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denver & the west

## Government program gives students the floor

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The three-month civics lesson puts teens in the shoes and the seats of lawmakers - and, it's hoped, builds their self-esteem.

By Elizabeth Aguilera  
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As Alex Chandler watched the final stretch of campaigning in the race for Colorado governor, he had a bit of insight on how it's done.

"It was an exciting race, but it got a little negative toward the end," he said. "I think they both could have done better."

Chandler earned the right to be a little critical.

After all, the 17-year-old ran for the office of youth governor last month and won, elected by 140 teen peers in the Youth in Government Program.

In less than two weeks, those same high school students will take over the legislative floor, sit in chairs normally occupied by real lawmakers and conduct their own session.

The students will present bills, lobby for issues and produce a newspaper covering the three-day session.

Then Chandler, as governor, will sign or veto the bills that make it to his desk.

The three-month program, put on by the YMCA of Metropolitan Denver, will show students how government works and help spark the drive to get more of them involved in politics and civic affairs.

"The kids learn about leadership, they learn about how to public speak, they learn how to be a better citizen," said Kimberly Armitage, who runs the program. "And I hope it helps build their self-esteem and build them as an all-around better person."

A recent YMCA study of program alumni found that 96 percent are registered to vote, compared with 66 percent of the general population.

Also, 25 percent have volunteered for a political campaign, compared with 8 percent of others.

Students, Armitage said, are working on bills that address issues ranging from abortion and stem-cell research to the proper time and place for renditions of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Julie Jones, 16, a lobbyist in the program representing Planned Parenthood, is writing a bill to prohibit the state from making abortion illegal in the future.

She has to find a student legislator to present her bill and drum up support for it.

"I picked abortion because I've heard stories from my parents about girls they knew who wanted abortions and couldn't have them and ended up dying," said Jones, a junior at Ponderosa High School in Parker. "If it becomes illegal, it would be detrimental to society."

Jones has her sights set on working in politics as a real lobbyist.

Chandler, who worked as an intern for Gov.-elect Bill Ritter, plans to run for office one day.

"It's, like, one of the most real experiences to how government really works," said Chandler, a senior at Heritage High School in Littleton. "The greatest thing it gives students is it sparks an interest in politics. That is important because my generation has been labeled apathetic right now."

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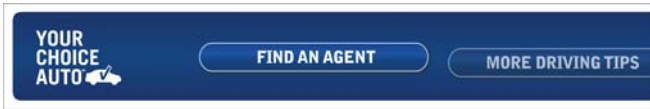
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