

2019 Florida League of Cities Annual  
Conference Program for Youth Councils  
Open Space Meeting Discussion Summaries  
August 17, 2019

## Introduction

On August 17, 2019, over 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 language and code. We recognized that language is itself a code and that, at an early age, we learn to “code switch,” to change the words and expressions we use to fit the audience and the context. We then considered how code switching takes place in political discourse and the extent to which such code switching, perhaps especially in recent years, has done harm to our society.

Sensitized to this concern, 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 do we switch the code?” Our focus: are there more constructive “codes” we can use that will foster greater understanding across groups?

Throughout the day, 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 a dozen, some as large as sixty.

Anyone who has had the privilege of witnessing these young men and women engage the topics of their concern with openness and mutual respect cannot help but be inspired. Lively conversations took place all day long 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.

A note for those who will refer to these reports: because they are reports of conversations, not research, claims about facts are reported in the pages that follow that may, or may not, bear up under more careful research. This is part of what happens when we converse with each other. The lesson is not that these conversations are unreliable, but that they express impressions about the way the world is. Before acting on a factual claim, we should be sure to do our research.

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## The Effects of Beauty Standards on Society Today

Our world today places toxic, unrealistic labels on what we consider as “beautiful”. This standard of beauty is one that rises to prominence through the use of social media and celebrities who promote an imperfect image to the abundance of individuals who support/follow them.

Judgement is something that has been apparent in all societies over time, a concept that does not seem to be changing any time soon. Judgement causes individuals to conform to being a version of themselves that they are not, something that our group addressed during our discussion.

A common opinion during our conversation was that the issues that many youth face today stem from the lack of confidence that lies inside of them. This confidence begins at a young age, especially with those who have had a solid support group versus those who have not. The latter would continue to develop significantly more insecurities and judgement towards themselves when compared to the former, who were able to rely on this support system to break out of their shells and accept themselves for who they are.

Our group had individuals who went through both scenarios, providing insight into different outlooks on the importance of having a positive support group, something that we all seemed to appreciate.

Additionally, it is imperative that all of us realize that these impractical images of beauty are nothing but a token of an egotistical mindset, something that certain celebrities, whether intentional or not, encourage in order to gain approval from those around them. Our group referenced brands like “Nike” and “FashionNova”, who in the past have utilized models to endorse their company. This endorsement is part of the code that must switch, as these companies inform the public that they too can look like such models if they wear the same apparel, an extremely flawed mindset.

As a whole, we acknowledged that despite what major companies or celebrities might advocate, the most essential thing to realize at our age, is that you are your greatest motivator. No matter what you go through, if you can tell yourself that you are beautiful and strong, those words are way more impactful than what anyone else can say. Social media steers social stigmas for the worse, allowing people who encourage an unreasonable definition of beauty to rise to popularity. If we can see past this “beauty” and appreciate our inner selves, society can change for the better. Furthermore, our group discussed how as a society we must all recognize that we all have positive aspects about us; however, we must also accept that we all have flaws as well. We must learn to appreciate and embrace both as a part of our overall beauty. This is vital to the posterity of our world, because we are the next leaders of society and must ensure that though these beauty standards will still be in place, no individual should feel susceptible to being attacked and must learn to love themselves along with the help of a support group that will truly be there for them.

Mayor’s Youth Corps, Tampa, FL

## Code Switching and US Border Policy

The U.S. as we know it is confused. We're confused within our domestic policies and even more confused when it comes to the appropriate steps to be taken when dealing with immigrants. Illegal immigrants are a problem, regardless of what side of the pendulum you are on. The idea of illegal aliens slipping into our borders and making their way into our country is both frightening and potentially catastrophic if not nipped in the bud sooner rather than later. The question, however, remains: How do we nip it in the bud? Our current president has proposed the construction of a multimillion-dollar border wall that wraps around the entire US with emphasis on Mexico and other countries of Hispaniola. Arguments surrounding this idea led to a 1-month government shut down and political tension between the left and right. The right predominantly argues against any and all illegal immigration with emphasis on finding people who are currently illegal and living within our borders. The left is slightly more liberal viewing illegal immigrants not as abstractions but as what they really are, human beings and taking a more humane approach to their status within our country.

How do we meet in the middle, to satisfy both the left and the right?

