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## LESSON ON THE ELECTION

### Edison students learn about process, parties

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EDISON — When the general election rolls around, these kids will be primed.

Students at Wardlaw-Hartridge Upper School in Edison spent Tuesday learning about the electoral process, political parties and the issues that continue to unite and divide this country.

As the centerpiece of the day, the school hosted a panel discussion on the political and electoral process involving a local politician, two government workers, an independent watchdog and a member of a political think tank.

Those five people fielded questions from the students, laying out their opinions on a variety of topics but always returning — with almost uncanny unanimity — to the importance of getting involved.

"This is your government, this is your town, this is your school," said Tina Renna, an independent political activist and founder of the Union County Watchdog Association. "Pick something, and get involved. It really is your responsibility."

Renna came to politics when her husband ran an unsuccessful independent bid for a Union County freeholder seat in 2003, and she noticed that getting public records was unusually difficult. After the election, she created the UCWA as a way to inform the public through the posting of public documents.

But involvement comes in various forms.

Martha Guarnieri, a sophomore at Rutgers University and a spokesperson for the Eagleton Institute for Politics, has focused on voter registration. She said she sees participation in the political process as a duty.

"Not voting really is silencing your voice as a citizen," she said.

Guarnieri is one of the leaders of RU Voting, an organization that works to register, educate and motivate Rutgers students and foster greater participation in the political process. She said the project is paying off with a significant increase in the number of students going to the polls.

"Turnout rates for young people soared in the primary," she said. "I think it's going to be an exciting year."

Jim Vokral agreed.

Middlesex County's administrator for the Board of Elections said the number of registered voters in the county is roughly half of the total county population. If history is any indication, the presidential contest this year would see another huge increase like that seen in 2004, when he said 40,000 new people registered in Middlesex County alone.

"I expect, for the presidential election in November, we can see a significant increase," he said.

Vokral was asked about the sanctity of the voting booth and whether each vote truly is accurately counted.

He explained the security measures protecting the voting booths and some of the problems the county election boards are facing in instituting the new technologies while protecting votes from increasingly sophisticated tampering.

"There are many, many checks and balances," he said.

That was a relief for William Vogt, 18, and a senior at the school, who voted in the 2007 general election.

He said vote security was at the top of his list. "The most important thing is that my perception was affirmed by an election official," he said.

Not all the questions were technical — some touched on the issues the nation's voters are grappling with during this election cycle.

Edison Councilman Dr. Sudhanshu Prasad was asked whether race or sex are having an effect on politics.

He said that by and large people are focusing on ideas, and not the race or sex of the candidates. He thinks that bodes well for the country.

"They are making decisions on policies," he said. "This country is ready for any changes will see in the next election."

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