

# Focus should be on plight of D.C. teenagers

Whether their opinions are from an empirical survey or scientific data, D.C. adults and teenagers do not think their elected leaders are doing much to improve the lot of the city's youngsters.

"Cranes fill the sky, and condos sprout like toadstools after a rain, but Washington, D.C.'s new look apparently hasn't trickled down to its adolescent citizens," said Brenda Rhodes Miller, executive director of the D.C. Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

That's the conclusion Mrs. Miller reached after her youth advocacy organization conducted two research projects and a political forum during this summer's political campaign season.

"Things remain as bleak for teens in 2006 as they were in 2002," according to the D.C. Campaign's public-opinion poll conducted by Lake Research Partners and in an online survey called "Express Yourself 2006."

"Most of the candidates have already spoken out on the topics they feel matter to teens. But, since teens are the

experts on their own lives, their voices must be heard as well," Mrs. Miller said. "What's interesting is the consensus between the informal research and the rigorous scientific study."

The D.C. Campaign will use its research results to inform public officials across the District on "what must be done to improve the lives of teens, as well as to enhance our own advocacy efforts and programs," she said.

In the "Express Yourself 2006" informal survey conducted from June 18 to July 20, almost 170 D.C. youth and adults responded online to topics and questions ranging from the quality of after-school activities to health care in the city.

Teens also were asked what they would do if they had \$1 million to prevent teen pregnancy.

The most controversial answer: "I would start a pregnancy-prevention curriculum for pre-school kids. Minds have to change before anything else changes. As long as young kids think having sex is more important than having success, teens will continue to have babies."



The winner: "Build a teens' only recreation center somewhere mid-city, with activities and members-only events. Teens must attend minimum number of activities and must stay involved to stay an active member."

In the online survey, 48.5 percent of the participants answered "poor" when asked, "Overall, how well do you think things are going for teens in Washington, D.C.?" An additional 26.6 percent said "very poor."

As for whether the D.C. government is doing enough for teens, 86.9 percent said "no."

Mrs. Miller said the D.C. Campaign also hosted its first D.C. Leadership Debate on July 20 at the Cosmos Club with a number of youth

groups.

More than 100 teens, young people and a sprinkling of adults queried D.C. candidates for mayor and the D.C. Council chairman during the forum about education, employment, health, recreation and violence.

Tiara Marshall, a student working with the Friendship News Network, hit on a critical issue: "Many of my friends need a job year-round because their family income is insufficient to survive. Would you consider expanding the Summer Youth Employment Program to be year-round? What other ideas do you have to ease the financial pressure on young people?"

And Sam Ribnick, with the District of Columbia Youth Advisory Council, asked what the city will do to ensure that recreation centers and libraries are open more hours and offer real programs to engage young people.

In the D.C. Campaign's scientific poll conducted by Lake Research Partners, 89 percent of adults whose children attend school think there should be more "constructive outlets" and

activities for teens. That opinion was "especially strong in Southeast." Seventy-one percent of likely voters also responded "not enough" when asked whether D.C. teens have the help and resources they need to become successful adults.

Lake Research Partners conducted its survey from June 26 to 29 by calling 400 registered Democrats who are likely to vote in the Sept. 12 primary. The margin of error was plus or minus 4.4 percent.

"Three quarters [74 percent] of voters with children in D.C. Public Schools believe reducing teen pregnancy should be near or at the top of the next mayor's agenda," according to the report issued by the D.C. Campaign.

Mrs. Miller reminded me that Metropolitan Police Chief Charles H. Ramsey said: reducing teen pregnancy would help reduce crime in the District in remarks he made about the recent crime emergency.

"Preventing teen pregnancy is essential if we're ever going to help families get out of poverty," she said.

Mrs. Miller is right. All too

often politicians and bureaucrats approach youth issues in a vacuum or piecemeal rather than comprehensively.

"This is a clarion call of reason to look at young people in the totality of their lives," she said. "The candidates don't seem to get that."

As candidates gasp at the September primary finish line, watch how they grasp at straws, digging up old dirt and gossip, in an attempt to set themselves apart from their competitors.

In this void and lack of issue development, some candidates would do well to place preventing teen pregnancy — the root cause of so many social problems — at the top of their campaign agendas.

"There is a lot of blah, blah, blah about young people, but why haven't our policies gotten more progressive with youth development?" Mrs. Miller asks of the city's elected leadership — past, present and future.

Good question for all those seeking to lead this capital city forward.