

Trempealeau County Youth in Government Day brings students into the courthouse to visit with officials and staff about their work. It gave Kathleen Vinehout a chance to spent time with them discussing her role as Senator and engage in a conversation about what they would change if they had the opportunity.

WHITEHALL, WI - “Imagine you could make the laws. What would you change about how things are run?” My question to the students spurred a long discussion about change in our world.

Almost 100 high school students recently participated in Trempealeau County Youth in Government Day. The daylong session was designed to encourage youth to become engaged in government. Students visited with county officials and staff about their work running county services.

During lunch, I spoke with the students about being a Senator and lawmaking. I encouraged them to think about laws as something they could someday change.



Teens told me they often think of the law as permanent. The day at the courthouse taught them things can change. They can be a part of change. The teens offered ideas that reflected their interests and experiences. Some focused on immediate concerns, “Get rid of the school dress code,” said Isabelle. Some had a larger vision.

“I want to save the horses sent across the Mexican border for meat,” said Raquel. We talked about the work of horse rescue groups who give time and money to help abandoned horses.

“We need to protect the environment. If we protect our environment, we protect human health and animal habitat,” one young woman explained.

“Fewer people are going into agriculture. Let’s offer free tuition to encourage more agriculture students and farmers.” Several students voiced agreement. “Everyone needs to eat – we need more farmers.” “Look at the average age of farmers in Wisconsin,” said another.

“We need cheaper college tuition,” said one young man. Others agreed. “Look what they did in New York – they made college free.” Another student noted, “Even in Kurdistan they have free college tuition.” I’m not sure about Kurdistan, but there are countries do not charge students tuition.

“We need to give everyone equal opportunity,” said Kayla, whose broad vision spurred others to think of ways to provide opportunity to all of our neighbors.

Shelly talked of helping homeless children. “Give them a home, lower the cost of adoption,” she said. We talked about the county’s role in helping children whose parents could not take care of them. Several students mentioned their visit with county social workers who spoke about children in need.

“I’d like to help people without health care,” said Monica who wants to become a Certified Nursing Assistant. She also saw the larger problems that happen when people cannot get needed health care.



I prodded the students for more ideas of how we could provide opportunity for all. One teen with beautiful blue and black hair framing her face, said people “should not be discriminated against for the color of their hair.” Her comment led to a discussion of discrimination in many forms. We talked about race, religion, national origin and immigration status.

The student's vision of changing how things are run was not limited to the county, or even the state. "I think we need to explore space," said Riley. "Let's explore Mars."

"Kids in other countries are dying of diseases and do not have a home," said one young woman.

"Stop corrupt governments," said Manny. He added corrupt people who are not committed to serving the public can run other countries and, even our own country.

His comment prompted a discussion about laws to assure good government. We talked about transparency in state and local government. Posting public notices in the newspaper for example helps people see actions local officials plan to take. Transparency gives everyone a chance to participate in what happens in our communities and state.

"Showing up is the first step to changing the world," I told the youth. The decision makers in this world first show up at a school board, county board or town board meeting.

"Next, let your voice be heard," I urged. Write, email, speak out, and call your representatives. I asked the youth to think about how to make their voice louder. They talked about joining groups, gathering petitions and working for change together.

Spending the day with the Trempealeau County teens reassured me youth of today are engaged and considering world problems they will soon inherit. I'm grateful to County Clerk Paul Severson, the American Legion, teachers and county officials who worked hard to give students a glimpse into how they could participate in government and someday even change the world.