

# The Herald-Sun

## Durham partnership gives youth a voice in community change agenda

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*Made in Durham Youth Network members discuss the role youth should play in promoting better educational and employment outcomes for young people in Durham.*

Durham – Last June, over twenty youth and young adults met in downtown Durham to take part in a community-wide partnership focused on creating better education and work opportunities for young people across the county.

For two hours, they discussed barriers to authentic youth engagement in decision-making spaces and affirmed the power that they have as young people to catalyze positive change in their community.

What was most striking about this session was not the dynamic energy and undeterred confidence that permeated the room as these young people declared their willingness to address barriers keeping Durham youth from success in school and work. Nor was it the unbridled optimism and determined resolve expressed when they – after viewing staggering statistics on youth unemployment and child poverty rates in Durham – began to grapple with solutions to these vexing issues, deciding that they would be, in the words of John Gardner, “shapers of what might be, instead of servants of what is.”

No – what was peculiar about this session was not anything that happened during the meeting itself, but instead that *such* meetings seldom occur when organizations take on community change initiatives that impact the lives of young people directly. In fact, most education-to-career partnerships across the country lack substantive youth engagement strategies that position young people as *equal partners* in achieving the community's vision.

Made in Durham – a education-to-career partnership including leaders in business, education, government, and community organizations – aims to change this dynamic by creating systems that elevate the voice of young people so that they may influence the partnership's programmatic output and strategic direction. In doing so, Made in Durham will engage young people constructively as critical beneficiaries, drivers of change, and informed decision-makers.

To infuse the input and feedback of young people into the partnership's work, Made in Durham constructed a 25-member Youth Network comprised of a diverse cross-section of Durham youth ages 14-24, drawing from youth-serving organizations across the city.

Made in Durham aspires to fully integrate Youth Network members into its organizational structure as equal partners, ensuring they have real influence and responsibility. Additionally, Made in Durham commits to providing support, guidance, and training to Youth Network members so they have the tools and competencies needed to collaborate with leaders of Durham's major institutions.

Made in Durham has made significant strides toward realizing this vision.

Since its first meeting in June, the Youth Network has narrowed down the challenges facing young people in Durham to a core set of priorities for research and action. They have teamed up with members of Made in Durham's staff to design and shape the staff's work. Additionally, during the Annual Board Retreat in September, two youth members were inducted onto Made in Durham's Board of Directors.

In the coming months, the Network will conduct research to explore the obstacles on the path to a solid education and good career prospects, craft and implement plans for youth-led actions projects to address these barriers, and draft recommendations for Made in Durham partners based on their research.

Youth engagement does not just benefit the goals of the partnership. Such opportunities equip students with valuable knowledge and experiences that empower them to engage and establish habits that can impact their future behavior.

A recent report by Opportunity Nation entitled “Connecting Youth and Strengthening Communities: The Data Behind Civic Engagement and Economic Opportunity” found that “civic engagement is a powerful way to create, reinforce, and expand social capital and impart transferrable skills to individuals, and is essential to building strong communities.” They find that well-designed civic engagement opportunities can serve as an effective conduit to positive educational and career outcomes for young people, particularly the most disconnected. Additionally, such opportunities enhance a region’s economic resilience.

Youth Network members clearly want to see this region thrive in a way that promotes opportunity and equity for everyone. When asked why they decided to take part in Made in Durham, they gave varied yet powerful responses.

Some students spoke from a place of altruism: “I am a young person in Durham who believes that all young people in Durham should have the best chance possible to succeed in Durham,” says Zuri Best, senior at J.D. Clement Early College High School. Others spoke more explicitly about the future: Teona Meeks, senior at Durham School of the Arts, said, “I want to help make a difference and help improve Durham because I do not want the next generation of youth to suffer.” Others spoke of wanting to see the current generation find more productive outlets to vent their rightful frustrations about the status quo: “As a whole generation, many of us are using our hands to make justice instead of our brains, even though our brains are what can actually make a change,” says Jackie Guzman, senior at Riverside High School.

But no one said it quite as profoundly, and simply, as Kyle Reece, a 2<sup>nd</sup> year student at Durham Tech: “This is what I want to do for my community.”

Over the coming years, Made in Durham aims to harness the knowledge and competence that only youth can – and have a desire to – bring to the table so that, together, we may ensure that one day *all* young people in Durham successfully complete a postsecondary education and gain a living wage job by the time they are 25.

*Joshua Mbanusi is the youth engagement coordinator for Made in Durham. For more information about the organization, visit <http://www.mdcinc.org/projects/made-durham>.*