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Community speaks out for children



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More than 280 Henderson County residents met inside North Henderson High School on Saturday and over eight hours hashed out six priorities in the United Agenda for Children community meeting.

The meeting was the first of its kind in Henderson County, where the population of children is 20,430 and growing.

The meeting drew people from all walks of life — teachers, retirees, police officers, elected leaders, social workers, parents. The crowd represented a cross section of the community, people of all races, ages and incomes.

The United Agenda for Children also drew perhaps the most important group; the children themselves.

Shaheem Foster, 16, and Najah Cardoza, 15, were among the teens who joined the forum.

"I wanted to say a few things about what kids need," Najah said. The two Hendersonville High School students ranked after-school activities as a major need.

"We need more stuff to do in the afternoons," Shaheem said.

Did they feel they got the message across?

"I think we really did," Najah said.

In the day-long forum, participants talked about their visions for the future of children in Henderson County.

"It's been wonderful. It's been great to network with other people who have a variety of jobs in the community, and to have an opportunity to talk and feel that you will be heard," said Trish Formichella, a preschool teacher at Immaculata School in Hendersonville. "I've worked in preschool for 20 years and I feel that the children need a voice for their needs and that this is a very effective way to come together and get some community support."

Seated at tables of 10 to 12, participants used wireless laptop computers to share the table's recommendations from each discussion period with the larger group. Each participant also used a wireless keypad to record individual votes on priorities and next steps.

In the end, the full crowd settled on six priorities to see the vision to fruition.

The Six Priorities

The priorities include:

Educated children

1. Increase access to preschool education through additional funding for child care subsidies and additional preschool spaces.
2. Develop programs that help young people make plans for post-high school.

Healthy children

1. Provide school nurses at nationally recommended levels.

The national recommendation for the school nurse-to-student ratio is one nurse for every 750 students. In Henderson County Public Schools, there is one nurse for every 2,120 students.

2. Increase mental health services for children in the community and in schools.

In Henderson County, 4.3 percent of children 5 to 15 report having a mental health disability. Because of the changing nature of mental disorders in children, along with the existing stigma against the mentally ill, many consider the official numbers to be under reported.

Safe children

1. Increase safe affordable housing.

When families or individuals spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing, they risk not having enough income to weather financial setbacks or meet other basic needs such as food, clothing and medical insurance, the United Agenda for Children reported.

2. Establish mentoring programs for at-risk kids.

"We're listening."

The United Agenda for Children will launch an intensive three-year process to make measurable improvements in children's lives in Henderson County. Decision-makers and participants left the forum with a united action plan featuring the group's top recommendations and priorities.

Henderson County Commissioner Chuck McGrady said he believed the United Agenda for Children could make a difference in how the community thinks and works for children.

"Today we have launched our tomorrow," he said.

As civic leaders gathered in front of the crowd, McGrady said, "I can only tell you we've heard, we're listening and now we need to get to work."
