

# Middle schoolers get life lesson in politics

It is unfortunate that today's politics has come down to which candidate has the most money. It's sad that Michael Bloomberg and Jon Corzine can win mayoral and U.S. Senate elections in N.Y. and N.J. by burying their way into the offices. (Stated in the *Providence Sunday Journal*) In fact, in our own state of Rhode Island we face the same problem of multi-millionaires battling each other, spending their way into the office of Governor. What has politics come to?

Interestingly enough, the average Rhode Island household earns around \$40,000 a year. How does this person ever run successfully? Isn't it more likely that a person in this income bracket might better understand the average constituent in this state? Or, at least, wouldn't it be nice to know that someone with this financial background might have a chance in getting elected?

I teach at Coventry Middle School and am currently running a mock election with my students. Many of them are either campaigning for a candidate, reporting the news, or polling the school population. We have been fortunate enough to be visited by Lt. Gov. Charles Fogarty, independent gubernatorial candidate Tonya Fuller-Balletta, and State Sen. Lou Raptakis. The students have benefited greatly from these visits and have gained some real first-hand knowledge about what politics is like in our state.

Unfortunately, some of the information and lessons gathered from these visits has been depressing and, at the same time,

illuminating. For example, I asked Mr. Fogarty why he didn't run for governor in this round.

He replied that he couldn't afford the race. He described how he imagined himself in the last week before election seeing multiple Republican advertisements on television while he sat with his head in the mud, unable to afford to compete financially for airtime. On the other hand, Tonya Fuller-Balletta added that she has been repeatedly denied media attention due to the misconception that she is not a valid candidate. She claimed that she did not get the required amount of valid signatures. (Candidates have only about 10 days or so to get 1,000 signatures in the beginning July, while most people are on vacation). Mrs. Fuller-Balletta does make the cut, federally, and is a legal "write in" candidate. Check the law yourself. She is for real. If she's valid and legal, why is everyone calling her an illegal candidate? Why wouldn't the media correct the issue? By the way, Tonya is not a multi-millionaire and, therefore, cannot buy the proper amount of airtime, gaining the media and populace's attention.

Myrth York and Don Carcieri both have declined an invitation to speak with the students, claiming that it is too close to Election Day and there are more important events to attend. For example, Myrth York's campaign scheduler claimed that there were a bunch of teachers that had made requests for visits, but Mrs. York would have to put all of them on the waiting list just in case some

spots happen to open up. Don Carcieri's campaign scheduler denied finally, as well; also saying he was just too busy to visit a school. I have been calling them for three weeks now. It is apparent that fund raisers and press events are much more important than the children in this state are. In fact, a couple of teachers that I work with have attended fund raisers for Don Carcieri. Mr. Carcieri said to them that he had attended a few money-raising events already that day and had more to attend later. Is campaigning mostly about fund raising? Coventry Middle School does not have fund-raising money to give to either campaign.

In fact, we don't even have enough money for supplies and computers. We, therefore, are not on the priority list. Or should I call it the money list?

Politics in Rhode Island and this country has come down to money. It is time for the people of Rhode Island to demand publicly financed campaigns. Granted, many pundits and wealthy candidates will argue that this would be a violation of their First Amendment rights of free speech.

In fact, many millionaire candidates would argue that they can spend their money as they see fit. The argument goes: If rich people want to spend money on running for office or supporting another candidate, they have the right to do so.

Some have threatened to take the new federal campaign finance laws enacted to court to chal-

lenge their constitutionality.

The problem with this financial freedom of expression is that it leads to the disenfranchisement of other citizens. For example, the average citizen in Rhode Island lacks the ability to run for Governor or financially support a politician. Money buys influence and increases one's speech in politics. If you have the money to air a campaign commercial you can exercise your freedom of speech to an elevated degree. In other words, people will hear what you have to say. Therefore, the more money one has, the more freedom of expression one has. And, to the contrary, the less money one has the less freedom of expression one has. In this line of thought, a person's employer, who provides them with income, is disenfranchising the poor or average Rhode Islander.

For example, if my employer, Coventry Public Schools, paid me millions of dollars a year, speech or expression would be greater due to my ability to buy airtime and have my voice heard.

Since this is not the case (my employer doesn't pay me millions of dollars a year) I might be able to sue my employer for infringing on my right as a U.S. citizen. Yes, it seems absurd. But, so do these multi-millionaire elections. Let's make the move as a state and mandate publicly financed elections, therefore, guaranteeing the equality of all in respect to the First Amendment.

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