Students Voice Concerns on First Day of School

by Melissa Jones

Students at Dr. Rayner Browne Academy began the school year on Aug. 30 with a lesson in civic engagement. City Council President Bernard Young and Councilman Warren Branch sat down for lunch with seven sixth and seventh-graders to discuss open letters they wrote to Branch as a part of the Summer SPLASH program. The program was created by Elev8 Baltimore, which helps middle grade students transition to high school. The letters expressed concerns the students had about their schools and surrounding neighborhoods.

“I’m almost embarrassed and I’m ashamed. I know first-hand that these kids are seeing blight and hopelessness,” said Young. “We want to instill in them that there is hope and that we are working on solutions.”

The students asked for new trash cans on the corner to help curb littering in the streets and that the city increase trash pickup days. One student spoke about the condition and subsequent lack of recreational centers, which the Council president took as an invitation to herald his position on funding the Department of Parks and Recreation. Another questioned the pair about crime prevention and getting guns off the streets.

At the top of their lists was their concern for the overwhelming number of vacant and abandoned houses surrounding their homes and school. “We have to find out if most of these houses are owned by the city or whether they are privately owned,” said Young in response. “We will try to get some torn down but the state and the federal government cut back demolition money, so we’re going to have to be creative in how we go about doing these things.”

Sixth-grader Jawayne Johnson’s biggest concern was how long it would take to see the changes that Young and Branch addressed. To that, the councilman and council president did not have a definitive answer.

Young closed the event by encouraging students to remain engaged in their communities and to reach out to other elected officials like Baltimore City Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake and President Obama.