

## Having their say: Youth take seats on local government boards



*Swearing in youth representatives on the Douglas County Board.*

“It was more than I could ever hope for. You learn so much about your community.” – Nate Dalbec, 17, Superior High School senior, who served two years on the Douglas County Board

“I think it’s an incredible way for youth to be able to express their opinion. These are our future leaders.” – Kim Breunig, Kenosha County Board Supervisor

“I always hope that because of this program students will be more involved in community. I think that’s very, very important.” –Douglas Finn, Douglas County Board Chairman

“To engage people in the political process, you have to engage them young.” –Mark Molinaro Jr., Kenosha County Board Supervisor

### **Situation**

In general, the perspectives of young people aren’t included in public decision making; local government is no exception. As a result, they lack ways to make their views heard, see how government works and gain political experience. What’s more, youth tend to feel adults don’t value them. In Kenosha County, for example, a Search Institute survey showed only 23 percent of youth feel valued by the community, while 27 percent think the community gives youth useful roles. Other Wisconsin counties had similar survey results.

### **Response**

UW-Extension started “Youth in Governance” with the goal of giving young people a voice in local government, encouraging civic involvement and mentoring future leaders. This builds on long-standing efforts by 4-H Youth Development Programs to provide leadership training and opportunities for youth. In 2009, at least 53 youth were appointed to advisory roles on county boards, city councils, and committees, where they participate in discussions, study policy options and cast advisory votes alongside elected officials.

Douglas County started the first program in 2003, with youth serving in advisory positions on the county board and Superior City Council. That same year, a voting youth representative was added to city government committees in Waupaca. Since then, UW-Extension has helped youth gain advisory roles in Washburn, Oneida, Burnett, Jackson and Kenosha Counties.

“Youth learn this is not some big scary thing that they could never do,” says Joan Wimpe, Douglas County UW-Extension community youth development educator. “It’s educational and teaches them about government and makes them more civic-minded, no matter where they go.”

In Kenosha County’s rapidly growing 3-year-old program, UW-Extension received 120 nominations for 18 youth positions on nine county board committees. Youth sit in on committee

*January 2010*

# <sup>UW</sup> Extension Impact Report

meetings, join debates and cast nonbinding advisory votes. Each young person is assigned a mentor from the county board. Working with schools and government officials, Extension recruits youth through an application and interview process, and coordinates orientation, training and support.

## Outcomes

The following outcomes are based on evaluations, focus group findings, surveys, and interviews of youth, county board supervisors and UW-Extension educators.

- **A public voice for youth:** Youth in Governance gives young people a forum to ask questions, speak their minds and influence county policies.

“What they (the county board) are doing now is going to be our future,” says Nate Dalbec, a Superior High School senior who served two years on the Douglas County Board. “So why not have a say in what your laws are?”

- **Civic responsibility:** Young people see democracy in action.

“I feel it’s very important to participate in local government,” says Lucas Geissler, a freshman at the University of Minnesota, who served two years on the Douglas County Board. “Time after time you’d go in (to board meetings) and you wouldn’t see a lot of people. It’s almost as if no one cared. I feel that there’s a responsibility for people to be involved.”

Geissler was impressed by the diverse backgrounds of board members, the way members could agree to disagree, and the importance of allowing all views to be heard.

“That was something I wasn’t necessarily expecting,” he says. “I was pretty surprised at how open they were.”

While serving, Geissler discovered the power of reasoned argument. During a debate about allowing all-night use of generators at campgrounds, he helped sway board members to his position – to limit generator use.

- **Mutual respect:** Adults and youth gain a newfound appreciation for each other.

“One of the strongest impacts (of Youth in Governance) is having adults see the abilities of youth, which leads to an attitude change,” says Jessica Collura, co-author of an evaluation of Kenosha County’s Youth in Governance program. “Youth really are capable of being active contributors and partners in the decision-making process, and oftentimes adults don’t believe that until they see it.”

While serving, young people tend to live up to the expectations of adult board members.

“The committee respects us a lot more than they used to,” says 18-year-old Patricia Gonzales, who is serving on the Kenosha County Board’s Extension Education committee. “They don’t view us as children so much anymore, but youth in the process of becoming adults.”

At first, Nate Dalbec wondered whether Douglas County Board members would listen to what he had to say. Later, he realized, “They want me to speak up. (Board Chair Doug Finn) was great about asking what my opinion was. I thought that was awesome.”

