

# Legislators Teach and Learn

When legislators venture into classrooms, civics come alive.

By Jan Goehring



Arkansas Senator Kim Hendren expanded Back to School Week to two weeks and met with 4,000 students in every school in his district last September. Many students had never talked with a “real live” senator before.

Nuts or no nuts? That proved to be the sticking point as first and second graders debated what makes a perfect chocolate chip cookie. The stalemate continued until one student stood up and asked why not make half with nuts and half without?

“That was the compromise, and it passed almost unanimously,” says Arkansas Senator Kim Hendren. He led the kids through this classroom exercise to give them an idea of how legislators debate, negotiate and compromise on issues to find the best result.

This classroom visit was just one stop on a whirlwind tour of his six school districts.

Hendren, a teacher turned state legislator, decided to see as many kids as possible during the National Conference of State Legislatures-sponsored America’s Legisla-

tors Back to School Week in September. He ventured into classrooms every day for two weeks and met with more than 4,000 students to tell them how the legislative process works. Many students had never met a “real live” senator before.

“If we don’t get our young people involved in government,” says Hendren, “America will suffer in the long run.” That’s what motivates him.

He engaged high school students in a discussion about teacher pay. “Do you believe that teachers who do the same jobs and teach the same course should receive the same pay anywhere in the state?” Hendren asked. Not everyone agreed and even posed difficult questions. “What I learn in these classroom visits makes me a better legislator,” he says.

In addition to his classroom visits, Hendren invited a handful of students to accompany him to the Capitol for his leg-

islative meetings. He took them to meet the governor and other constitutional officers. It’s a four-hour drive from his district to Little Rock, so they had to leave at 4 in the morning.

## ALL ACROSS THE COUNTRY

More than 1,500 state legislators ventured into classrooms to share ideas, answer questions and help young people understand the legislative process during the Back to School Week event. They reached more than 250,000 students.

The majority of legislators could visit only one or two classrooms. But important connections were made with students.

In the top 10 states, participation was impressive. In eight states, better than half of the legislature got involved. The Louisiana and New Mexico Senate chambers had especially high turnouts—35 of 38 senators in Louisiana and 41 of 42 in New Mexico.

America’s Legislators Back to School Week, part of NCSL’s Trust for Representative Democracy, is held the third week of September every year and is organized in each state by legislative coordinators. Now entering its sixth year, the program continues to grow. Plans are already under way for this year’s event, Sept. 20 - 24. To get involved contact your state legislative coordinator listed online at [www.ncsl.org/public/trust/contacts\\_bsw.htm](http://www.ncsl.org/public/trust/contacts_bsw.htm) or call Jan Goehring at NCSL, (303) 364-7700. Mark your calendars now to be a part of the nation’s largest civics lesson.

## TOP TEN STATES FOR LEGISLATORS BACK TO SCHOOL WEEK

State	# of Legislators Participating	Percentage of Legislature
Arizona	67	75%
Louisiana	96	67%
Utah	67	65%
New Mexico	66	59%
Rhode Island	65	58%
Nebraska	27	55%
Maryland	95	51%
Alaska	30	50%
Kentucky	55	40%
South Dakota	40	38%

*Jan Goehring works with NCSL’s Trust for Representative Democracy, coordinating America’s Legislators Back to School Week.*