



Republican candidate Newt Gingrich, portrayed by Dante Bucci (right), a sophomore from Evesham, shakes the hands of Moorestown Friends Middle School students as they enter the school fieldhouse Tuesday morning to hear the candidates debate. Story, A4

DENNIS MC DONALD / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

## Students take on roles of GOP presidential candidates

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MOORESTOWN — For months, the candidates and political activists pushed their messages.

From serious to funny video spots to PowerPoint presentations to the old standbys of pens and buttons, the candidates and their supporters did them all.

"It's a lot of time thinking about the campaign — not wanting to make any mistakes," said Brett Barbin of Cinnaminson.

The 14-year-old freshman, who played the role of Mitt Romney, was among the six Republican candidates to run in the Moorestown Friends School's mock primary election Tuesday.

Since 1960, the school has held the event every four years. To mirror the real election, it held a Republican primary and asked voters to also weigh in on some ballot questions concerning nuclear power, a soda tax, and whether the United States

should join the International Criminal Court.

The process began at the start of the school year and culminated Tuesday with presentations to the entire school and town hall meetings moderated by Michael Smerconish, a nationally syndicated radio host whose show is broadcast weekdays on WPHT-AM (1210).

Throughout the process, the students researched the candidates, learned the issues, and tried to figure out how to best run an effective campaign, according to Judy van Tijn, an Upper School history teacher who coordinated the event.

"It's really a civics lesson," van Tijn said. "The purpose is to show the students that being involved in politics can be fun."

All the students said running as presidential candidates was an eye-opening experience.

"I've learned about the power of people's perception," said Doug Adair, 18, of Moorestown, who is running as Rick Perry. "It really is a matter of perception."

U.S. Rep. Jon Runyan came out to talk to the students about political campaigns.

While the former lineman for the Philadelphia Eagles may be used to being questioned, he told the students that politics can be tough to take at times.

"It does weigh on you," Runyan said of the barrage of attacks during a political campaign.

He told the students that even though he doesn't consider politics a non-contact sport, it's still easier than going head-to-head against a 300-pound football player.

Afterward, he said the mock election is a good way to educate students about the political system.

"I think the school is helping the students understand the process," Runyan said.

At least one of the candidates learned how fickle support can be on the campaign trail.

"You might be ahead, then someone brings in some Pez sticks," Barbin said of another candidate's giveaway in hopes of

swaying the younger students' votes.

Despite the limited exposure in recent weeks due to not participating in Iowa, the Jon Huntsman candidate, Joe Kiernan, 17, of Haddonfield, had a good feeling about the campaign moving east.

"I feel like New Hampshire is a better indicator," Kiernan said.

Earlier in the day, he said he believed he had begun to garner some support for "that guy from Utah."

That feeling clearly was right on track.

Huntsman, as represented by Kiernan, won the school's mock election.

In addition to Huntsman's victory, the school community voted in favor of a 1 percent tax on sugar-sweetened drinks, and against additional funding for nuclear power by the federal government as well as the United States joining the International Criminal Court.

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