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Campaign fever runs high at school's mock election

By **CATHERINE BAUM**
Staff Writer

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EASTHAMPTON - None of the students at White Brook Middle School can legally vote at the polls that will be set up at the school Tuesday, of course, but all of them had a chance to vote in the National Student/Parent Mock Election in the school's library Wednesday. And the majority of them did - White Brook boasted 94 percent turnout.

White Brook was one of hundreds of schools around the country to take part in the mock election. Teachers connected the exercise to curriculum, and students posted election-related material around the schools leading up to the vote. Discussions that started in class often continued among students after they left class.

"A lot of our kids are following the election as if it's the World Series," said Susan Welson, social studies curriculum team leader at White Brook. "The kids are jazzed about it."

Results of the mock election were being assembled at the JFK Presidential Library and Museum in Boston Thursday.

At White Brook, 123 students voted for Sen. John McCain and 355 students voted for Sen. Barack Obama for president. Statewide, Obama got 48,765 votes to 21,063 for McCain.

"Many of the kids came in with limited knowledge" or skewed thinking about the election, said history teacher Mary Szalankiewicz. "I think they're leaving with a much better sense."

White Brook teachers and administrators credit that deeper understanding in part to "ROCK block," an interdisciplinary initiative that kicked off in September. Under ROCK block, which stands for Research, Organization, Community/Communication and Knowledge, students studied the election 45 minutes a day for 10 days. In addition to the election, topics studied this quarter are business letter writing, study skills and technology.

"It's multifaceted, hands-on learning with group and individual work and instruction that often is not part of the regular core curriculum," said Welson, who developed ROCK block with other educators this summer.

In Kate Bust's seventh-grade class, students studied and discussed McCain and Obama's views on health care, education, stem-cell research, the Iraq war, immigration and energy and environment.

"Obama says that even if you don't have health care, you have to make sure your child has health care," said Bust, while McCain's health care plans are to foster development of routes for safe,

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Students voted in droves at White Brook Middle School's mock election Wednesday. Here, eighth-grader Cameron Urbonas, 13, right, places his ballot in the ballot box while poll workers (aka students) Elizabeth Whitney, 14, and Frankie Weir, 13, look on.



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"There's merit in both of their plans," said Welson. "Both of them want to provide health insurance for the vast majority of people, they just go about it in a different way."

One student asked if McCain was really captured and tortured, or if he "just said that to make people feel bad for him." Bust answered the candidate would look worse if he lied, given that people fact-check what candidates say.

Welson praised the question. "A lot of people have concerns about misinformation," she said. "The job of an educated citizen is to delve in and see what the candidates are all about."

As the class ended, Wynter Niedzielski, 12, packed up her materials in the back of the classroom, and said she planned to vote for Obama at the mock election Wednesday.

"I think his views on the war, taxes and health care are really important ... it's important to end the war because there isn't much of a point in fighting anymore," Niedzielski said.

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