

State rep takes letters personally

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When the letters started pouring into her Lansing office from Clarenceville Middle School students, state Rep. Laura Toy (R-Livonia) decided to do something more than just write back.

On Monday, Toy visited students in Anthony Salicrudi's social studies classes, answering questions and giving them a closer look at how government really works.

Salicrudi said he encouraged students to correspond with any government leader, right on up to President George W. Bush, as a way to help them become more civic-minded.

"I told them if you're going to complain, complain to the right people," he said.

Toy felt responding in person might be a little more effective than mailing off a report on an issue. "Especially at these ages, you can influence them. And it's nice to hear their views on issues."

Students in Salicrudi's 2nd hour class took a hard line on whether Andrea Yates, a Texas mother recently convicted of killing her five children, should have gotten a death sentence, rather than life in prison. Although she'd been diagnosed with a mental illness, most felt she should have been executed.

"Just because you're crazy doesn't mean you can kill people and get away with it," said 13-year-old Jeremy Spriggs.

Toy then pushed the issue of capital punishment a step further, asking how they felt about imprisoning Dr. Jack Kevorkian, who has admitted helping others end their lives. The consensus appeared to be that was different, because the "victim" wanted to die anyway.

Change with the times

Using various examples of how times have changed, Toy said lawmakers have to use their experience and understanding when they deal with issues the law doesn't cover.

"Laws have to be tweaked and changed to suit the times," she said, citing new laws that govern Internet predators and parents



Checks and Balances: State Representative Laura Toy talks about the different branches of state government.

who try to sell their own children.

"There are six thousands pieces of legislation and 148 legislators who have to make these decisions," Toy said.

While Gov. John Engler has a lot of power, she explained, if a bill is stopped in the House or Senate, it doesn't go any farther toward becoming a law. With 110 legislators in the House, it's pos-

sible for there to be "shared power," with Republicans and Democrats having an equal number of votes.

"If you have a majority, that party has all the (committee) chairmanships and vice chairmanships," said Toy, who serves on the powerful appropriations committee, which has 27 members, 17 of whom are Republi-

cans.

Because of the 2000 Census and redistricting, Toy's district will change to cover all of Livonia. She explained representatives serve two years and are limited to three terms.

"Some people say six years isn't long enough, and believe me it isn't long enough," she said. "The focus becomes getting re-elected and people don't get involved...and about the time you get to know the answers, it's time to leave."

While issues like gun control and the airport authority were touched on, students also asked about issues close to their own hearts.

"Are there any new laws about go-karts?" asked Lee Diaz, 13. Because those machines aren't classified as motor vehicles, they can't be driven on streets. However, Toy said, the issue is also a local one.

"I would write my city council," she advised Diaz.

Toy left students with one of her favorite aspects of serving in the legislature.

"What's neat is all 110 people come from all over the state and they have all different points of view. The Speaker (of the House) is a farmer. How important is that to us? We live in a city so we don't have to be concerned with the different issues farmers face. As a state rep, I have to find out how the other reps feel."

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