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THE STUDENT VOICE:

Student Perspectives on Politics

By Jaymes Pyne

Colleagues wants to thank the Grand Rapids City High School administration and City High teacher Joanne Peterson for their assistance in creating a student round-table interview that provided some insights into the thoughts of some current students. Due to the political buzz going on around the country we decided that for our latest issue on “education and politics” it would be critical to allow students to have their say in the matter.

There was a common theme among the backgrounds of the six students we spoke with – they were all from the school’s debate team. While this fact may seemingly skew our understanding of politics amongst teens, we offer this: If our schools are meant to educate the public in order to, among other things, create an intelligent, informed electorate, shouldn’t all students take an active role in politics? Additionally, assuming this is true, what should be the school’s role in covering the topic of politics with students? We posed this and other questions to our student round-table.

The students’ names have been removed from the text for legal purposes. Parental consent was provided for student participation.

What issues are important this year?

- C: Social issues concerning American voters. For example, healthcare. Democratic candidates are emphasizing it a lot.
- D: Environmental issues, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Global warming is one of the main issues too.
- J: I pay attention to the war.
- W: The war is a major part because there are conflicting opinions on how it should be handled.
- M: I’m less concerned with issues and more concerned with how new problems are handled in the future.
- D: Some of the issues brought up in the election are fairly minor, while environmental issues and war issues will have an impact in the long-run.

Would you vote if you were of age? Why vote now?

[All said they would vote if they could, and that they believe their vote counts.]

- W: There have been a lot of new ideas in this election. I remember the last election wasn’t nearly as interesting. The long battle between Obama and Clinton really brought out their characters and adding McCain, who is on the opposite side, to this has made it really exciting.
- D: The election will determine the direction of American politics for a long time. I think it is really important to vote.
- C: Americans had the chance to vote for the first black candidate or the first woman candidate, although Hillary is going to bail out today....

Are candidates reaching out to younger voters?

- W: Obama definitely seems to be reaching out to younger voters, more than McCain, who is relying on long-term, hardcore republican voters. There were a lot of young people at the Obama rally at the VanAndel [Arena in Grand Rapids]. Even Hillary relied on long-term democratic voters.
- D: Definitely. A large portion of O’s base is young voters. It will be important for young voters who are just old enough to vote become involved and informed on the major issues.

How much do you talk about politics in school?

- J: In history we go over current events and talk about the nominees pretty frequently.
- D: Some classes we never talk about politics. It really depends on the class and the teacher. History courses seem to be the place where we talk about politics more.

Do you feel that discussing politics in school is appropriate?

- D: Definitely. If politics ties the lesson into events, drawing parallels between modern events and historical events, then it really enhances the curriculum.
- M: You can’t just distract from a class though, like math, and just start discussing politics.

Do you think it’s hard for teachers to “walk the line” on bringing politics into the class?

- W: My history teacher lays everything out, explains things, but doesn’t take a side. I think its okay to throw opinions out there, so as long as they’re giving you all the information to make your own decision, that’s fine.
- D: It’s fine and best if the teacher acts as a facilitator rather than picking a side, allowing students to debate.
- J: My teachers state before any class where they talk about politics that they are just giving the facts and not trying to change anyone’s mind.

Are most students vocal in the school about politics?

- W: Not really, not outside of class.
- C: There are a select group of students who talk about politics all the time, those in forensics and debate....

Are there people who just want to stay out of it?

- D: There are plenty of people who just don’t talk about politics.
- M: Some people I know just don’t want to be involved because they don’t have feelings for any side. Or they think that both sides are wrong or they just don’t care.



Would it be wise to change the voting age to 16?

W: Some people who are old enough to vote don't make it a priority to keep themselves informed, or they just don't care. Then there are students who are 16 who are informed and talk about politics in school all the time. I think it would only help the process, and if some sixteen-year-old doesn't want to vote, then they won't, so I don't see the harmful effect of that in any way.

D: I disagree somewhat. I'm going to take the middle ground and say that it would be okay to allow sixteen-year-olds to vote in smaller elections, and then leave national votes to the 18+. It might make it too much of a "being popular with the youth" if it went too far.

J: I think it would be a good thing because there are some thirty-year-olds that don't care and younger people who do, so it's all about mental maturity.

How well do schools inform students of civic-mindedness and civic duty?

D: To the extent of classes that talk about politics they are doing a good job, but I think that in some subjects the focus has been too much on grades and tests.

C: I would say that being in a student congress or legislative debate really expands your knowledge on the issues and the system [more so than class alone].

E: In forensics too. You're encouraged to have opinions and find different viewpoints.

What can schools do to encourage more students to become more active?

E: Well, there are some events that involve everyone. The whole school is there and takes one side or the other. Then afterward students go to their classes to discuss it.

D: We try to encourage people to become involved in debate and other activities. We do fundraisers to raise awareness too.

W: If teachers are active in politics and think it's important then you'll end up talking more about politics and relating it more to your education.

If you could vote, who would you vote for?

W: Obama, because Hillary is out. I don't like what McCain stands for.

J: I wanted to vote for Clinton, but now I'll vote for Obama. McCain has some good points but I just don't support the war, so that's the big thing.

E: I actually haven't decided. I like McCain but I don't know yet. I like them both.

D: I will definitely support Obama. Clinton was too much of an insider and I pretty much disagree with McCain on every issue.

C: I supported Hillary, so by default I will have to support Obama. McCain isn't so bad, so I can't attack him.

M: I am going to support McCain. I don't read as much into it, but by listening to them talk I can tell that McCain is more realistic about the situations going on in the world. ♡

After these opinions were divulged the fire started to brew in these seasoned debaters. One challenged the critiques of McCain, while another insisted that McCain's current persona is a complete fabrication for the election. Another stated that Obama's policies are carbon copies of earlier-released Clinton policies which prompted demands for proof of this claim. Next, someone interjected that "new ideas" should be decided by more than one person, even the president, and it is what they stand for that is important. This soon led to thoughts on the war, and other topics that are important to them. The students were witty and passionate about their viewpoints. It was difficult to end the interview, because each student had more to add to the discussion. However after a healthy debate, everyone involved realized that time was getting short and they had to get back to class.

What is your position on teaching politics in school? Voice your opinion in the "Politics in Education" forum at ColleaguesPlus.com

Interview conducted by Clayton Pelon and Jaymes Pyne