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- Jobs
- Cars
- Real Estate
- Apartments
- Houses for Rent
- Foreclosure Sale
- Pets
- Grocery coupons
- Media Services
- Online Advertising
- Special Occasions
- Autos A - Z



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Back to School

Hurricane Guide

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Local News

- Newport News
- Hampton
- South of the James
- Williamsburg
- York / Poquoson
- Middle Peninsula
- News columnists
- Feedback from DP readers
- Whaddayaknow?
- Sports**
- Business**
- Entertainment**
- Opinion**
- Life**
- Traffic**
- Travel**
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- Military news
- Urban affairs
- Community news
- Special reports
- Hot Topics
- Virginia
- Nation / World
- Reader feedback
- Submit feedback

'Presidential candidates' spar over key issues at Menchville's mock debate

Eight students took on new roles to offer their classmates a glimpse of the process.

By **CATHY GRIMES** | 247-4758

September 25, 2008

NEWPORT NEWS - — Brittany Passmore was oblivious to the crowd and commotion around her. The strains of a Sousa march, the red, white and blue balloons festooning the Menchville High School auditorium, chattering classmates with patriotic pinwheels and campaign-themed hats, camera operators dollying around her; none of it gained even a glance from the 17-year-old senior.

Dressed in a black pantsuit and ballet flats, Passmore hunched over a fistful of note cards and honed the comments she would use as the voice of [Sen. John McCain](#) on education.

A few seats away, Jasmine Mazyck, also wearing a pantsuit and clutching a sheaf of notes, said she was nervous, but more than ready to spar with Passmore. Mazyck would speak as [Sen. Barack Obama](#) about education issues.

The two were among eight students who took on the presidential candidate's roles Wednesday morning in a debate played out in front of classmates and local elected officials, including members of the state Senate and House of Delegates. The event was one of two mock debates held at [Virginia](#) high schools and sponsored by CSPAN and Cox Communications.

Cox senior vice president Gary McCollom moderated the debate, shooting 12 questions at the teams focused on four key issues: the [Iraq War](#), education, health care and the economy. The students had eight weeks to study the candidates' positions, perusing campaign Web sites, journals, blogs and the news.

Those specializing in the economy and the war showed they had read overnight news accounts, referring to the proposed financial market bailout and its chilly reception in Congress and world leaders' remarks at the [United Nations](#) on Tuesday.

They had a tough audience. According to the debaters, most of the Menchville seniors interested in the presidential election already had chosen their candidates. Partisanship was evident in the small bursts of applause for each team's responses.

The debaters took on their roles with gusto.

They cast withering glances at their opponents as they derided proposals and views. The Obama team pushed pulling troops out of Iraq, repairing foreign relations, expanding health care and making Wall Street firms accountable for their failures. McCain's crew lauded the success of the troop surge in Iraq, questioned Obama's readiness to take on foreign powers and cautioned against heavy government regulation of either the financial markets or health care.

Passmore said she favored Obama as a candidate but gamely joined the McCain debate

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team and found she approved of many of his proposals. She spoke of a broken school system and the need for vouchers and financial aid based on need. Mazyck countered with Obama's push for early childhood education and an overhaul of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Austin Mayer and Chris Elder had the toughest jobs of the day, speaking for their candidates as the financial markets teetered and federal officials faced Congressional skepticism over a proposed \$700 billion bailout. Mayer, as Obama, said he wanted more oversight of the markets and a focus on average citizens. Elder said some regulation may be needed, "but we must not over regulate companies ... like we're looking over their shoulders as a parent or big brother."

Forty minutes after it had begun, the debate ended as Adam Hunter and Matthew Caplan took the last question on health care.

After the debate, the Menchville seniors marked ballots for their presidential choice. Obama won the election decisively, with 296 votes to McCain's 156.

The Teams

Team Obama:

Adam Hunter, health care

Ariel Brown, Iraq War

Jasmine Mazyck, education

Austin Mayer, the economy

Team McCain:

Brittany Passmore, education

John "Chris" Elder, the economy

Matthew Caplan, health care

Antuan Byalik, Iraq War

Viewing opportunities:

The students' debate will be available on Cox through its On-Demand options.

[Newport News](#) Channel 47 also will broadcast the debate.

No dates or times have yet been scheduled.