

Civic Engagement at the Middle School Level

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Over the past month as I looked out into the audience gathered for our last two board of supervisors' meetings, I noticed something about those present. Yes, we had many of our regulars, the usual crowd. They have their "assigned" seats, just like in church. However, as I scanned the seats there were new faces, faces that appeared too young to care about tax rates or the budget, faces that appeared too young to vote.

Soon, it was time for citizen comments and I watched as each of these young people come forward to the podium, remarks prepared and practiced. Remarks that were practiced ensuring they could be delivered within the three-minute time limit. Unlike the young people that I have seen on the news who chose to make their points heard through marches, signs, bullhorns, and, at times, profanity laced speeches, these young people were soft spoken and respectful, yet confident in the story they were telling.

What makes these young people willing to give up a Wednesday evening and sit through a two or three-hour government meeting just to have three minutes to address their elected officials? The answer: a new middle school.

As each student spoke, they told a story. They talked about the lack of electrical outlets to accommodate their Chromebook. They talked about the poor air quality within the building. They talked about the constant beeping of CO2 monitors in their classrooms and how distracting it was to their learning. Each one had a different experience, a different concern, but all wanted the same outcome: a new school. Not once during the flow of speakers was there a raised voice, a profanity laced tirade, or a threat to unseat the elected governing body. No, there was only civil discourse, mutual respect, and a lesson for these young people - no matter one's age you have the right to engage your elected officials, to make your voice heard, and to try to influence the process.

In this age of instant gratification, when we are quick to respond to a differing opinion with a reactionary tweet, like or dislike, or other quick response that makes us feel good in the moment, it is refreshing to see young people taking the time to get off of their electronic devices, prepare handwritten remarks, attend a meeting, and deliver those remarks in a respectful manner.

It appears, in Frederick County, that the seeds of civic engagement are taking root in the next generation and if the first few sprouts are any indication, we have potential for a bountiful harvest.