

Pittsburgh Student Voices with Congressman Doyle

BRITTANY MCCANDLESS, *the.News* Student correspondent:

A virtual conversation with their congressman... that's what Student Voices provided members of a high school civics class in Pittsburgh. Using the internet, ten students at Oliver High School discussed some issues they cared about directly with their congressman, Mike Doyle, now in his seventh term.

GARY SCHERMER, Social Studies teacher:

You're saying it's good for the economy...

BRITTANY MCCANDLESS:

The students drafted their questions, with the guidance of their social studies teacher, Gary Schermer. He is a lawyer and the creator of a magnet program for law and government at the high school.

The students first raised the issue of social security benefits. They wanted to know how this National issue would be handled by their representative, because they see its impact on their communities in the future.

JACOB DUMONT, Student:

...they've been saying that they might move it up, the age limit, to like 70... or something like that... to collect full benefits.

GARY SCHERMER:

So even a guy like you, you're what? 15?

JACOB DUMONT:

I'm worried about it.

GARY SCHERMER:

A guy like you is worried about something that's going to happen 50 years from now? Wow, that's great. So keep the age limit as it is?

JACOB DUMONT:

Yeah.

GARY SCHERMER:

And what is... what is the age limit now?

JACOB DUMONT:

I believe 65 to collect...

GARY SCHERMER:

65? Ok.

JACOB DUMONT:

...to collect full benefits.

ANGELA YOCHAM:

They're not promising our, this age group, that show... ask them why, how can we be sure that we're going to get Social Security.

GARY SCHERMER:

Ok, how do we protect the Social Security system, make sure everybody can benefit from it? Ok?

BRITTANY MCCANDLESS:

After receiving that question and a host of others, Doyle sat down at his computer in his Washington office to reply.

His answer to the social security question:

MAN:

In order to stop raising the retirement age, we would have to instead accelerate raising the cap on earnings, so that all earning would be subject to Social Security taxes.

BRITTANY MCCANDLESS:

Doyle said that he had not expected old age benefits to be the students' first concern..

CONGRESSMAN DOYLE:

I think children and teenagers today realize that what happens down here affects them, which is a good reason why they should be involved. I mean, it's always great to see young people asking questions like this, or being involved in a program like this because Washington really does affect their future – their ability to go to college and be able to afford to do that, whether or not their families are going to have healthcare, and just some of the anxiety that a lot of people go through, "Is my pension going to be there when I retire, and if it's not does the government have a safety net?"

BRITTANY MCCANDLESS:

Think about how your representatives at every level make decisions to affect your daily life. How do the issues they deal with impact you now? What about in the future?

The students at Oliver High School also had questions on other national issues that affected them locally.

GARY SCHERMER:

What would you say?

NICOLE DAILEY:

I mean, you get stadiums, build stadiums all over the place and have nowhere for teens to go. And they wonder why teens are in a situation that they are. They're selling drugs on the streets, getting killed...

RONALD BROCK:

Why are we stuck at fast food and convenience stores? Why can't we do something else?

BRITTANY MCCANDLESS:

Doyle explained he could not directly address some of the local matters because they are not governed by congress. As the 10th Amendment to the constitution says, "Powers not delegated" to the federal government "are reserved to the states respectively, or to the people."

Ten days after their question session, the students sat in the jury box in their teacher's special moot court chamber to discuss Doyle's answers.

Teacher Gary Schermer asked his students what they'd learned from the process.

ANGELA YOCHAM:

I think he answered the questions well.

JACOB DUMONT:

No one wants to raise taxes... no one wants to raise the age of Social Security. So they're both unpopular. So that's what he explained to me. So I understand that point.

GARY SCHERMER:

How many would participate in it again? Ok.

BRITTANY MCCANDLESS:

Schermer said he wanted to keep the dialogue going.

GARY SCHERMER:

You could write your congressman or other representatives whenever you wanted to and they would be able to respond to you. And I think that's a great way to learn more about particular issues and to actually engage yourself.

CONGRESSMAN DOYLE:

Writing to your congressmen, or your local state senator, or your school board member, and say these are the issues that are on our mind, what are you going to do about them? It's important.

Sometimes I'll have five or six e-mails from people – I can answer it right then, I can get instant feedback too, that's the real beauty, I think, of the internet, you know, we're hearing much quicker from people on how they feel they're being affected by legislation

BRITTANY MCCANDLESS:

2008 is an election year and that's likely to make your representatives more willing to hear from - and reply to - the folks back home... including those of you still too young to vote.

This is Brittany McCandless reporting for Student Voices and *the.News*.