In our small talk we discussed the following

- The importance of a border wall as the first step in the immigration reform process because we want to send out the message to other nations that it is not okay to come illegally to American borders thinking America has an obligation to let you in
- We debated how to deal with those who are illegal immigrants currently residing within our borders who have set up lives and families here and are not convicted felons
  - It was decided that a year cap could be placed as to when immigration reform policy would apply to an individual under these circumstances
    - Ex. At year 2025 anyone who is illegal and has been residing in the US for more than 5 years who has not been convicted of any crime may stay and will be facilitated in going through the legalization process
- Government officials need to understand American reliance on immigrants. Immigrants are the backbone of our nation.
- ICE coming and uprooting settled immigrants from places of work is inhumane
- We need to change the conversation. And it starts with changing a mindset. The mindset that illegals are bad or the dispositive they are **all** criminals. This is dangerous and warped thinking.

Christiaan Johnson and Florence Onyike

## Effects of Fencing Around Schools

Fences around schools are now a requirement here in the State of Florida. When it comes to fencing around schools, every one of them has different views or rules that have come into place because of these fences. However, this discussion shows that most of the views about these fences are negative rather than positive. In general, the fences are seen in a more negative light.

Many different changes are happening around schools ever since the fences have started to be put up. There have also been negative perspectives gained because of these changes. One of the biggest issues is the fact that security has become less effective ever since the fences were put up. One of the biggest issues is that the fences will not prevent possible shooters from bringing their weapons onto campus. This is because many of the schools have not put in metal detectors or are not conducting bag searches when students enter. People would still be able to bring weapons onto campus.

Another big issue is the changes caused by the fences. In one case, students and teachers now have to share a parking lot, limiting space for everyone's cars. Students' schedules have become messed up, students cannot come in to receive help from their teachers, and there is only one entry and exit for the whole campus. These are some cases of the rights of students being taken away. It seems like the teachers want to be helpful & keep students safe, but they are now "treating students like prisoners." In this case, they have become stricter and students have no say about decisions around campus.

However, some steps could be taken to make the fences seem better. One thing could be making the fences seem less intimidating by making them look nicer. Lastly, they could ask students for suggestions on the courses of action they could take.

Overall, there are many cases of mixed views about these fences as seen in this discussion.

Jaeden Nowaczyk - Belleview Youth Commission

## Gun Violence

In today's meeting, we talked about various ideas about gun violence and how it affects the "code". With the year almost coming to an end, we have had over 100 shootings in about 7 months. By the time 2019 is over the number will continue to rise because we aren't taking action like we should be. This is changing viewpoints for schools, ethnic places, and much more.

In the discussion we talked about how in school settings we should have a higher rate of safety and more SRO'S (school resource officers), but also we don't want to make the schools look like a prison and make students more stressed out. Outside the setting of school we want to make the background checks stronger, check for age of the buyer, and most importantly ensure that the person is in the right mental state. What we can't control is the illegal gun exchange or the person having someone they know take the gun.

As much as we want the country to get better, it's not all going to stop. We can reduce as much as we can and try to make people feel as safe as possible.

In the setting of the police enforcement and judicial areas, the system is disrupted in many different ways. In some situations people think that the "government" doesn't care enough and they are just looking for the money.

Gun violence has been a big issue for a very long time, but the past years have been the worst. People think that police officers should have cameras on them to make sure there is safety for both the police and citizen. BUT there is still the 2<sup>nd</sup> amendment rights (A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a Free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.") We can't take people's rights away, but we could make them stricter.

In the end, we hope that reaching out to the government can help prevent future gun issues/arguments. This is a bigger problem and it's not something we should overlook because no matter who someone is, no one deserves to get hurt because someone else has issues they want to take out on others. This is significant because we must establish a solid platform to protect the younger generation, as they are the future of our country.

Saint Petersburg Youth Council

## Healthcare Help: What Needs Change in Our Healthcare System

### **A Right vs. a Service:**

Healthcare is considered a right and need for all individuals, though it is treated as a service, in which one purchases appointments, medications, treatments, and everything in between.

### **Medical Expenses:**

- Each component of healthcare has an exorbitant price tag: from treatments, to scans, to appointments, to referrals, to prescriptions, and everything in between.
- The constant battle to have our insurances provide for such services, when we have purchased medical coverage, is risky, unfair, and time-consuming.
- Medical equipment is overpriced. One example is that organs and blood, often freely donated, are transfused and transplanted for a significant fee, much higher than if it was simply the cost of the labor in the procedure.
- Doctors are paid tremendously. Some are paid by the amount of patients seen, which results in quick, brief appointments little worth the wait. Others are paid a standard wage, which reduces their motivation to provide effective service. This may be due to high student loans and debts accrued through rigorous higher education lasting over a decade.
- An emerging problem: Due to this, individuals FEAR the hospital and its accompanying bills, and refuse to go to the hospital when needing urgent care. This is in addition to the fear of misdiagnosis and medical malpractice.

