

Middle schoolers learn, debate world issues at HillieMUN

By Mike LaBella

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HAVERHILL — Teams of middle school students from across the city took a two-day break from their classroom routine to solve world-wide problems affecting nations around the globe.

Students with a knack for debating took part in a two-day Model United Nations conference, called "HillieMUN" in the high school library Wednesday and Thursday. The program's fourth year is modeled after Haverhill High School's Model UN program, which since 2000 has been under the direction of international relations and history instructor Zachary Simmons.

For HillieMUN, Simmons got help from former students who were in the program and are now in college.

Students from Hunking, J.G. Whittier, Nettle and Consentino schools came together with their peers from St. Joseph School of All Saints Parish, Sacred Hearts School and Hill View Montessori Charter Public School to discuss world issues.



Rachel Comeau of the Hill View Montessori Charter Public School, who was representing the United Kingdom on a Security Council, presents her argument as part of the annual Middle School Model United Nation Conference held at Haverhill High School. | PAUL BILODEAU, Staff Photo

They formed committees similar to the United Nations including the United Nation Children's Fund (UNICEF), Security Council, ECOSOC the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and the Human Rights Council.

In preparation for the event, Simmons' international relations students visited middle school students after school to teach them how to research the countries they would represent at the conference and learn about world concerns such as the refugee crisis in the Middle East.

During a discussion of women's rights, Hunking sixth-grader Elyse Goncalves, who represented Israel, argued for funding for women's rights issues and asked students who represented the United States and Iceland if they would financially support the effort.

"This is my first year with the program and I'm learning a lot about this issue and other issues of concern to countries such as Israel and Saudi Arabia," Elyse said during a pause in the discussions.



Gabriela Vargas of the Nettle Middle School, who was representing Poland on a Human Right Council as part of the annual Middle School Model United Nation Conference held at Haverhill High School. | PAUL BILODEAU, Staff photo

Hill View seventh-grader Abigail Gomez, in her second year of HillieMUN represented the United Kingdom and sought funding to those seeking asylum.

"It's really a great opportunity as it opens my mind to thinking more logically about complex topics," Abigail said.

St. Joseph seventh grader Nathaniel Buteau, who represented Afghanistan, noted that Saudi Arabia isn't the only place where women's rights are an issue.

"We have the same issues in Afghanistan, Poland and Israel," Nathaniel said. "When I'm done middle school, I want to come to Haverhill High and be in the Model UN program there."

High school senior Troy Sliney, who served as chairman of the Human Rights Committee, said participants weren't allowed to inject their own personal opinions into the discussions. Instead they were to base arguments on the actual views of the countries they represented.

Other topics of debate included ways to combat Isis, protecting civilians during peace-keeping operations, helping children refugees survive, and promoting renewable and sustainable energy.

Senior Anna Rossi, who coordinated this Model UN session, said participating middle schoolers are getting a head start on learning how the United Nations works.

"In a couple of years they'll be here together, collaborating again," Anna said.

Ryan Dekeon, now a student at UMass Lowell, returned to assist the middle schoolers with "mission briefings."

"They are getting the same experience or better than when I started with the Model UN program as a sophomore," Ryan said.

Andrew Morfill, now a student at the College of the Holy Cross, was impressed with discussions that took place during the conference.

"No one forced these kids to be here and what they can do as sixth, seventh and eighth-graders would have intimidated me as a sophomore," Andrew said. "It takes a lot of confidence to get up and speak in front of a crowd of your peers."

Jessica Morris of Brookline, the Boston community engagement fellow for UNICEF USA, attended to not only learn about the program, but to conduct a question and answer session with students about the real world issue of providing education to children during crisis situations. She also spoke to them about how they can get involved with UNICEF initiatives.

"I was really blown away with the knowledge these kids have," Morris said. "What they are doing here is incredible. They are becoming global citizens and are thinking about the issues our next generation needs to solve."

To qualify for the program, middle school students had to write research papers about a country they wanted to represent.

"That's their ticket into the program," Simmons said.

The keynote speaker was Cody Kuker, a Haverhill High School English teacher and a former Model UN participant.

High School principal Beth Kitsos said the Model UN program is an example of the many outreach opportunities she has implemented to ensure high levels of learning and to give opportunity and access to all students.

"The Model UN Program with our middle schools, including Hillview Montessori and St. Joseph's and Sacred Hearts is part of a larger initiative to connect with the middle schools and provide the children of Haverhill an opportunity to become involved at HHS as well as spread the message that HHS provides our students a quality education as well as a variety of programs," she said.

Simmons said the Model UN program gives students the opportunity to polish their public speaking skills and learn the art of compromise.

"At the end of the school year they will all come together for a big Model UN conference in Newburyport," Simmons said.

Here are the schools that participated and some of countries they represented:

- Consentino - China, Chile and Jordan.
- Hunking - United Kingdom, China and Rwanda.
- Nettle – United States, Australia and Lithuania.
- J.G. Whittier – South Korea, Portugal and Chad.
- St. Joseph School of All Saints Parish – France, Nigeria and Guatemala.
- Sacred Hearts - Spain, Turkey and Canada.
- Hill View Montessori – Pakistan, Austria and Morocco.