



Philadelphia Students Speak Out on Election Issues: *The Power of Student Voices* Mayoral Forum

By Jeremy Quattlebaum, Student Voices Staff Writer

The students of Philadelphia's Central High School spoke, and the men running for mayor listened. And responded.

On Monday, February 26, five candidates seeking the city's top job traveled to Central High to respond to student questions at a forum attended by Central seniors. Organized by Central teacher Michael Horwits, who has been involved in the Student Voices program since 1999, the event also attracted city print and broadcast media.

The Power of Student Voices Mayoral Forum (click [here](#) to listen to the forum), provided an opportunity for Philadelphia's youth to raise their concerns. The candidates were grilled on issues including the soaring homicide rate and government ethics.

This semester, about 5,000 Philadelphia students are participating in the Student Voices campaign curriculum focusing on the mayor's race. Student Voices is a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania.

Four of the five mayoral candidates in the Democratic primary -- U.S. Reps. Bob Brady and Chaka Fattah, businessman Tom Knox and former City Councilman Michael Nutter - - and the lone Republican candidate, businessman Al Taubenberger, addressed the students' questions, hoping to show that they have what it takes to run the city. State Rep. Dwight Evans, the fifth Democratic hopeful, could not attend because of budget hearings in Harrisburg.

The candidates on the homicide rate:

One student panelist questioned the candidates on the issue of violence: "With over 400 murders last year, and being on a pace to exceed that number this year, Philadelphia is without a doubt a dangerous place. What specific steps, other than adding police officers to the force, would you take to make our neighborhoods safer and enhance the quality of life for all citizens?"

Knox said that education is the key to reducing crime and lowering the homicide rate. "The long-term solution is all about education, education of our prisoners before they

leave, education of our students, providing our students with options that keep them in school.”

Nutter said that areas hardest hit by crime should receive more police support and social aid. His strategy would entail “targeting the enforcement zones in probably the 12 most crime-ridden areas in the city.” He would “take illegal weapons from people that should not have them [and] provide additional social service support for many of our families that are struggling in those same neighborhoods.”

Education is the key to reducing the homicide rate in Philadelphia, said Taubenberger. “Enforcing the gun laws that are currently on the books I think is paramount. I think increasing the amount of police is important, the police themselves have asked for it, I think a minimum of 600 is what is needed.”

Fattah said that the government should not make violence a political issue and that the community is needed to reduce the homicide rate. “What we need to do is work together. We should not politicize violence, this is about saving people’s lives,” said Fattah. He added that programs like the anonymous tip line, which offers money rewards to people who notify the police about illegal guns, have gotten over 5,000 guns off the street and are examples of the success of community-based crime initiatives.

The candidates on ethics:

During the two weeks leading up to the forum, students across Philadelphia submitted questions they wanted the candidates to answer on the [Student Voices website](#). One question, submitted by a student at Overbrook High School, was chosen to be asked on behalf of all Philadelphia’s youth: “Mayoral candidates have been promising honest government for decades. Why would your promises of honesty be any less dishonest than those of your pay-to-play predecessors?”

Taubenberger answered that in order to prevent corruption, the mayor must know himself and know his staff. “The answer to that question is those that you hire in the Mayor’s Office should be like family. It’s like a marriage -- look at them very well, kick their tires, get to know who they are.”

Brady said that his service in the U.S. House of Representatives should be an indicator of his low tolerance of corruption. “We get painted with the same brush about pay-to-play politics, but yet there’s a reason why I’ve never been mentioned in any way, shape or form [regarding government corruption].”

Not everyone involved in government is corrupt, said Fattah. “The 23,000 people that work for the city of Philadelphia, they’re honest people. We should not paint everyone with the same brush.” Fattah said men and women that work to make this city better should not be lumped together with those who have run afoul of legal and ethical rules.

Knox criticized the rampant corruption and favoritism that he says is endemic in the city government. “I’m sick and tired of smoke-filled, backroom, big boss politics that are permeating Philadelphia.” Knox said that he will end patronage and end the practice of no-bid contracts.

Nutter responded to the question by citing his track record in City Council. He touted his recent ethics legislation as a sign of his commitment to end corruption in city government.

Education issues:

The student panel also asked the candidates how they would improve education, improve school safety, and whether the schools should be locally controlled or managed by the state.

Nutter said that the mayor is responsible for safety in schools and that local control is necessary in order to improve schools.

Taubenberger said that parents have the right to send their children to a safe school and that he will fight to bring local control back to Philadelphia.

Local control and increased funding are necessary to improve the schools, according to Brady. He said that since the state takeover the city schools have not improved and the state is not doing well in running the district.

An early start and career training programs are needed to improve attendance said Knox. He also said that he will look into the issue of locally run schools, but called the issue a “double-edged sword.”

Fattah said that the school board needs to be reformed with a balance of elected board members and appointed members. He said he supports Paul Vallas, CEO of the School District of Philadelphia, but does not support local control of the schools.

To read more about the forum, check out local media coverage on the event:

- [Philadelphia Student Voices](#)
- [Students Question Five of Six Mayoral Candidates](#) - WPVI Philadelphia, Feb. 26, 2007
- [Mayoral Candidates Visit Central High School](#) - WKYW Philadelphia, Feb. 26, 2007
- [Kids give pols a pop quiz](#) - Philadelphia Daily News, Feb. 27, 2007
- [Students get to quiz mayoral candidates](#) - Philadelphia Inquirer, Feb. 27, 2007.
- [Audio: Mayor’s Race Forum at Central High School](#) - Philadelphia Inquirer, Feb. 26, 2007