

Xilian's Kidscount Speech

Hello everyone and welcome to the annual KidsCount Breakfast! My name is Xilian Sansoucy and I am a tenth grader at Classical High School. I am also the co-chair for the board of directors for Young Voices. It is an honor to be speaking among you all this morning! I would like to thank everyone in this room for making this event possible, as well as giving me the opportunity that not every fifteen year old gets--speaking publicly in front of so many influential adults. For those of you who came last year, you may have remembered the youth keynote speaker, Kinte Howie. After hearing how successful Kinte had spoken, I was determined to have an opportunity similar to his. Little did I know that this was the *exact* opportunity that I had the fortune to acquire the following year.

It is amazing how opening one door can lead to the opening of more doors filled with remarkable opportunities. In fact, the experiences that I have gotten ever since joining Young Voices as a freshman were breathtaking! For example, around this time last year, we worked with PSU, Providence Student Union, to host a youth-led mayoral candidates forum. This meant that my fellow students and I sat on a planning committee, and created a platform of issues within our Providence school system that we wanted to improve with our next mayor. On the day of the forum, two of our youth facilitated the event and asked questions regarding education to the panel of the mayoral candidates at the time. We had them each sign our platform vowing to address our requests for improving the schools that we attend daily. Jorge Elorza signed it and has promised to work with us high schoolers in order *to get things done*. In order to create a more powerful group not just focused on the missions of Young Voices or PSU, we created a coalition of eight different non-profit youth advocacy organizations in Providence called the Providence Youth Caucus. Each of these organizations contribute two of their youth in order to develop strategies to refine our school systems across Providence. Being on the executive committee of this caucus, I am *so* proud to say that we are thrilled to work with you, Mayor Elorza, very soon to start turning our dreams on our platform into a reality where every student can thrive in their learning environment!

Although we have recently created this diverse group of high school students, we have already met with Governor Gina Raimondo to discuss the

selection process for our new education commissioner! Personally, it was a great opportunity to speak with you, Governor Raimondo, and I appreciate that you took the time to listen to our voices, because after all, *we* are the ones in the classroom.

As you all can see, working together has created more opportunities for ourselves serving as a catalyst for change within our education system not just in Providence, but now on a statewide level thanks to catching the attention of our new governor. Our goals are to give students a chance to be successful in schools, which means starting student-centered learning within our classrooms. Learning has to be personalized to each and every student in our schools to fit their method of learning, because no student is identical. This indicates creating a secure climate and culture where students feel invited into the building, not kicked out. Currently at Classical, our discipline has been very old fashioned, yet we could replace these punitive disciplinary practices with restorative justice. No student should be suspended for being tardy. No student should be targeted based on their skin color. No student should have to get detention or suspension for something that could have easily been prevented by a simple talk with an adult--explaining *why* the student misbehaved, instead of expecting them to figure things out themselves. It's simple, if high schoolers are expected to behave like adults, then they should be treated like adults. It is up to students, and adults like you, to help upgrade our school system to fit the 21st century expectations that our Rhode Island employers have. Not only will we be meeting with the mayor soon, but we will also meet with the president of the school board and the city council to make sure that our requests are heard by our policy makers. As young policy makers, we are not the leaders of *tomorrow*, but the leaders of today. As I mentioned earlier, I'm a sophomore. This means I'm willing to work with you all for the next two years to make a difference before I go off to college, and I want to get things done during that time! Although my time is not very long, I can pay it forward and plant the seeds of change that will be continued by the work of my fellow younger students.

This process will be continued by the adults, that may or may not be in this room today, who have fought for student voice and school reform for *years*! Some of you are policy makers, while others are right on the front lines communicating with students every day! The point is that we all have the same motivation. The same passion to see a better future for our students in Rhode Island so we can be successful no matter what obstacles come our way. On behalf of our youth leaders,

I want to thank you all again for allowing our voices to be heard not tomorrow, but today.