

Core Democratic Values

“ I, Jennifer M. Granholm, governor of the State of Michigan, do hereby proclaim October 2003 as Student Backpack Safety Month in Michigan and encourage all citizens with children to be aware of the harm overloaded backpacks can have. ”

ARE YOU PACKING TOO MUCH?

Did you know it's Student Backpack Safety Month? That's right, Governor Jennifer Granholm even signed a proclamation last month making it official. Any student knows that backpacks can be heavy.

Now, thanks to the students at Northern Hills Middle School in Forest Hills, and Governor Granholm, more people will be aware of the heavy loads you lug around and the harm that they can cause.

Student Backpack Safety Month is a great example of democracy in action.

What started as a social studies lesson in Mrs. Carole Cotts' class ended up as House Resolution 28. To help students learn about the way government and public policy work, Mrs. Cotts uses a program called Project Citizen. She asked students to brainstorm issues they care about and issues that need change. Mrs. Cotts made a list of ideas on the

chalkboard.

The honors social studies class of 24 students then came up with five hot topics, including the weight of backpacks. The students divided into groups and researched their ideas.

Four girls in the class (the only girls in that class!) teamed up on the weighty issue of backpacks.

Catherine Coyne, Kellie Dykman, Lauren Smith and Kristin Winn talked to chiropractors and other experts about the problems overloaded packs can cause. They also weighed classmate's backpacks and discovered the average weight was 30 pounds. They learned that a loaded backpack shouldn't weigh more than 10 percent of your body weight and that for many kids, the packs were as much as 30 percent of their weight.

The girls also brainstormed solutions with teachers. One good solution includes assigning a second set of books to students



PHOTO BY MARK BIALEK

Eighth-grade students from Northern Hills Middle School in Forest Hills, worked to get a proclamation making October Student Backpack Safety Month. Posing with their heavy packs from left to right are Catherine Coyne, Lauren Smith, Kellie Dykman and Kristin Winn.

so they could have books in class and books at home.

Although that program hasn't happened because it would be expensive, it might be possible in the future. The students also talked with textbook publishers about getting a textbook on a CD-ROM, another idea for the future.

"We talked to a lot of people and did lots of research," says Kristin. "We called doctors and chiropractors."

"Everyone in the class helped us," added Lauren. "Everyone thinks backpacks are way too heavy."

Then the students were ready to make a case before the state legislators.

Thanks to the Michigan House Civics Commission and the Civics Institute, state lawmakers visited 14 Michigan schools, including Northern Hills Middle School, for public hearings. Last December, students in the seventh- and eighth-grade honors social studies classes at Northern Hills Middle School testified before lawmakers. The hearings gave lawmakers a chance to hear students talk about important issues.

State Representative Doug Hart of Rockford, who is the House Civics Commission co-chairman,

was so impressed with the girls' research he helped them take their idea for backpack safety awareness to Governor Granholm.

In May, the students testified again before lawmakers in Lansing and in September they got the good news that Governor Granholm would proclaim October as Student Backpack Safety Month.

The girls were recognized for their work at a Civics Institute breakfast in September with lawmakers and civic leaders. Governor Granholm presented the girls with the backpack proclamation at the breakfast.

"I liked that she called us 'chicks in charge,'" said Kristin.

In addition to meeting Governor Granholm last month, which all the girls agreed was cool, they also won a statewide Project Citizen competition for their work on the backpack issue.

You can check out www.michigan.gov for the full proclamation.

Way to go, chicks in charge.

By Janis Campbell

See Page 6 for a story on the Civics Institute.



PHOTO BY JANIS CAMPBELL

Gov. Jennifer Granholm, left, presented a proclamation to Forest Hills students Kristin Winn, Catherine Coyne, Kellie Dykman and Lauren Smith who are pictured with their social studies teacher Mrs. Carole Cotts at a breakfast in September.