

Wednesday, October 11, 2006

After countless visits to schools across my district – including today's meeting with the Advanced Placement classes at Connetquot High School -- I instantly recognize familiar expressions.

A few students seem bored even before I have had the chance to bore them.

Some students welcome my presence. Not because they are interested in me, but because I am relieving them of whatever they were scheduled to actually learn that period. As if to say, "The teacher isn't going to teach. All we have to do is listen to this guy."

Some regard me with a healthy dose of skepticism -- that healthy high school skepticism that suggests that no blue-suited politician from Washington could really understand the challenges they face.

There are some who seem impressed. Who tell me they saw me on the news; or know someone I know. They are generally eager to ask questions -- as long as they are not the first one to ask.

And their questions are refreshingly informed.

Take this morning's visit to Connetquot, for example. There were questions about North Korea, and immigration; questions about alternative energies and drilling at ANWR. At one point, their teacher, Mr. Truppia and I encouraged them to "get personal" -- to ask about my schedule, or whether my wife ever gets mad at me for being away from home. They would have none of it. They wanted to stick to the issues.

A nice contrast to the slash-and-burn personal campaigns we're seeing these days.

Maybe those students' skepticism is well-founded. Maybe they can teach candidates for Congress a thing or two.

I enjoy all of the school visits but, I must confess, my favorite school visits are to elementary schools. Those kids have predictable expressions too...but completely unpredictable responses. For instance, last week I was speaking with a NASA astronaut who recently flew on the Space Shuttle. He was telling me about his visits to first grade classes. He talked about his voyage to space, how the G-Forces felt, what it was like to be in zero gravity, what earth looked like from orbit. When he was finished, he asked for questions. One girl raised her hand excitedly. He acknowledged her. She stood up and said, "My grandma and grandpa-- they live in Florida."

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And sat down.

Some day, she will ask a visiting politician about policies and issues. Our job is to give her a decent world and safe schools in which to grow up in so that she learns how to ask those questions.

Posted by: SI