

KIDS VOTING

Program lets children participate

By Tanya Caldwell
and Kim McCoy Vann

DEMOCRAT WRITERS

Thousands of Leon County's younger citizens will head to the polls Tuesday.

They'll have their say on who should be the next president and whether high-school students should be allowed to leave campus for lunch.

Kids Voting USA, a nonpartisan and nonprofit organization, is encouraging public-school children to mark the ballots along with their parents.

"Our mission is to accustom the children to the voting process," said Deborah Antonelli, Leon County Kids Voting sponsorship chairwoman.

"They have the opportunity to vote so that, by the time they turn 18, they'll be registered and will become lifetime voters."

Kids Voting is a success because students have a real-life voting experience, said Mike Odom, the school district's social studies curriculum developer.

They have their own voter registration cards, go to real precincts with their parents or classmates, place their ballots in Kids Voting booths and watch the results that night on cable Channel 23.

"You have all these A-to-Z programs, from Rock the Vote to the student-parent mock elections, but that doesn't recreate the real experience of voting like Kids Vote does," Odom said.

The children will vote on some of the issues that their parents will vote on. For example, they'll choose a president and schools superintendent and make a decision on two amendments.

Students in third through twelfth grades will also decide whether nutritional information posted on vending machines would affect their selections. And high-school students will be asked if they should be allowed to leave campus for lunch.

Students have been learning about elections issues in school.

SAIL High School students, for example, have worked on class projects on election themes, history and how to detect media bias and propaganda, according to Principal Roseanne Wood. A panel that included Leon County Elections Supervisor Ion Sancho and political-party representatives spoke with students about the political process. It will culminate Tuesday when students vote and staff a Kids Voting precinct.

Students at W.T. Moore Elementary have learned about the election process through their morning news broadcasts. A different issue was presented each Wednesday of this month. During one show, School Board Vice Chairwoman Sheila Costigan answered questions about voting.

In addition, the students have been preparing for a Kids Voting rally that will take place Tuesday. It'll include a play, patriotic songs and a rap of the Pledge of Allegiance.

"It's our hope to encourage children to understand the value of their vote," music teacher Tina Mason said. "Even though it's not one that will count now, it will instill a lifelong habit of wanting to vote and will encourage parents to also vote."

Many students at W.T. Moore are eager to cast a ballot. Fourth-grader Jonathan Mason, Tina Mason's son, said it was important "so you can practice voting when you get 18. It helps our country make decisions."

Oksana Kenon, another fourth-grader, has already learned a valuable lesson about voting.

"I think I can make a difference," she said.

■ Contact reporter Kim McCoy Vann at (850) 599-2143 or kmccoy@tallahassee.com.

TO LEARN MORE

- To make a donation or for more information on Kids Voting, visit www.kvlc.talstar.com.