

Monday, April 30, 2007

As I watch the students of the East Northport Middle School file into their auditorium on a Friday afternoon, I think that I can be standing in virtually any school in my congressional district. The auditorium is cavernous and dimly lit; the students rustle impatiently as they wait for the program to begin; their teachers stand at every few rows, monitoring their behavior and quieting them with an occasional "Sssshhhh."

And then something happens. Something different.

They present me with an energy efficient light bulb and a tree they will plant in their garden. Then they show me a video they produced highlighting their "green" activities.

I stand on the stage, bathed in bright lights. They have asked me to speak about global warming and climate change. But instead of giving a speech, I decide to give these students a test.

"What is a fossil fuel?" I ask.

A multitude of hands sprout up across the auditorium.

"A fuel that has carbon," a student responds.

"Give me three examples of fossil fuels."

A teacher hands a portable microphone to someone else: "oil", he says. And in quick

succession, two others announce "gas" and "coal."

These kids know their stuff. "What are some energy sources that can replace fossil fuels?" I ask.

"Wind!"

"Water!"

"Solar!"

I tell them about my recent trip to India and how I learned about a remote Delta village which is powered by solar energy. I talk about how I was on a Stryker Combat Vehicle in Iraq that ferries our troops into dangerous areas at the rate of seven miles to the gallon. I ask them to imagine a world with cars that can be plugged in and charged overnight and school buildings with solar panels. I discuss my legislation to help lower school taxes by providing federal funds to retrofit schools with advanced energy technologies.

You can hear a pin drop in that auditorium.

After an hour, the principal interrupts with the news that there is only time for one more question. "Who wants to ask the last one?" I ask.

Seven hands go up.

I answer as many as I can. And when I finish, I assume there will be a stampede out of the auditorium. It is Friday afternoon, after all, time to go home for the weekend.

Many students leave. But at least twenty congregate near the stage.

"What steps can I take to be energy efficient?" asks a young girl.

"What do you think of wind power on the south shore?" asks another.

"How far can a plug-in hybrid drive?"

The students of the East Northport Middle School are as invested as any group I have ever addressed. I believe they realize that the issues we have discussed are not about me or my agenda, but about them. They are not about the world as it exists on a rainy Friday before a weekend in spring, but the world they will have to manage for the rest of their lives.

I leave the East Northport Middle School, inspired by the intellect, the curiosity and the passion I witnessed there. And I depart more confident about our future than when I left Washington the prior evening.