

**Durham Youth panels Pushed**  
**Teen wants adults to hear the voices**

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Startled by recent reports of juvenile offenders escaping from the county youth home, reputed gang members robbing people on a front porch and white students outperforming their minority peers on state assessment tests, local leaders are huddling in committees and searching for solutions.

But few -- if any -- wear fruit-flavored lip gloss, can name all the contestants vying tonight to become the next American Idol or have memorized the lyrics to 50 Cent's "In Da Club."

"There are all these adults saying this is what teenagers need," said DeWarren Langley, 18. "How can you say that if you haven't talked to them?"

Langley, a Jordan High School senior, has proposed forming Durham's first youth commission, a teen-scene sounding board for the City Council, county commissioners and the school board.

A resolution supporting the concept was approved by the city in September, and the city and county are outlining the specifics in a draft agreement. It is expected to affirm, among other things, that neither government is willing to pay for three 10-member commissions.

School board Chairwoman Kathryn Meyers said her board supported lending a voice to teens but would wait for Langley to figure out how to pay for it.

Langley, who is seeking outside grants, is convinced that engaging teens in the civic process will lead to better policy on topics such as juvenile justice and abstinence education.

He's also pressing for high school students to be appointed as voting members of government agencies, such as the Durham City-County Planning Commission and the Workforce Development Board.

"I don't know if we're ready to embrace that concept," county commissioners Chairwoman Ellen Reckhow said Tuesday. Teenagers are supposed to be in school when many committee meetings take place, she said.

If successful, a youth panel linking three branches of local government would be a first in the state, and possibly the nation, said Debra Henzey, executive director of the Civic Education Consortium at UNC-Chapel Hill's Institute of Government. The consortium has organized youth councils working to keep young people from leaving rural Swain and Bertie counties after high school graduation. Both panels draw more members than the county boards they serve, she said.

From Grand Rapids, Mich., to Chattanooga, Tenn., youth panels have sprouted during the past five years, even as teenagers are snubbing politics, according to the National Youth Rights Association in Washington .

About 20 youth councils exist across the state, including panels in Cary and Clayton, said Al Deitch, who is interim director of the state office of Youth Advocacy and Involvement. The state Board of Education also reserves a nonvoting seat for a youth representative.

Once established, many youth boards are devoted to parks and recreation departments, where they organize hayrides and book-a-thons.

In Raleigh, a youth council was established in 1959 as a legitimate arm of the city, but over time, city officials "decided they didn't want kids to have that kind of role," Henzey said.

Dana Youst, who advises Raleigh's 60-member council as teen program supervisor for the Parks and Recreation Department, says several of her members have lobbied for a mobile police substation and more collection days for recyclables.

Previously, Durham city and county governments financed a Youth Coordinating Board that was responsible for evaluating grant proposals for youth activities. The board dissolved last year, Meyers said, after unsuccessfully trying to merge with the Juvenile Crime Prevention Council.