### **The Medical “Back and Forth:”**

When a doctor needs confirmation for a certain diagnosis, they refer to another doctor. This results in a game of ping-pong: primary care, to specialist, to pharmacy, to primary care, and to additional procedures, surgeries, and scans in between. Individuals find that they cannot afford to go from one place to another without finishing a month’s paycheck. Misinformation within the patient community is also significant in having patients exacerbate their own health issues.

- A solution: When referring a patient from one institute to another for further consultation---for example, when referring between hematologists (blood) to endocrinologists (hormones) ---the price of the next appointment/treatment can be reduced by a certain percentage.

### **Public vs. Private Healthcare:**

Public healthcare lacks funding from the government. Government should become further involved and listen to the people’s voice. Public hospitals unfortunately pay certain specialists that are “rare” or somewhat far away (like a wrist surgeon) higher wages to keep them at the hospital, which increases patient costs. On the other hand, private healthcare is funded by corporations, following their own board of regulations. Some claim that private hospitals have significantly more infrastructure, resulting in comparatively better service. However, one cannot easily choose whether they are going to a public or private hospital, especially when suffering severe and traumatic injury.

- A solution: The government can create a new insurance policy that significantly reduces the price of medical help. In result, other insurance companies and even private hospitals could reduce the prices of their entire medical package due to the completion. However, this makes the government take up a business-like role, which is a dangerous line to cross.

Indu Parameswaran – Mayor’s Youth Council - Tampa

## How Code Switching Alters Our Perception of History

During this meeting, we discussed how “code”, the way in which sentences are conveyed, has altered our perception of not only the history of different countries, but also the history of our own. For instance, Japan had a horrific event called the Rape of Nanjing occur. American textbooks go into explicit detail of how this event occurred, as well as everything that happened during the siege. However, if these textbooks had been intended for a Japanese audience, this event would have been excluded from the textbook or glossed over very lightly because of the horrific actions the Japanese had done. A similar instance to this one is the holocaust. In most countries, the holocaust is written about in great detail with many personal accounts being published in that country. Again in Germany, this horrific event is simply glossed over.

America is seen doing things like this as well. When it comes to discussing events such Japanese Internment Camps, the true brutality of slavery, the Trail of Tears, and the way Christopher Columbus treated the Native Americans, the details are very limited. Even Advanced Placement classes exclude the students when it comes to talking about the explicit details of each event.

While many textbooks exclude the specific, explicit details of events that are now frowned upon, there are individual authors that portray the true nature of such events to the readers. We came to the conclusion that countries may change the code of what they choose to explicitly disclose to their citizens in terms of these types of events because of a “shame” that comes with being responsible for such devastating events.

Clermont City Youth Council

## How Code Switching Has Ruined Activism

The conversation began with the discussion of how PETA's recent posts have been very aggressive while trying to convey their message of anti-speciesism, vegan conversion, and ethical treatment of animals. One student cited how PETA commented that the celebration of Steve Irwin's birthday was cruel, as he was known for "fighting alligators."

The conversation then moved into the ethicalities of zoos and aquariums. One student questioned what the definition or criteria was for a zoo to be considered ethical. Many opined that, ultimately, zoos are keeping animals alive for longer and in good health, as well as educating the public about animal conservation. While some agreed, others were still against the idea as zoos are for profit and organizations that truly care about the sole well-being of animals would be non-profit, like sanctuaries.

The students then continued to explain that although progress is being made against animal abuse, such as shutting down puppy mills, this is still highly ineffective in terms of their long-term ethical treatment. One student stated when one puppy mill was shut down all the dogs were sent to a "shelter" where they were kept in single isolated cages away from humans where they were not able to develop necessary social skills, thus rendering them "unadoptable." Because of this, one student stated that zoos might be better than "shelter" as they have the necessary funding from the profits that they made to take care of the animals as well as the education and knowledge.

Overall, the conversation concluded with an understanding that absolutism is the largest factor in this issue. Complex situations like this one are never black and white and should not be seen as such.

Sasha Farid and Maximo Valdes – Homestead Mayor's Youth Council

## How Switching the Code has Affected Discussion About Climate Change

One issue that significantly affects this generation is climate change. Unfortunately, it has somehow become a partisan issue that some people refuse to take action on. Many people in power have not taken action on the issue because it will be expensive to do so in the short term. Business leaders and politicians are often reluctant to take action as switching to renewable energy sources is an investment that requires a large, upfront cost. While in the long run this investment is absolutely necessary for the survival of our species, it has the potential to harm the economy in the present. If this action is to occur, there must be cooperation between all of the powerful governments and businesses. Without this cooperation, the governments that take action will be at an economic disadvantage compared to the ones that do not.

