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A Civic Enterprise of the YOUTH EMPOWERMENT PROJECT

## 5-26-10 Report to the School Board

**Good evening Trustees and Dr. Roberts. We are Abraham Liddell, a Senior Senator from Huron, Keo Robin, a Senior Senator from Pioneer, and Nikila Lakshmanan, a Sophomore Senator from Community.**

### **DISTRICT UPDATES**

#### **Walkathon & Picnic**

The Fight Poverty in Africa Project and the Youth Senate hosted its annual Walkathon and End-of-the-Year Celebration on May 16th. Through the support of students, teachers, parents, local businesses, and many others, the Africa Project successfully raised money to support its mission, Tostan's development work. Tostan engages the whole village, with groups not normally included in community activities and decision making, such as members of minority groups and youth. Tostan's education program also empowers a wide range of age groups. The Walkathon and Picnic was meaningful, educational, and raised awareness about world issues. It also demonstrated that our students, families and community care about our mission. Members of the Africa Project couldn't be more thankful for the support they received.

### **ANNUAL SENIOR STATEMENTS**

#### **Abraham Liddell**

Over the duration of my high school career, I attended two completely different schools. Though I experienced a great deal at both, my experiences at each school were very different. I first came to Huron High School during the second semester of my sophomore year. Initially, I was nervous. Huron was a bigger school with a larger, more diverse student body than I was accustomed to. The classes, on average, demanded more of me. As the years passed, I grew. I made a lot of friends who helped ease my transition from my old high school to Huron. I found pleasure in meeting with so many people who were different than me and I continued to learn from each experience. One such group of people was the Achievement Solutions Team, a student-led project of the Youth Senate sponsored by the Youth Empowerment Project. I was a peer coach for the AST; I found that I could also rely on them whenever I was in need.

I have always been driven to succeed academically and in doing so, invest in my future. When I came to Huron I immersed myself with like minded people--other students who wanted the same things as me. My desire to succeed was bolstered by positive support from my friends. When I looked around, I only saw people who wanted to make something of themselves. This was compounded by both my experiences in the Youth Empowerment Project and the friends that I made there. My family also played an integral role in my academic career. Coming from a family with only a handful of college graduates, I felt that it was absolutely imperative that I

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succeed. My experiences in dealing with the diversity at Huron High School can only help me in my future. I was able to understand and share experiences with others from different racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. I feel that I have left behind a legacy that will inspire others to do their best and to both accept and love diversity. With that being said, I enjoyed my time at Huron High School, and will take what I learned on my journey for a higher education at the University of Michigan. GO BLUE!

### **Keo Robin**

I am soon-to-be a graduate of Pioneer High School and have been a student in the Ann Arbor Public School District since Kindergarten at Wines Elementary School. I have also been a member of Youth Senate for four years. Without Youth Senate's opportunities and support I could not have made it through high school.

The unique experiences I gained over thirteen years came from a diverse group of teachers, staff, administrators, and students. They were instrumental in teaching me the basic skills needed to go on to college and prepare me for life. One such teacher was Mrs. Millicent Fisher, who taught me in third grade. I can still remember the song we sang to clean up the room, the pledge of allegiance, and the grammar drills we practiced. Another stand-out teacher was Mrs. Susan Washabaugh, my AP Chemistry teacher. She was a great teacher in more than just the subject matter. She taught me some things about life – and how to look at college.

However this system isn't perfect. I struggled with a teacher earlier this school year who should not have lasted long enough to teach me, since they have received consistent complaints. Also, Pioneer is a large school that doesn't necessarily have too many people, yet it lacks a sense of community. We do not necessarily lack the academic support resources needed for widespread student success in this district; but rather, we need to work on the methods of implementation we use to make these resources accessible. This is a great school district with great faculty but there is a lot of room for improvement. Some solutions may be found by engaging students and staff. The district can also look at research from other schools and independent studies such as Youth Senate's *Leap the Gap* research and pilot of the Achievement Solutions Teams.

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***NOTE: Youth Senate Reports do not necessarily represent the beliefs and opinions of the entire district student body, nor any respective high school's entire student body. The Senate Reports to the School Board are always opportunities for diverse student voices to be heard.***

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**Thank you for listening to the Youth Senate's Report, and have a good evening!**

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**Ann Arbor Parent Advisory Committee  
Board of Education Meeting  
May 26, 2010**

Good evening.

My name is Kathy Grijalva and I'm here as the AAPAC representative from King Elementary tonight. Some of you will recall that I've been with the AAPAC for quite a few years, including serving on the executive board. My husband and I have been members of the Ann Arbor community for almost 23 years. Although it's been a number of years since I've attended Board of Education meetings on a regular basis, I've continued to be involved with AAPAC and a variety of other organizations that advocate and support our students with special needs.

