

YMCA's Youth In Government

By David K. McDonnell (© David K. McDonnell, www.clandonnell.net)

This Spring, I witnessed a portion of the four day Michigan Youth in Government conference in Lansing, sponsored by the State YMCA of Michigan¹. My observation? This program provides a wonderful lesson in the mechanics of democracy to high school students.



The students move into the state capitol for four days and take over state government. Students write legislation, steer it through committee, argue for or against amendments both in committee and on the floor of the legislature, and, if successful, see the passage of their bills.

While some students act as legislators, others receive training from lobbyists, or from members of the print or electronic media. The lobbyists then seek to influence the legislation, and the media-students report on everyone's efforts.

The executive branch students – the governor and cabinet members – participate in this legislative process, but also shadow state officials. While this is going on, the more ambitious students are campaigning for governor, or speaker of the house, or any other more visible position, for next year's conference.

In the meantime, the students learn more than a little bit about house and senate rules and order of business, committee processes, lobbying procedures, drafting legislation, Parliamentary procedure, and negotiation.

The setting for all of this is the Capitol Building. The conference is conveniently scheduled during legislative recess, so the students have nearly full use of the building. This includes the floor of the house and senate, caucus and committee rooms, and (I suspect) the legislators' rest rooms.

The Michigan Capitol Building was constructed in the 1870s and is on the National Registry of Historic Places. For many decades, the state allowed the building to wither, and made many short-sighted remodeling decisions. Fortunately, the building underwent major renovations, beginning in the 1980s, and has been largely restored to its original design and condition.

¹ If you are interested in this program and are not a Michigander, check out the national youth in government website. Its map of the U.S.A. has links to the program in each state.



I thought you might be interested in some of the bills drafted by the student participants. It might give you a clue of what is on the mind of high school students. So here they are.

You shouldn't be too surprised to learn that driving and motor vehicles were high on the list. No less than 34 bills were introduced on this subject. These ranged from establishing maximum decibel levels for music emanating from motorized vehicles, and increasing the state speed limit, to requiring a parking lot test before being allowed to park in a student parking lot. My favorite was a bill "to require the display of lighted headlamps whenever it is precipitating".

Only two of these driving bills passed. One act requires annual driving tests for any motorist over age 70 who has been involved in an accident. The other permits foreign exchange students to take drivers training here and receive state drivers' licenses. (Actually, I'm not sure that the latest anti-terrorist legislation from Washington would permit this.)

In comparison, there were only 18 bills introduced relating to environmental issues, but they had a far greater success rate – 7 of 18. The student legislators mandated that all govern buildings be built to national "green" standards, created a Great Lakes Water Conservation Council, increased the deposit on bottles and cans from 10¢ to 15¢, funded the study of "invasive species" into the Great Lakes, and prohibited the disposal of toxic chemicals into state rivers.



Non-Michigan garbage was of great concern to some of the students. There were several bills to prohibit landfills from accepting refuse from foreign countries, and one bill specifically prohibited Canadian refuse. (Evidently this legislator thought that Bolivian garbage was OK, but

Canadian garbage was not). Other drafters weren't at all concerned with foreign garbage but wanted to prohibit refuse from other states. (Evidently these legislators thought that Canadian garbage was OK, but Ohio garbage was not). None of these bills passed.

The success ratio of the environmental legislation was much higher than all other categories. There were 13 bills on weapon and hunting issues and none passed. None of the employment and workplace bills passed (including the bills to increase the minimum wage, and to require payment of minimum wage to waiters and waitresses.) None of the 10 bills relating to high school athletics passed (including the bill to limit practices to 150 minutes, or the bills requiring random drug testing of student athletes.) And none of the 8 tax bills passed.

Students introduced 19 bills relating to alcohol, tobacco, and drugs, and 9 different crime bills. The only one that passed was a bill to mandate rehabilitation programs, and prohibit incarceration, for first-time drug offenders.

By far the largest category of bills (47 bills) related to public K-12 education and college. This is, for obvious reasons, in the forefront of high school student thinking.

Students wanted, for example, to prohibit school on Wednesday afternoons, require schools to provide a lunch hour, exempt students with a 3.0 GPA or better from many school requirement, require high schools to offer advanced placement programs, increase the school drop-out age, eliminate or replace the state standardized test, and prohibit start of school before 8:30 am.

Interestingly, none of the bills relating to high schools were passed. Only three education bills were passed. One limits college tuition increases to the rate of inflation. Another requires school districts to provide pre-school programs. The third requires every school to maintain a usable and easily attainable automated electronic defibrillator.

The student legislature *rejected* bills to require photo IDs for voting, mandating childcare classes for pregnant women, prohibited advertisement of prescription drugs, provide for proportional allocation of the state's electoral votes, require state jobs for homeless people, require community service by welfare recipients, and require HIV infected persons to carry state issued identification. All of the same sex civil union/marriage/joint property rights bills were rejected. All of the abortion related bills were rejected.

The legislature did, however, approve measures which require drug testing of welfare recipients, require certain safety precautions at tattoo parlors, require certain disclosures prior to onychectomy (declawing) of animals, and legalize doctor-assisted suicides.

The students, as a whole, were a bit more socialistic that I would have anticipated. Bills required such things as state payment of college tuition, and free domestic services and snow removal for senior citizens.

The most extreme bill was actually communistic. It would require all citizens to be employed by the State of Michigan and impose a 100% tax on all income earned in the State of Michigan. It would also require the state to provide its residents, free of charge, housing, education, medical care, public transportation, nutritional food, and all other needs. To take of the Feds, the bill would require the state to pay all federal income tax due from its citizens. The bill did not pass.

I laughed when I read some of these bills. Many seemed incredibly petty or simple-minded. Like the bill to prohibit illumination of Christmas decorations before Thanksgiving and after January 5th. Or to require restaurants to include the tips as part of the menu price. Or to reduce the age to view R-rated movies to 16 (another bill would reduce the R-rated movie age to 12). Or to mandate prisoners serving life sentences to be drafted into the military (which is just what the

Army needs). I had some serious doubts about our future, if we are to be led someday by this generation.

My concerns went away, though, when I read the list of approved legislation. The students rejected the silly, the trivial, and the ill-conceived. What passed were serious bills, addressing serious issues in a responsible manner. I frankly think we might be better off if we fired all of our current legislators and replaced them with our youth in government kids.