

# Washington Jewish Week

## Students study issues as election approaches

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*JPDS third-graders Leor Hochstein, left, and Maya Fritz are studying the use and protection of public lands as part of the schoolwide election project.*

While their parents have been enduring a long election season, students at the Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital have been tackling policy issues that the grownups have barely touched.

The entire school is involved in an elections project that has focused on globalization, the environment, statehood for the District of Columbia and political messaging, with each grade tackling a different subject.

JPDS has done projects during election years, but this year educators wanted students to understand issues rather than pay attention to the candidates, said Janet Collier, an instructional leader for grades 2-6.

“The underlying belief is that when we educate children, we’re not just educating future citizens, we’re educating current citizens,” she said. “And even though there are certain things that children cannot do — they cannot vote, they cannot own property — they still have rights. And that got us to thinking about how we could connect that idea to the election.”

The sixth-graders, studying political messaging, are analyzing presidential campaign ads of the past, looking at political cartoons and also drawing their own cartoons. Adina Siff, 11, said her class examined ads going back to the 1950s on a website called “The Living Room Candidate” in analyzing campaign tactics.

“We looked at how throughout the 1900s these commercials influenced elections outcomes,” she said. “We look for how eye-catching it is. Right now, some ads are negative to the other candidate and some are just positive to themselves.”

Asked whether she preferred positive or negative ads, Adina said, “I’m gonna go with positive, but I’m not sure that’s very realistic right now. If you campaign negatively about one major party, some citizens might vote for the Green Party or the Libertarian Party.”

Each classroom contains a component of the election. In a sixth-grade classroom, the teacher posts two political cartoons daily with space for students to leave their reactions. In the fourth grade, students studying globalization made tug-of-war charts comparing the costs and benefits of the United States

engaging in overseas trade. Among the benefits, according to the students, were “workers make money” and “cheaper clothes for us,” while costs included “child labor” and “dangerous working conditions.”

Adiv Brooks-Rubin, 9, said his class studied the 2013 collapse of a clothing factory in Bangladesh as an example of problems in importing products from developing countries. He said his teacher told the students to look at the tags of their clothing when they went home to see where they were made.

Fourth-graders also visited other schools in Washington to present their tug-of-war project and ask students whether they thought the United States should produce more of its own goods.

“A lot of people answered that we should make more clothes,” Adiv said. “Because we wouldn’t have to ship all this stuff. It would also prevent people from having to work in factories in bad conditions. And they would have more freedom, more job choices and they’d make more money.”

Fellow fourth-grader Aliza Lesser, 9, played devil’s advocate.

“I agree, but it’d be difficult if the U.S. made all of their own clothes because sometimes they don’t have enough of one material and another country might not have enough of one material that the U.S. has a lot of,” she said.



*Fourth-grade JPDS students created a cost/benefits tug of war chart while studying globalization and trade.*



*JPDS sixth-graders Isaac Trommer, left, and Adina Siff design their own political cartoon as part of the curriculum that is looking at political messaging. Photos by Daniel Schere.*

Another cost mentioned on the chart was “guilt,” which Aliza says she felt after she learned about labor conditions in Bangladesh and other developing countries.

“I think we totally take for granted all of the hard work and the bad working conditions with everything we use,” she said.

The complex grasp of the topics that the students have achieved wowed elementary school director Arielle Derby.

“I went into it thinking, ‘This is going to be an amazing idea but it’s going to be a lot of work,’” she said. “And to me, the amazing thing is the really high level of thinking that goes into these projects. They

dove into it, they took it on its own. And they’re doing all of this complex analysis.”

Derby said she was particularly impressed during a visit from the Treasury Department’s Acting Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Adam Szubin (also a JPDS parent), who spoke about recent developments in U.S. diplomacy, like last year’s Iran nuclear agreement.

“He came to talk to the kids about diplomacy and how it all went down, and they grilled him,” she said. “The questions they asked were amazing.”

One point students from all grades seemed to agree on was the need for politicians to soften their tone and focus more on solving problems. Leor Hochstein, a third-grader studying the preservation of public lands, said he wishes politicians devoted more attention to the issue.

“They should start taking time to work on it and not just be like, ‘Oh there’s a crack in the Grand Canyon’ and just leave it be,” he said. “Like, they actually need to put their time and ideas into how to make it better.”

Leor, whose father works in the State Department, said it might be wise to wait until the next president assumes office in January before looking at the environment as a priority.

“I don’t think right now with the election it would be a good time to fix it because the government is so jumbled up with the election that they can’t take time,” he said. “You actually need a full president to take care of it. You can’t just have a big mess and turn it into another big mess because the problem won’t get solved.”