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October 27, 2006

**Iris Salters**

## Elections, education linked

### Many races pick officials whose decisions affect schools



E ducation and elections go together -- and not just because polling places are often located in school gymnasiums and cafeterias.

Nearly every major decision affecting how teachers teach and how children learn is made by an elected official at the local, state or national level. Everything from class size to academic requirements for students to funding levels is decided by someone -- or a group of people -- elected by voters like you.

This year is no different. Election Day is Nov. 7 and voters will elect candidates to state and federal offices that directly impact education. Voters will also decide the fate of a Michigan school funding initiative.

### Elections affect schools

Voting empowers Michigan citizens to make a difference and to control their destiny.

Election season is a powerful reminder that the public has a great deal of say about what happens in public schools.

The power of elected office is less about the individual politician who occupies it than it is about the people who put him or her there. Voters decide who will serve on local boards of education, or in the governor's office, or in the White House. Elected leaders should be responsible for listening to their constituents' opinions about issues -- on Election Day and beyond.

By casting a vote, you help make major decisions about our public schools, including:

How best to keep students safe at school, including tough anti-bullying rules and procedures for schools to follow in the event of a major emergency.

How much money schools have to spend in the classroom and for vital support services, including for transportation, the library, counselors and food service.

Wages for school employees as well as basic benefits, including necessary health care.

What knowledge students need to be promoted from one grade to the next and what academic requirements they must meet to graduate.

Whether college is affordable for those who want to pursue higher education.

### Unseen issues on the ballot

Each of these education decisions -- and hundreds more -- are made by officials elected by voters like you and me, even though these issues may never appear on a ballot.

In schools this time of year, students at every grade level are learning important lessons about elections. They hold heated mock debates. In some schools, students are abuzz about election matters, creating buttons, signs and campaign slogans.

Some students experience a thrilling sense of empowerment as they learn to appreciate the prospect of exercising their right to vote in a mock election, even when the outcome counts only as a civics lesson.

Unfortunately, adult voters sometimes feel disenfranchised. Some simply don't believe their vote will count.

### Votes do count

But if you don't vote, you don't even have a chance of your voice being heard.

In our schools, one of the ways children are motivated -- even inspired -- is by hearing about elections in which the final outcome was decided by a narrow margin, such as the 2000 presidential election. One vote can make a difference.

Children also learn by watching the adults around them. School is an important place for children to learn about elections, but it isn't the only place where this learning occurs.

### Teach kids about elections

As the election draws near, talk with the children in your life about the election. Learn about the candidates and issues and share what you learn. You might consider taking your child or grandchild with you to the polls on Nov. 7.

As a lifelong teacher, I can't think of a better way to teach a child about the importance of voting than by letting them witness the power of our democracy in action. Nor can I think of a better way of preparing our next generation of voters and political leaders.

If more children could observe adults learning how voting impacts them -- and the sense of engagement that comes when you've had a chance to impact the future, more children might grow up to value their right to vote.

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### **Labor Voices**

Labor Voices columns are written for The News on a rotating basis by United Auto Workers President Ron Gettelfinger, Teamster President James Hoffa, Michigan AFL-CIO President Mark Gaffney and Michigan Education Association President Iris Salters. The News hopes to provide a forum for discussing workplace issues that are critical to a large segment of Michigan's population, whether or not they are union members. Look for Labor Voices every Friday in The Detroit News.

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