

B

Regional Report, B2
Obituaries, B4
State, B4-6
Dingell's seat appears safe, B3

LOCAL

Students tackle achievement gap

Leap the Gap project developing recommendations for Ann Arbor district

BY DAVID JESSE
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As they begin the process of drafting specific recommendations on how Ann Arbor Public Schools can overcome the achievement gap, students are determined to force changes.

The students are involved in the Leap the Gap project of the Youth Senate Project from the Youth Empowerment Project in partnership with Ann Arbor school district.

"I'm really looking forward to coming out with some feasible solutions, some workable plans that will be in place for my little sister when she comes to Hu-

ron," said Christina Tzortzinis, a Huron High School senior. "We're serious. We're very serious and intent on getting the solutions in place."

This is the second full school year the group has been working on the project. They started by gathering focus groups of students to gain input on barriers to academic success, then followed up with a survey of Ann Arbor students. Helped by graduate students from the University of Michigan, the students are ready to start a think tank process where they will work to develop specific recommendations.

Students can pick up applications to join the think tanks at

the high schools' offices.

The goal is to develop specific recommendations on how the district can close the achievement gap and present them to the school board in the spring.

The achievement gap is commonly discussed as the difference between white and minority students, especially black students, in test scores, grade-point averages, graduation rates and dropout rates.

In focus groups and surveys, students identified 23 barriers to achievement.

The Leap the Gap students say they are eager to be heard on the decades-old problem.

"I want the kids to have a voice," said Sharice Bryant, a

Huron High School senior.

They're also passionate about making changes.

"I want the (recommendations) to have an effect on (students)," said Mateso Mbala-Nkanga, a Huron senior. "... This isn't just something that can be thrown out. It has to be listened to."

Prithvi Varma, a Huron junior, agrees: "This is not just a small thing. It's going to make a big change in the Ann Arbor school district."

In the surveys and focus groups, the students found several common themes as to barriers to student achievement, including stereotyping and lack of cultural understanding that

showed in discussions of negative peer pressure and also in discussion of barriers at school.

"That was across the board," said Tzortzinis. "Everybody said it, each group of students."

Mbala-Nkanga said she was surprised by all the forms it took.

"It wasn't just stereotyping among the races, it was even amongst themselves," she said.

The students cite the conversations surrounding that issue in the surveys and focus groups as an example of how all the tough issues were raised in the process.

"I was surprised by the honesty of folks," Tzortzinis said. "They just laid it all out

there. They were into it."

Other barriers included judgment from teachers based on sibling precedence, language barriers, lack of respect for students from staff and lack of information about and access to resources and opportunities.

Bryant says she thinks the project will help students' relationships with each other.

"I hope it will get more people to be more understanding of each other," she said. "I think it will help more people to be in groups talking about problems and solutions."

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