion and wind damage. Other necessary infrastructure improvements are storm walls/protective barriers, and updated building codes. We also discussed how mangroves and coral reefs not only serve as an ecological tourist attraction that boosts the economy, but also as a natural storm barrier. They help combat storm surges as sea levels rise and provide habitats for the wildlife. After the devastation that Hurricane Irma caused, the need to update our building codes is essential. All buildings should be required to have hurricane proof windows and doors, hurricane shutters, and many may need to be raised off the ground to prevent flooding.

Our group also discussed the damaging effects of the Red Tides in our communities. The Cape Coral Youth Council voiced their concerns about the economic and social effects within their own community. The Red Tide has caused so much damage that the Florida Government has declared a State of Emergency. While our group did not come up with a solution yet, all the councils decided that we would work diligently together to make one.

Lastly, Florida's rapid urban development has come at a cost. Many natural ecosystems such as the wetlands of the Everglades have been damaged by this expansion. This has hurt several species, including the burrowing owl, alligator, bobcat, and snowy egret. These native

species which have already been pushed from their habitats are being once again displaced and are in danger of extinction. We decided that zoning regulations must be imposed to protect our diverse wildlife.

The Pinecrest Youth Advisory Council pledges to work with the Cape Coral Youth Council, the Homestead Youth Council, and the Islamorada Youth Council across the board on these pressing environmental issues. The Pinecrest Youth Advisory Council recognizes the extreme importance of our wildlife and ecosystem in the prosperity, safety, and happiness of our state and will do whatever it takes to protect it.

#PINECRESTING

By: Pinecrest Youth Advisory Council

Gender and Sexuality Identity

Our meeting was based on how to help those with different sexualities and genders feel comfortable, however they identify. We concluded that bathrooms for each gender should be based on the parts you have, not based on what you may look like from the outside. For some reason, parents see this as a danger to their children and their future. The issue of sexual identity is a major problem due to the “manipulation” of adults (mostly parents). Today, most children grow up being taught one way and close out any other thought process. People need to understand that sexuality is not harmful. People with closed minds hurt those in the LGBTQ+ community. One should not be afraid to be themselves! We, the future, should be encouraged to shine like the bright star we are, exactly how we are.

By: Destiny Perkins

Gun Violence

In today's world, gun violence has increased and has become a controversial topic, as well as a concern within our community. Our meeting talked about the ways we can take the extra step to improve safety and prevent further tragedies.

For schools, we talked about how we can increase the amount of School Resource Officers. That way if there is a shooter or intruder there is an increased chance of awareness throughout the school. Next, students and staff should be taught three important rules. These rules include but are not limited to... run if intruder isn't near the area of the students and staff, fight back if you can (but be safe during the process), and lastly hide somewhere until you can seek help. We also want to further improve the exit plans in our schools. Staff should explain where to exit in case of emergency and students should practice every possible route that they can take at each class.

We also talked about measures that can be taken outside the school setting. Background checks should be more secure and taken accountable before a citizen can lay their hands on a gun. Also, monthly background checks should be taken to ensure the person is still mentally sane. To conclude this meeting, we decided that if WE want to make a difference and make our voices heard in the community. People suggested that we can contact our senators and state representatives and express our feelings towards this situation as well as educate and do our research about the topic for ourselves when contacting the people who represent us.

By: Saint Petersburg Mayors Youth Congress

Knowing Your Rights in Court

I made the topic because I wanted to know what laws come in to play when defending yourself in court without a lawyer. We learned that the court is very tricky and if you don't stay within the evidence you have provided it could end badly. Defending yourself in court is the best way to go.... **once you know the law and your rights**. I want people to know that the lawyer, the public defender, the jury, the judge and whoever else can't defend you and your "rights" like you can once you are equipped with the right tools. Being aware that the justice system can be very biased and prejudiced can help you stay even sharper. All in all,.... Try the system for what it is worth and test what it really stands for.

By: Antwuan Major

LGBTQ+ Rights

Many people struggle with the idea of accepting LGBTQ+ rights and following their religion. We talked about in this discussion the difference of the Catholic Faith and the Christian faith. Religion is about loving everyone for who they are. Some people believe that the Christian faith accepts people for who they are even if they are gay. The Catholic Faith believes that gay people are sinners and that is wrong. If there is a god, then he created us a certain way and there's nothing we can do about it so we want to know why people discriminate against things that we can't change.