Our son, Peter, was born with Down Syndrome and a number of medical complications. He entered the Ann Arbor Public Schools' Early On program about 13 years ago when he was barely 2 months old. Following Early On, he attended the special education preschool program when it was located at the WISD's High Point School and was called PPI, for pre-primary impaired. When Peter was almost 5 years old, several UM physicians diagnosed him with autism spectrum disorder as well as mild cerebral palsy. Although the school district initially disagreed with the autism diagnosis, an independent educational evaluation resolved the issue. Peter has been a student in self-contained special education classrooms at Haisley, Logan, and now King Elementary, a school which is less than 500 feet from our front door. Next year, he'll be making the move to Clague Middle School.

We also have a daughter, Teresa, who is 10 years old and finishing fourth grade at King Elementary. Having both of our children at the same school has been wonderful, especially given the support we've received from the building staff. I credit our principal, Kevin Karr, with leading by example to welcome a self-contained special education classroom for four years. The class will be moving to Wines in fall, where it will join another communication classroom. While I fully appreciate the advantage of pairing two classes, it will indeed be a loss for King as the presence of these students has been a benefit to the entire school population which will continue for years to come.

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Over the 13 years of Peter's enrollment in Ann Arbor schools, we've worked with 5 different special education administrators, with Larry Simpson's 4 years being the longest tenure among them. This fact alone speaks to the tremendous changes that have occurred in special education in Ann Arbor. With the current challenges facing our district, we will certainly be seeing more change.

Among the changes that have improved the educational programming for our children with special needs are the formation of the elementary communication classrooms and the establishment of the core behavior support team. Those of us who were able to scrape together the funds – usually by taking out large loans on our homes – have conducted home therapy programs for our children at a cost of \$20,000 per year or more, all out of pocket as no insurance coverage applies yet. Seeing the school district embrace the same behavioral principles and structured teaching methods we've used at home, and having classroom teachers and support staff collaborate with our home consultant, have made the past few years radically different from some of our earlier experiences.

Much of this difference has been due to having Larry Simpson as AAPS's Director of Student Intervention and Support Services, which includes special education. Larry announced at our last monthly AAPAC meeting that he is planning to retire at the end of June. In his 4 years as Director for SISS, he has taken to heart, and genuinely championed, the interests of students receiving special education services. His retirement this summer will bring another change to the district and our children, but we hope that the programs he has started will continue to develop and that his firm belief in the ability of all children will be the core value for special education in Ann Arbor. Thank you, Larry, and best wishes to you.

Another positive change that Larry brought to AAPS is the development of the Teaching and Learning Camp for Extended School Year services. Rather than having a few isolated services – half an hour of speech each week for 5 weeks – many of our special needs children are now able to participate in a program that runs Monday through Thursday mornings for 5 full weeks. Although they remain in a school setting, the atmosphere of summer camp is definitely there. Recreation, opportunities for enrichment, and the crucial maintenance of key skills make the summer experience so much more appropriate for our children.

For the past three summers, the Teaching and Learning Camp has been held in the same building as some of the summer school services for general education students. This has allowed students with special needs to attend programs with their typically developing peers, a very valuable learning experience for all participants. The absence of typical peers this year is disappointing, but given all the challenges, we are grateful that the program continues even in this difficult budget year.

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On the subject of having special education students included with their typical peers: We have spoken in previous reports of the numerous studies showing that students receiving special education services improve socially and academically when they are included with their regular education peers, and that students in regular education develop a greater understanding and acceptance of their special education peers' lives, abilities, and challenges. Students with IEPs – Individual Education Plans, the basis for special education services – have the legal right to be educated in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) with their general education peers to the greatest extent appropriate under IDEA, the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. There are still students in self-contained classrooms that have had very little opportunity to learn with their general education peers. The AAPAC looks forward to continuing to collaborate with the administration to ensure that LRE is a concept that is being put into action in every child's education experience across the district in all levels of education.

One key component for successful inclusion to achieve LRE is the specialized training of the teaching staff providing daily instruction. Given the fact that all of the teachers in the communication classrooms and several members of the behavior support team were hired recently, parents have expressed concern that these teachers are among those who have received notification of possible lay-off due to the budget deficits. Parents of students in these classrooms understand that all areas of the school district must share in the funding reductions, but since teachers with expertise in Autism are rare, making up for their loss would be very difficult. The students in the communication classrooms having been making great strides due, in part, to the special skills these teachers bring with them each day. We encourage the Board and AAPS administration to consider these issues and the specialized qualifications of the teachers as you make decisions about the instructional needs of the students in these relatively new and successful classrooms.

One final topic: The AAPAC is in the process of recruiting parents of students with IEP's and 504 plans to serve as Ann Arbor representatives on the WISD Parent Advisory Committee. Parents of students receiving special education services throughout Washtenaw County attend these monthly meetings and take with them ideas and concerns from their communities for discussion and action, then report back to their home districts. Ann Arbor has not had representation for the past several years. We look forward to hearing from any interested parents who would like to represent Ann Arbor.

As always, we invite the public to attend monthly AAPAC meetings. The next and last meeting for this school year is on Monday, June 14, 2010, at 7pm in room B327 of Skyline High School. Todd Roberts and Larry Simpson will be joining us. Come and experience the difference you can make in the lives of special education students and their families.

Thank you.

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