

Legislators discuss bills with high school students

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Seniors Daniella Woiski, left, and Caitlin Goodman look over bills written for the project in the high school's library.



Jacqueline Dormer/staff photos State Rep. Mike Tobash, R-125, left, state Rep. Neal P. Goodman, D-123, center, and state Sen. David Argall, R-29, right, listen Thursday as Pottsville Area High School seniors debate bills they wrote for a bill-writing project in their Advanced Placement American Government class at Pottsville Area High School. Students participating in the debate are, clockwise from left, Emily Comisac, Kevin Wang, Ryan Coyle and Tiffany Cheng.

For a high school class on state government, Pottsville Area senior Emily Comisac had to write a draft of a federal bill, and she decided to write one aiming to abolish standardized testing.

"I don't think SATs should be as heavily looked at as they are to get into college. I have all straight As and have a good GPA, but I don't think the SATs show how good of a student I was," said Comisac, 18, one of the 29 students in an Advanced Placement American Government class.

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"I've got a bill we're developing in Harrisburg which talks about that exact topic," state Rep. Mike Tobash, R-125, said Thursday.

Tobash was one of three local legislators who visited the class at the high school library during sixth period Thursday to discuss the bill-writing process.

"The bill I'm working on has to do specifically with the Keystone Exams," Tobash said.

The Keystone Exam replaces the 11th-grade Pennsylvania System of School Assessment exam. Beginning with the Class of 2017, students must pass those exams to graduate, according to The Associated Press.

"This year, the state implemented three of the Keystone Exams. Our bill doesn't have a name yet but we're going to contemplate not requiring that we roll out the next seven. I think measuring people is fair but in this case, I mean, taking a look at what the criteria is to get into a college, is inevitably measured by the college," Tobash said.

This AP American Government class is something new Pottsville Area introduced at the start of the 2012-13 school year. Pamela Delenick, the teacher, put in the proposal for it.

"The goal is to teach them about American government in greater detail than our intro class. And with this assignment, the students were asked to draft federal bills," Delenick said.

Delenick said in the next few days, the students will be reviewing 21 bills written by other students from across the nation.

"They'll be deciding whether to reject, amend or go ahead and approve the bills. They'll be doing this in groups of four using laptop computers. And we've asked the legislators to offer them some advice as they do this debating," Delenick said.

So, during the 45-minute class on Thursday, Tobash, state Sen. David Argall, R-29, and state Rep. Neal P. Goodman, D-123, offered some advice on the bill-writing process.

Joe Natishak, 18, said he wrote one which would give further support to soldiers in the armed services called "Strengthen Our Nation."

"I'm proud of what we had and I'd like to give men and women who give so much to the country everything that they need to do their jobs successfully," Natishak said.

"That's very germane to today. A lot of people don't realize that we in Pennsylvania fund the National Guard. So decisions made in Washington have a direct effect on us at home in Pennsylvania," Goodman said.

Brianna Amos, 18, said she wrote one about abortion, called "Dying to Be Alive."

"I think it should be pretty much outlawed depending on the circumstances," Amos said.

"That's a topic where you'll find an awful lot of debate," Tobash said.

Meanwhile, the bills they've written have been sent to other students across the nation via the website for the Youth Leadership Initiative at youthleadership.net, Delenick said.

The Initiative is "a program of the University of Virginia Center for Politics, which develops free education resources designed to assist civics teachers, and encourage students to participate in the political process," according to the website.

The bill-writing project is part of a nationwide project called "Youth Leadership Initiative's E-Congress program." It allows students to learn about Congress by writing original legislation and following it through the lawmaking process, according to the website.

"We don't know the specific schools but we know they're from places including Florida, California, Minnesota and Montana, to name a few," Delenick said.

"We should get feedback but we don't know where they ended up," Amos said.

After the students get input on their bills, the class will vote to accept or reject their bills, Delenick said.

"I enjoy this. It's interesting to learn people's viewpoints on issues. It's fun to express your opinion, just see what people think," Amos said.

"I wish I had an exercise like this when I was a senior in high school. I teach a course one night a week at Penn State in Harrisburg and I'm thinking I should do something like this for the college students," Argall said.