If governments choose not to take action on climate change, the pressure is on the businesses that are harming the climate to take action. While businesses are driven by profit to stay alive, they have a moral responsibility to limit harm to the environment. The most effective way to market sustainable products that we found is to make them seem futuristic or trendy. This makes people more likely to buy the product as it is seen as a status symbol.

One obstacle that businesses face with regards to selling sustainable products is the price. New technologies tend to be expensive when they first hit the market. This makes it difficult for the technology to reach the masses. We found that one effective way to sell these expensive technologies is starting at the top and working downwards. If a product, such as an electric car, is expensive when it first becomes available, it should be sold to upper class and upper-middle class people first. Once enough of these units are sold and the demand for the product is demonstrated, the price should be able to be reduced. The product can then be sold at an increased volume to middle class people. The product at this point should be developed to the point where the price is greatly reduced. Now the product should be cheap enough that the average working-class person can afford it and it becomes diffused throughout society. When using this process, the product can be developed and tested on a smaller subset of the market first before it reaches the mainstream.

Another concept that we discussed is if space exploration is really ethically responsible when we are destroying the planet that we call home. Billions and billions of dollars are spent every year on learning more about and exploring our solar system and beyond. This can be useful in learning about the history of the universe and if there is a potential other habitable planet in the universe. We questioned whether this information is actually necessary since we can't seem to keep our home planet habitable. If we were to divert some of the funds that go into space exploration to developing sustainable technologies, maybe then we could actually begin to reverse the damage that we have done to our planet.

Demetri Sedita

## Labeling as Relates to Politics

To formulate and pass policy directives and retain popularity, governments must have a plurality of support from the governed to act with confidence and legitimacy. In American democracy, political parties and their members need to find ways to retain power so they may go forward with their desired agendas. This process, combined with the innate human desire to belong, has created a political culture dominated by labeling. In our discussion, we talked about the malignant nature labeling has on our society, and its tendency to exacerbate the country's ideological divide.

As a means of remedying the issue of assumptive labeling, we thought it imperative to understand the cause of the issue. Causes we discussed included political tribalism, public desire for complexities to be simplified, and the convenience it provides to those in power.

As relates to tribalism, people naturally wish to belong to groups, and naturally demonize those who are outside of their group. Short identifiers prove to be a suitable method to expedite this natural process of organization, and because of this, create societal division.

In relation to United States democracy, political parties are the groups a large portion of people belong to, and because of this, political parties often create labels for their opponents. This procedure divides Americans politically and often prevents progression. We discussed if this issue was more to the fault of representatives or their electorate. The consensus we reached was that this is a cyclical issue, and because voters become attached to these fabricated labels, officials embrace them to keep office. To rid our politics of this scourge, we posited the need for increased collaboration across ideologies and parties, combined with rejection of absolutism and the altering of our semantic patterns.

Kieran Patel

## Red Tide and How It Affects Florida

Red Tide is an on-going complex issue that has negatively affected Florida in diverse ways. These include impacting tourism, depleting fish supply, harming an already weak ecosystem, and causing political conflict. While the visual consequences of Red Tide—dead fish floating around—only affect certain parts of Florida, it most definitely affects all of Florida.

Red Tide is caused by excessive amounts of nutrients being released with the water from Lake Okeechobee. The excessive nutrients act almost as steroids, exponentially increasing the reproduction of algae causing an algae bloom. This bloom of algae depletes the water of oxygen, killing aquatic life that rely on oxygenated water.

The group discussed a variety of solutions, from eliminating the cause of excessive nutrients to filtering them out of the water. One issue debated was the effect Big Sugar corporations have on the cause of algae blooms. Some argued that runoff from these large sugar cane farms caused the increase in nutrients in Lake Okeechobee. The lake is infamous for catching all the runoff from nearby agriculture, making it the supply of this nutrient-rich water. When the Army Corps of Engineers release water from the lake, this nutrient-rich water runs down the lakes to the West, hitting salt water and causing the blooms. One solution was filtering the water that is released from Lake Okeechobee, which some argued would be too large of an undertaking. Another potential argument called for government regulation of the sugar cane runoff. An even more extreme solution proposed was the complete eradication of Big Sugar from the surrounding area, which was met with political issues since the corporation has deep ties to Florida politics.

