

Students Find Voice at Youth Summit

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Allowing students the opportunity to have authentic voice isn't easy. It takes planning, preparation, a little structure, and most importantly trust. Few organizations know this better than the [Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago](#) (CRFC) which has been providing a platform for student voice for the past 18 years through the Youth Summit. The CRFC knows that when students have the opportunity to voice their thoughts and opinions on issues that matter to them, positive change occurs.

On April 27 three student-chosen topics were discussed at length amongst nearly 200 Chicagoland high school youth at the culminating summit; however, the program itself is much broader than this event alone. This year, the program engaged nearly 1,000 students at 15 high schools. The participants surveyed more than 1,600 of their peers on issues for the Summit and reached an additional 8,400 other students and community members through Summit service projects. The CRFC also provides a [supporting curriculum](#) to help teachers facilitate the program in their classrooms. The students at the event were a representative delegation from each of the participating schools.

"I think the summit is important for a few reasons. One – it allows students to select current issues that are important to them – it lends their voice to these issues," said Dee Runaas, CRFC's director of high school programs. "Secondly, it teaches students about public policy and how those policies have a direct impact on them. Another nice aspect of the Summit is that it is student driven and student led. Once the students choose the policy issues they are interested in, they are trained to facilitate discussion on these issues with their peers and they also lead their peers in developing service projects around an issue of their choice."

This year, the students focused on the following issues:

1. Should the Illinois General Assembly enact a law requiring all public schools to provide comprehensive sex education in grades 6-12?
2. Should the Illinois General Assembly enact a law banning the use of all red-light cameras?
3. Should the Illinois General Assembly enact a law allowing public high schools to use social media in teaching students?

While some topics might seem like a natural fit for high school students to tackle, others seem less likely.

“This year I was really surprised that students selected red light cameras as one of their topics,” Runaas said. “I thought they would find it boring but they really questioned the resource people on this issue and it generated a lot of discussion.”

The students also are unpredictable on how they decide to vote.

“The other aspect that surprised me this year was that students voted opposite on a topic that I thought they would support – social media. The majority of students felt that schools should not be allowed to use social media as a teaching tool – that caught me completely by surprise,” Runaas said.

At the end of the Summit, students had the opportunity to step up to a microphone and, in a room full of their peers, give their opinions before a final vote was taken on each issue. It is clear during this “Town Hall” meeting that students – outgoing and reserved alike – are empowered to voice their educated thoughts and opinions.

“The one thing that never surprises me is that there is always at least one student who starts out shy without a voice and during the Summit, they stand at that microphone and speak up,” Runaas said. “It is one of the things about the Summit I like best – watching students find their voice!”

The Youth Summit has been recognized as an [exemplar](#) in Student Voice, which is among the six proven research has shown contributes to high-quality, school-based civic learning. Few programs offer the unique and comprehensive experience that the Youth Summit does. To learn more about Youth Summit and other CRFC programs, please visit [their website](#).