

Students show political savvy with mock election

By NICOLE WIETRAK

COVENTRY — While many of the state's registered voters took to the polls last week to support their favorite candidates, so did the students at Knotty Oak Middle School.

Every year since 1998, Knotty Oak Middle School social studies teacher Ted Mitchell has worked with the eight graders in his class to organize a "mock election" within the school to teach students about the electoral process and about the different issues facing their town, state and nation.

Mitchell's class certainly did not skimp on any of the election season's fundamentals. His students split up into a campaign team, Political Action Committee (PAC) campaign team, opinion polling organization, television news production team and newspaper editors and writers.

During their five-week long adventure, Mitchell's students have had a wide-range of famous faces visit their school including Glenn Laxton from Channel 12 News, candidates James Langevin, Rod Driver, Sue Stenhouse, Reginald Centracchio, William Harsch, and Patrick Lynch. Even the U.S. Senate candidates' wives Sandra Whitehouse and Stephanie

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— TED MITCHELL
EIGHTH GRADE TEACHER
KNOTTY OAK MIDDLE SCHOOL

Chafee dropped in for visits.

Mitchell said he contacted as many candidates as he could so the students could see the broad range of candidates that run for political office.

In fact, Mitchell said that on the Monday before the state elections, Secretary of State candidate Ralph Mollis and Lt. Governor candidate Elizabeth Roberts actually stopped by on their own volition to visit the students because they were so impressed with their work.

"We took Mollis and Roberts around the school and barged into all the social studies classrooms as a surprise," he said, and joked that it was the candidates' last minute campaigning at the school that won them the Knotty Oak election.

When a candidate came to the school to speak with the students, the candidate first

had to participate in a "press conference" where students asked questions they generated themselves.

A film crew taped each event and then, working with Mitchell, put together news segments about each candidate.

The newspaper team put together a newspaper called the "Knotty Oak Middle School Mock Election Times," which featured articles on each race, the difference between Democrats and Republicans, voting fraud, letters to the editor as well as summaries of each of the nine referendum questions on the ballot.

During their lunch period Monday, the entire school had the opportunity to vote based on the information they were given by Mitchell's students during the five-week long program.

What may be even more

impressive than the scope of the project itself, is the accuracy of the school's results in relation to the statewide results.

"Every single year, the results match up," said Mitchell of his class' mock election, which took place last Monday. "As far as the races go, the election here is almost always a predictor of what's going to happen on Election Day."

After all the votes were counted, the students elected Sheldon Whitehouse, Langevin, Carcieri, Roberts, Lynch and Mollis by roughly the same margins as the state election results.

They were also right on the money when it came to the referendum questions, even voting down the proposed West Warwick casino.

Each time Mitchell runs the program, he said that he receives nothing but positive feedback from parents and other teachers, and that the students end up engrossing themselves in the process as well.

"I'd be walking down the halls and the kids aren't talking about Abercrombie and Fitch," said Mitchell, "they're talking about how the Democrats and Republicans are arguing this point or that point and about different referendum questions."