- **Life skills:** Young people learn to pay attention, speak in public, dress appropriately and relate to adults. Evaluations indicate that youth also build decision-making skills and self-confidence.

“It’s a self-esteem booster,” notes Patricia Gonzales, who says she’s become more mature since joining the Kenosha County Extension Education committee. “It gives you a

January 2010

# UW Extension Impact Report

chance to get out of your bubble and speak to other adults, to professionals.”

Gonzales' position on the county board committee recently led to another opportunity: She spoke to a committee of the Kenosha Unified School District, inspiring them to recruit youth to serve on school board committees.

- **Networking skills:** Students gain valuable contacts. Experience on the county board gives youth networks of local leaders they can call on for academic and career references, says Douglas County's Joan Wimme.

- **Future leaders:** Young people who serve on boards come away with a desire to serve their communities. A former youth representative is now a Douglas County Board supervisor. Many youth, including Nate Dalbec, Lucas Geissler and Patricia Gonzales, say Youth in Governance has made them eager to serve in local government.

- **New perspectives:** In addition to differing viewpoints, both youth and adults report that young people bring energy, idealism and compassion to board meetings. “They make us more sensitive,” says Douglas Finn, Douglas County Board chair, who invites “youth reports” during board meetings. “It’s very refreshing.”

What’s more, youth sometimes ask questions adults don’t feel comfortable asking, expanding the discussion.

“They don’t think in boundaries as much,” says Jessica Collura. “Often the questions they ask are questions the adults are thinking but feel uncomfortable asking because they’re supposed to be in the know.”

- **Grassroots government:** Youth learn how county government works.

“I see how important the county is,” says former youth representative Lucas Geissler. “Before, I really didn’t know what a county was. Now I can see all the things they do and fight for and contribute.”

On the board, youth learn how budgets come together, what their taxes pay for and what constituents care about.

“I think they’re learning something very valuable, whether it’s something that’s going to help them in college, or just to be more aware of local government, or help them be a better person,” says Kim Breunig, chair of the Kenosha County Board’s Extension Education committee.

- **New connections:** Youth who serve generate a buzz of excitement that carries back to their schools and student bodies. In Kenosha County, that buzz generated 120 nominations for 18 positions on county board committees. In Oneida County, youth representatives make regular presentations about local government at their schools, which has led to increased student participation in local elections.



*Douglas County Board Chair Douglas Finn and youth representatives: Nate Dalbec, Dominic Frost, Lucas Geissler, Ashley Berger, Kelly Nys and Megan Dalbec.*

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- Planning and partnerships: Good Youth in Governance programs are the result of planning, strong partnerships, ongoing support, constant tweaking and youth input into every step of the process.

“Every year we’ve made changes to the program to make it stronger,” says John de Montmollin, Kenosha County Youth and Family Educator. “We’re constantly listening.”

To succeed, Youth in Governance programs require extensive preparation, according to a 2008 evaluation of Kenosha County’s Youth in Governance effort. (To read the evaluation, go to <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/4h/yig/research.cfm>. Click on “evaluation” in the “Kenosha County” section under “Youth representatives on committees.”)

Most important, perhaps, Youth in Governance programs need a champion, someone willing to embrace the concept and convince other board members to do the same. In Kenosha County, longtime board member Mark Molinaro Jr., played that role. “Supervisor Molinaro was the trailblazer,” says de Montmollin. “Without him this would never have happened.”



*Kenosha County Supervisor Doug Noble talks politics with youth representatives Jesse Wilson and Andrew Andrea.*

*Photo by Joe Potente, Kenosha News*

- Respected resource: In the past few years, UW-Extension has developed a wealth of resources on Youth in Governance. A web site (<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/4h/yig/research.cfm>) offers impact statements, evaluations, suggested practices and links. A Kenosha County handbook covers everything from Robert’s Rules of Order to the structure of county government to a map of the courthouse complex. As a result, UW-Extension can serve as a resource for others – nonprofits, businesses, churches, school boards – wanting to start similar programs.

- Retaining youth: Getting young people involved in local government gives them a stake in their communities.

“If we want to retain our youth workforce in our county, I think it’s important to get them involved in our county,” says Kenosha County Board Supervisor Kim Breunig. “The more they become involved, the more they’ll want to see it succeed. I want them to invest in the county.”

Breunig says she’d like to see young people serving, not just on county boards, but town and village boards, school boards and other decision-making bodies. So would Kenosha County’s John de Montmollin. “If government can do it,” he says, “everyone can do it.”

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