

Education

For students from Oklahoma, a look under the fractured hood of democracy



Students from Lawton High School in Lawton, Okla., listen during a tour of National Statuary Hall before meeting with Sen. James M. Inhofe (R-Okla.), at his office on Feb. 7. (Astrid Riecken/For The Washington Post)

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[Education](#)

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So, the meeting with the senator did not go well.

There were handshakes and photos and smiles at the beginning. Not a bad start. A typical Washington reception. But then the students asked questions and they didn't like the answers — or nonanswers — they received from Sen. James M. Inhofe (R-Okla.), their state's senior senator.

Tate Michener, a high school senior, said he asked what Inhofe thought of the pay gap between men and women who performed the same jobs. The query didn't land well, apparently.

“He said he didn't agree with the premise of the question, so he wasn't going to answer it,” Michener said.

The students were not impressed.

“We're about to jump into the real world,” said Katavia West, a senior who is joining the Air Force after graduation. “You can't just not answer a question because we're students.”

The visitors to Inhofe's office were from Lawton High School in Lawton, Okla., a city of close to 100,000 with significant minority populations and deep ties to nearby Fort Sill, a large military base. The students, 19 of them, traveled 1,421 miles by plane to the nation's capital to spend last week studying government, engaging with teens from other states, debating issues and meeting with their representatives on Capitol Hill.

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And what a time to be in Washington for a look under the hood of democracy. The Capitol itself is ever-gleaming and magnificent, but its inhabitants are a loathed bunch. Not all, but still. Eighty percent of respondents to a Washington Post-University of Maryland poll in October said Congress was “basically dysfunctional.” And that was *before* it shut down the government twice in less than a month.

The news isn't rosy at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue, either. Based on approval ratings, President Trump is the least popular president one year into a term in the modern era.

Young people especially are put off by how Washington runs — or doesn't. Almost half of young Americans — 47 percent of those ages 18 to 30 — said they were not proud of the way democracy works in America, according to that same poll.

But the Oklahoma students were not here to bash Congress or the president or democracy.

[Washington Post-University of Maryland democracy poll, Sept. 27-Oct.5, 2017]

For some, the trip was their first time on a plane. For many, it was their first visit to Washington. For all, it was a thrilling opportunity to see their national government in action and their leaders up close — even if those leaders said things they didn't always agree with.

Disagreeing, after all, is what Washington does best. Earlier, the students were led on a tour by friendly interns from Inhofe's office who took them on the Senate subway and to National Statuary Hall where, for good luck, they rubbed the feet of a statue of Oklahoman Will Rogers, who once opined: “Congress is so strange; a man gets up to speak and says nothing, nobody listens, and then everybody disagrees.”

In a statement, Inhofe said he enjoyed meeting with the students and answering their questions.

“They were a sharp group and I hope they come back and visit me again,” he said. “I encourage all student groups to stay engaged by visiting or contacting their elected representatives, learning policy issues and engaging with people from different views or perspectives.”

The Lawton high schoolers were taking part in a program created by the Close Up Foundation, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that has been arranging Washington insider experiences for students interested in politics and government since 1971. About 850,000 students have taken part over the decades, including nine who are members of Congress and many others who work on the Hill or in government.

The week in Washington includes trips to Arlington Cemetery, tours of the Library of Congress and the Mall, and meetings with diplomats. The students share hotel rooms (and points of view) with teens from throughout the country. Last week’s participants included students from Alabama, California, Florida and Michigan. The program costs on average \$1,800, including airfare, meals and lodging. About 22 percent of students receive financial assistance.

The goal, says Close Up chief executive Tim Davis, is to experience Washington in a way that gives students a sense of how much they can contribute by taking part in the system and introduces them to other students who might be from different backgrounds but share an interest in politics.

“We want them to walk away knowing that this is not brain surgery and that they should go back and get involved and do something,” said Davis, who was a participant in Close Up in its first year. “This has the potential to be transformative for young people.”

Phillip Shell, 18, a senior at Lawton, is one of those young people who feels transformed by Close Up. This is the second year he has made the trip to Washington. Shell plans to attend Oklahoma State University, major in mechanical engineering and, one day, land a job with a major defense contractor. He considers himself a conservative Republican but thinks he has become a bit more moderate. He's willing to listen to others and consider their viewpoints, something he doesn't see much of on the national political scene.

"It's almost childish in a way how politicians argue," he said. "There's a bit too much drama in Washington."

But that dim view of American politics hasn't scared Shell away entirely. He says friends have told him he would make a good president. And although he initially shied away from thinking of a career in elected office, he now wonders if it might be in his future.

"What I've learned is that being a politician isn't something you're born with," he said. "You can learn to be a politician."

[With state budget in crisis, many Oklahoma schools hold classes four days a week]

For many of the Lawton students visiting Washington, education is the biggest issue. Oklahoma ranks near the bottom of states when it comes to funding for students and teachers, and dozens of school districts have gone to four-day weeks to cut costs.

"We have such poor resources, but our teachers do the best with what they have," said Grace Hibberts, a senior, during a lunch break in the House cafeteria. "Some of our government books are so old, they don't even have Obama in them. Some of our science books still say Pluto is a planet."

The students praised their teachers for their commitment, particularly their AP history teacher, Dink Barrett, who accompanied them. But they worried

about how their fellow students across the state are suffering, and even though most funding for education is local, they wanted their leaders in Washington to know it's a big deal for them.

Later that day, the students raised their concerns about education in a meeting with Rep. Tom Cole (R-Okla.), their representative in the House. They wanted to know if he considered their concerns about education as important as concerns raised by adults.

Cole told the students that people like him are there to help to advance their ideas and make the country a better nation for them, said West.

“He was very nice and answered all of our questions,” student Julianna Ramos added.

So, the meeting with the congressman went well.