

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

October 4, 2001

Revisiting Sixth Grade

Respect for today's teachers, appreciation of young students, admiration of the new middle school. These are my impressions after spending a morning at East Longmeadow's Birchland Park Middle School last week.

I attended Mrs. Tina Moore's sixth-grade class as part of a national program for legislators to talk with schoolchildren about our government. The sixth-grade social studies class curriculum covers ancient Greece, so I appreciate Mrs. Moore taking time out of her schedule for a detour into the modern day legislature. (We did discuss that democracy came from the Greeks.)

The lesson plan covered several aspects of state and local government. We talked about the school's upcoming Student Council elections, about their parents' successful coalition that won town support to build their school.

What did the students talk about? One boy asked why his friend who had moved to Springfield could not continue to attend the school. I explained the school choice option. Another asked me if I ever lost debates in the legislature. Admitting that I don't always win, I talked about the Massachusetts referendum procedures as an alternate method for achieving a desired law.

The visit took place shortly after the terrorist attacks on our country, and I wanted to hear some reactions from the children. One child talked about how the disaster had united the politically divided country behind President Bush. Another voiced his concern that the United States may find itself isolated if it seeks to punish the perpetrators.

A third chimed in that we should seek allies among other nations to present a united front against terror. Many of the class had watched the President's speech to Congress and the nation the previous night with their parents, and they were all well informed.

I had visited Birchland Park only one other time, for the celebratory grand opening a year ago. It was reassuring to see it in routine operation during an ordinary day. A building does not educate children, but the state of the art classrooms and the bright hallways of a well-designed school offer real assistance in developing a learning environment.

I kept comparing Longmeadow's aging Wolf Swamp and Blueberry Hill Schools with the new building and hoping that the town has authorized enough bonding to create a similar learning environment.

By the end of the class period I felt energized because of the interaction with the students. Their interest, demeanor and intelligence are a credit to their families and school. I must also admit to feeling physically tired from spending just one-sixth of one school day as a teacher. Mrs. Moore has my admiration for presenting me with such an inquisitive group of sixth graders. My thanks to her and to all of the teachers who spend each day on the task of educating the next generation of Americans.

NOTE: The Massachusetts budget is now three months overdue. The first quarter's payments will be sent to cities and towns in the interim and two-week budgets continue to fund state services. Fiscal instability because of world events has brought the Senate, House and Governor together to deal with the probability that state revenues will be significantly lower than projections: Unfortunately monetary shortfalls may cause our final budget to be lower than anyone expected when it was drafted in May and June.