

## Youth Voices Call For, Help to Establish, a Welcoming Center

*The following is adapted from an article written by Reiko Koyama, three-year member of the conference planning committee, and now a first-year college student.*

I began working with immigrant students in middle school. I tutored three Somali girls in math. Through this experience and friendship, I began learning not only about the Somali culture and Muslim faith, but also the tension between native and newcomer. The girls would often express their frustrations with the way they were welcomed. Throughout middle school and high school, I was saddened to see more enemies made than friends.

Last winter, I worked with Scott Sueker, an avid peace activist, and a grant from United Way's Youth as Resources, to plan a forum with a panel of youth from recently-arrived immigrant and refugee families.



**Reiko Koyama introduces the panel as Scott Sueker listens**

Young men and women from Tech and Apollo, representing a wide variety of cultures (e.g. Latino/a, South African, Somali, Kenyan, Gambian, and Hmong), were eager to share their stories with other peers.



**Three of the students on the panel**

Hearing their perspectives added a whole new dimension to what I knew about immigrant and refugee issues.

One idea we thought worthy was a Welcoming Center for new immigrant and refugee students. We were surprised to later find out that that very same idea was circulating on city boards.

Several weeks later, ZamZam Salad, Farhiya Iman, and I were invited to a meeting at the St. Cloud School District Administrative Office. We shared our youth perspectives, and expressed the need for a Welcoming Center and the components it should have. We felt so hopeful that something was getting underway, and were glad that our voices were heard.

In July, we heard word that the Welcome Center had finally materialized at the Roosevelt Early Childhood Center. The Center now serves as a place to greet new students and their families, obtain helpful documents and brochures, and sign up for English classes.