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Press Release FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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On Tuesday, October 28, one week before the actual Presidential election, Bayview Elementary School's 3rd, 4th and 5th graders had an opportunity to express their choice for president in a nationwide youth mock election. The results: McCain won by a margin of 126 to 94. Left, a Bayview student is assisted in the voting process by fifth grade teacher Jeffrey Sabella who coordinated the program at Bayview

Students Get a Lesson on Hands-On Democracy and Vote in Nationwide Youth Mock Election

Middletown: The most historic presidential election in generations provided a fertile learning opportunity for Bayview students to explore the lessons of American democracy. One week before their parents were able to vote, Bayview 3rd, 4th and 5th graders had the opportunity to express their choice for President of the United States in a national mock election on the Internet. The results--the Bayview student body voted to elect Senator John McCain president by a margin of 126 to 94. Nationally, Barack Obama took the election with 60% of the vote versus John McCain's 35.5%. The remainder represented votes for various third party candidates. Over 3 million students participated in the election nationwide.

Bayview Fifth grade teacher Jeffrey Sabella had discovered the Youth Leadership Initiative website, which sponsored a nationwide mock presidential election on the actual ballot positions within a Congressional District. Bayview students were able to access their Congressional 6th District ballot on-line and vote for president as well as senator and congressional representatives. Students from all over the country and at every grade level were allowed to participate.

Bayview decided to concentrate on the top of ticket and debated the positions that presidential candidates Senators John McCain and Barack Obama held on the issues important to students.

Jeff Sabella explains, "When we first asked the students who they would vote for, we quickly learned that they were mimicking whatever was being stated in their households. So we decided to delve into the issues and the candidates' position on them. Additionally, we offered a seven factor guide to aid the students in their selection process for president."

That seven point factor guide included: what was occurring in their community, the country and the world; the candidates' position on those issues; the candidates' reputations; their party affiliation as well as how they appear, speak and act to the students.

To assist in learning about the candidates' positions on the issues, the fifth graders created, "Compare and Contrast" sheets on the major issues of the day, including such topics as the war in Iraq, taxes, social security, etc. The students also wrote an essay on what democracy means to them.

Joe Davis, a fifth grade student, visualized democracy through an average day stating, "When I go to school I see people of all cultures, Caucasian, African American, Spanish and Chinese. When I walk outside I see signs for McCain and Obama and I know we live in a country where you can elect your officials. When I go past the church, I am reminded that we live in a country where you can practice your own religion."

The students' essays were displayed on the school corridor walls along with renderings of the candidates and the important issues of the campaign.



Fifth grader Cassie Zappala participated in an exit poll and explained her views on why she voted for Senator John McCain, stating “Before the mock vote, I pretty much just supported the candidate my parents were voting for, but now I know why I am voting for John McCain—because he will only take our troops out of Iraq when it is safe to do so.”

Fifth grader Cassandra Wojdylak also thought Iraq was an important issue, but for different reasons she was voting for Barack Obama, adding, “What is really important to me are the environment, economics and energy and I feel Barack Obama is the best candidate on those issues.”

Both girls, as all of Mr. Sabella’s students, were acting as poll workers signing in their fellow classmates on the day of election, guiding the younger grades in using the on-line voting program and rewarding them with stickers for voting afterwards. The Media Center, where the actually voting took place, sported a huge colorful, student crafted sign “Election Headquarters.”



There was some levity to the exercise, such as when some students discovered they could vote for themselves in the “write-in” category. When confronted with the categories of senator and congressmen which they hadn’t previously discussed, the poll workers advised them to just pick the category which stated, “I choose not to vote for this position.” Instead, some chose to “vote the ticket” and selected the same party in each category.

Fourth grade teacher Felicia Merklinger was excited that voting day had finally arrived for her students, stating, “They were counting down the days. Some kids were even writing about it in their daily journals. They were so happy because this is what their parents will be doing.”

When asked if the children knew if their parents were voting in the election, several responded in unison, “Yes they are, and I am going with them.”

Jeff Sabella was pleased with the day of voting and stated, “As a teacher I found this election to be a good way to get students involved and aware of the issues that will impact their lives. Additionally,

I feel this process is a window to the future, as I told the children, this may very well be the way they vote sometime in their lives –on the Internet, at their leisure without having to travel to the polls. Maybe that will help increase the percentage of voters.”

The Youth Leadership Initiative is a non-profit unit of the University Center for Politics at the University of Virginia. It is funded by the United States Congress, the Virginia General Assembly and other private donations. For more information on the project, visit www.youthleadership.net.

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