We also talked about pride month. It turned more into about profit than about pride. Many people just do it for the aesthetic and not for expressing who they are. People shouldn't take advantage of people's struggles. Companies are creating gay pride for profit and not for pride; however, at least pride is getting out there into the world.

We also discussed how the federal government should decide about gay marriage and not states. If there is an economically challenged gay couple who wants to get married, but their state doesn't allow it, then there is nothing that they can do about it.

Hopefully one day we don't call gay people "gay people", we just call them people.

Mental Health

At our meeting, we talked about mental health and how it affects others. We shared different stories and events on this topic, such as life experiences and how these shaped our future. Mental health is a major issue that doesn't get recognized like it should. Mental health is affected by things such as getting bullied or family problems. Sometimes, mental health runs in the family and people have no control over it. Mental health often gets brushed aside and is not tackled the way it should. In my group, we talked about the issues that come from mental health and discussed how our individual youth councils can make a change in our communities regarding mental health.

Religion and Public Institutions

We discussed the establishment clause and the free exercise clause (under the first amendment) and the related Colorado case in which a gay couple was refused service by a bakery because homosexuality was offensive and “wrong” to their Christian values.

Our opinions . . .

The constitution cannot recognize a religion as valid. This, we believe is a valid and effective way of maintaining a secular society that does not discriminate or favor any group connected by faith. The refusal to serve any person, in our general opinion, is discrimination and unconstitutional; but, at the same time, is an intense aspect of many individuals’ lives. Despite this, if an institution offers its service to the public, it is then required to operate within the parameters offered to us by our laws. Although companies often operate under the majority control of a certain faith, such as Chick-fil-a, which often has espoused its Christian values, it has become a public resource and entered the market and therefore, in our opinion, cannot discriminate regardless of alleged prerogative.

Self -Esteem

For the short amount of time that my group talked about self-esteem, I found that they had some insightful things to say. Self-esteem is the way you see yourself or your self-confidence. Young adults often have very low self-esteem which makes our ability to be heard a challenge. To add to the problem, we often get judged by other people for how we look or sound. Also, depression doesn't help the situation of self-esteem. If young men and women are to be the next mayor or commissioner, we have to have high confidence in ourselves so we can be heard.

One of the meeting participants said, "People take the time to look at you and try to lower your self-esteem." Some people, like bullies, that try to lower your self-esteem probably envy you or just like to make people feel bad. We must overcome low self-esteem, because if we want to make change and be heard in our cities in the future like the many commissioners, mayors, and representatives before us, self-esteem cannot continue to be a problem for us. The mayors and commissioners that spoke and enlightened us today had to have high self-esteem to be able to speak up in front of us today. All in all, low self-esteem must not continue to be a problem for anyone. We all should take pride in ourselves and have confidence in ourselves if we want to be heard and be the future of tomorrow.

By: Chad Jordan

Social Media Impact

In this meeting discussion, we discussed the effects social media has on our personal life, as well as its pros and cons. The pressure to have a specific body image, FOMO (fear of missing out), and the pressure to post the “perfect picture” are all aspects of social media that many of us can relate to. Also, most of us agreed that social media has had many negative effects on mental health. The dependency teens have on social media is like an addiction. Our battery usage showed us that people spend an average of over 15 hours a week on social media. Although it is called social media, it may wreak havoc on our social lives.

Despite these negative aspects, some argued that social media can be positive. For example, social media can keep people in touch with friends and it can allow one to meet new people as well.

United Front

To improve communications and connectivity between the youth councils of Florida, we decided to collect contact information of most members and transfer this into a group chat, initially using SMS. We plan to transition to WhatsApp or Discord based on group opinion and convenience, and our next step is the creation of a private/public Facebook page. Not all members are required to commit to any of these networks; however, we encourage their participation to create a united front representing the youth of Florida.

By: Hirsh Kabaria or Indu Parameswaran (Tampa Mayor's Youth Corps)