

This past year, I have had the pleasure of serving as the chair of the Youth Advisory Council (YAC). Because of meeting cancellations due to COVID-19, YAC unfortunately had no way to draft and approve a statement as a whole as we have in years past. So, I am writing this report, although not on behalf of YAC, to describe what we have accomplished this year as a council and recommendations that arose this year on the two main topics we discussed, as well as a recommendation I have on how the effectiveness of YAC could be improved.

YAC is dedicated to advising the City Council in all matters pertaining to youth and youth-related issues. This year, YAC decided to continue our work from the prior year on the topics of sustainability and youth substance abuse. Youth homelessness, an increase in community violence, and inequalities in education were other possible topics that were discussed by YAC. On the issue of youth homelessness, YAC met with a representative from the Flourish Initiative who highlighted the differences in youth and adult homelessness and the negative ramifications of closing Rainbow House.

Sustainability:

YAC met with a representative from the Resident Arts Initiative at the beginning of the year to discuss the work done by the organization to promote local artists and conservation, including the mural painting and design process and a sustainability checklist for local businesses. YAC members adapted this checklist for the local public high schools, finding that generally they do a good job of meeting goals such as recycling and water bottle filling stations. Later, YAC developed policy ideas from the previous year as well as new programs that could be put in place in schools to encourage awareness and education on sustainability and climate change. The main idea we hoped to be able to go to the Board of Education and City Council with, although this planning was cut short by COVID-19, was a sustainability competition in schools where a district wide sustainability goal is set, such as lowest amount of per capita food waste, with each high school and/or middle school competing against each other. This, coupled with in-class teaching on issues related to sustainability would increase awareness on the issue and action to address it. As YAC learned through two meetings with a representative from the Office of Sustainability's Outreach and Education Program, many of the largest sources of pollution such as cigarette butts and oil runoff are not ones commonly thought of, making adequate education on the impact of everyday actions even more crucial.

Substance abuse:

YAC met with three members of the Substance Abuse Advisory Commission, who offered input on the current impact of vaping on youth both nationally and locally, answering questions from YAC members. We discussed which policies, specifically bans on flavored products, minimum pricing requirements and changing zoning laws to prevent retailers from selling vaping products within a certain distance of schools could be implemented to address the rise in teen nicotine use, all solutions which YAC believes have strong merits. This conclusion is based on both our anecdotal experience with substance usage by our peers and nation-wide data indicating that low prices and flavors targeted towards minors contribute to the recent increase in new users of e-cigarette products. We also recommend using student-led groups to promote drug and illegal

substance abstinence, as data YAC gathered last year suggests that the majority of students view drug and e-cigarette use as an issue in their schools. Finally, we would like the City Council to encourage Columbia Public Schools to prioritize recovery over disciplinary action. Such policy changes would constitute important first steps toward addressing a crucial public safety concern among Columbia's youths. One potential issue that makes recovery difficult is that programs are generally not in place for students who want to quit using nicotine products unless they have already faced disciplinary action for it, which likely restricts help from a large number of those who would want it. Members of this group were planning to redistribute and update the survey from last year on substance abuse, however, schools going to online-only classes prevented the distribution and analysis of the survey.

Youth Summit:

YAC was planning to hold a youth summit, however, COVID-19 necessitated its cancellation. The summit would've had speakers on the issues of sustainability and public health, with substance abuse included under the broader topic of public health. After presentations from speakers, the summit would've broken out into discussion groups that would help inform YAC members on their input to City Council and also bring up any new topics of interest. The target demographic for the summit was high school students, however, students of all ages were encouraged to attend.

A change to the structure of YAC I think should be made:

Although not a discussion that was had with YAC as a whole, I believe the effectiveness of YAC could be increased if it was changed from purely an advisory board to the City Council to a joint advisory board from the Board of Education as well. Alternatively, a non-voting liaison from the Board of Education could be added to YAC to assist in discussions. Many of the topics we discuss relate to policy changes and actions that would also need help or approval from school administrators or the Board of Education. For instance, in our discussions with the representative from the Office of Sustainability's Outreach and Education Program, it became clear there was a lack of a coordinated sustainability program between the City and the school district. Additionally, in conjunction with policies the City could implement like a flavored e-cigarette product ban, YAC also had policy ideas like emphasizing recovery over disciplinary action that would be implemented in schools, an area where YAC currently has no advisory power. Since so much of the time spent by youth is as students, the most effective policies should include in-school aspects. Working with the Board of Education would allow YAC to more comprehensively offer input on issues related to the youth. Also, making YAC more present and active in school policy input could help to expand recruitment of YAC members to be more equitable, with a large number of council members in years past coming from Rock Bridge High School.