One of the best solutions discussed involved using green fertilizer, which would eliminate the excessive nutrients. While this idea was met with optimism, it too had its cons. Green fertilizer is four to ten times more expensive than normal fertilizer.

Whichever solution works, the problem of Red Tide has deep roots to Floridian politics and deep pockets.

Ryan Logan - Cape Coral Youth Council

## Scrubbin' Da Burg

In St. Petersburg, Florida we have a program called Scrubbin' Da Burg. In this program, we clean up around the city in different places sometimes we mulch and sometimes we just clean. We are thinking that we could share this and maybe other cities would give it a try. This is a way to help places be clean not just St. Pete.

Also to help cleaning we think there should be more trash cans and recycle bins. Even though some people see trash cans and still throw trash on the ground, hopefully they get tired of seeing trashcans and soon start to use them. If the trashcans don't work, the littering tickets should become higher.

Lastly, sometimes animals die from plastic so paper is a good thing to use at times such as paper straws. Even though sometimes the paper could get in your drink, it's better that you use paper to keep our animals alive!! Hopefully that will be a start and from there we can clean piece by piece and then soon our community will be clean and our animals will be safe.

My'Ajah and Da'Nia

## Switching the Code of Gender Roles

Our group was able to calmly discuss multiple aspects of women's and men's rights and how language choice, also known as "Switching the Code" affects both groups. While we may have had a smaller open discussion group, we were able to build connections and piggy back off what other youth members contributed.

*These next four topics were some of our groups' main discussion points.*

### **CULTURE:**

We discussed how different religions and cultures have different normalcies. One specific example that was mentioned was Hindu beliefs about women's coverage. Many may think that women's equality includes wearing what you like, Hindu followers don't necessarily agree. We also covered how a person's religion can affect their upbringing to sway one way or the other; to be more feminine or masculine, and the roles that certain genders stereotypically have in a person's religion.

### **EDUCATION:**

It was also addressed how not only a student is affected in school by those around them but also their teachers. One concept that was brought up is the idea that when teaching younger children, women teachers are better suited to teach since their male counterparts can be "aggressive" which ties into the supposed biological impulses that males have. It was also pointed out that lower level teachers seem to be predominately females while higher level teachers were males. The group came to the conclusion that this is probably due to that in the past men were the ones to pursue a higher education while women did not.

### **EQUALITY:**

As a group we spent a lot of time discussing the pay gap. One group member brought up the fact that often pay gaps occur because of maternity leave and mothers at home with their children instead of at work. This adds to gender differences because men can continue to get paid therefore increasing the pay gap. Marketing is another inequality that we discussed. For example, toys such as Legos, video games, and dinosaurs are geared towards boys while Barbies, ballerinas, and ponies are geared towards girls. Marketing for clothing also tends to lean towards men or women.

### **POLITICS:**

The main politics discussion we had as a group was about elections and women in government roles. As for elections we discussed Popular vs. Electoral College votes. Often, women who run aren't elected, for example, we have never had a female president. Over the past fifty years, many laws have been enacted that support women's rights, but recently women's rights seem to be moving backwards. Sadly, issues such as abortion and healthcare are affecting more and more women in the country.

Payton Ziegler

## Switching the Code of Political Trigger Words

The first topic of discussion related to how the media sensationalizes trigger words without repercussions. For example, offensive language promoted by certain political figures without proper context creates biased interpretations by the public. This lack of common etiquette creates a negative connotation towards not only the political representative but the general population as well. The leaders of this country are a reflection of the country as a whole, and this wave of “cancel culture” prevents people from putting thought into their responses. Instead, it encourages a mindset of saying an opinion rather than listening to the consensus. Social media such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook have catalyzed the wave of instant replies and cancel culture. To prevent this from occurring, the public should proactively do their own research about world events in addition to local news.

Another problem within the realm of political trigger words stems from the division with political parties. Whether a Democrat, Republican or Independent, false and biased stereotypes are present in each group. The pressure to conform to in-group thoughts or group think is not allowing future generations to think for themselves in fear of exclusion from that group. To combat this problem, citizens of this country need to take steps to expose themselves to different backgrounds of upbringing, thought and culture. The reason for this uprising of hate and division comes mainly through fear of the unknown and exclusion of other opinions. Political correctness in the media has encouraged one way of thinking and a narrow-minded mentality. An example stated in the discussion talked about the unknown or undisclosed fact that a Caucasian woman funded the Black Lives Matter movement and as a result created further division between the black and white communities. Code switching between different races cause exclusion and further division within the community. As Americans, we need to advocate the dismantling of conscious and unconscious code switching and create platforms to unite as one people and one United States.