



THE NCSL BLOG (www.ncsl.org/blog)

SELFIES AND AUTOGRAPHS: TALKING DEMOCRACY WITH FIFTH GRADERS

By Angela Andrews, September 30, 2016

This school year, as he's done for the past 14 years, Senator Jimmy Higdon (Kentucky) will visit 25 elementary schools and talk to fifth graders in his district using the framework and materials from [NCSL's Legislators Back to School program](#).

Higdon discusses representative democracy, the legislative process and the importance of voting. In the classroom, Higdon explains representative democracy by comparing it to a topic all Kentuckians can agree on—basketball. In Kentucky, you're either a University of Kentucky fan or a University of Louisville fan and at any given time, you might find yourself in the majority, or perhaps the minority. In a representative democracy, the majority always rules, but the rights of the minority are protected.

Higdon encourages his fifth graders to participate in the legislative process by communicating with their elected officials. To illustrate, Higdon tells students a story about a bill the Kentucky legislature considered a few years ago that required drivers of four wheelers under the age of 16 to wear a helmet. Higdon opposed the bill until he received 100 letters from fifth graders supporting a bill, including one letter from a fifth grader whose brother was killed in a four wheeling accident. Higdon changed his mind and voted for the bill, which ultimately passed the legislature.

In the 14 years since Higdon started visiting classrooms, he's become a minor celebrity in the communities he represents. Kids will recognize him at parades, ask for his autograph, yell "Hey Jimmy," and take a selfie with him. As he says, "kids think I'm important and most have never met an elected official." For Higdon, the best part of visiting schools and talking about representative democracy is getting to know the people he represents and getting recognized on Main Street—by a fifth grader.

Angela Andrews coordinates America's Legislators Back to School program and always likes to hear stories from legislators (and others) talking about representative democracy, the legislative process or participating in civics education efforts.

[Contact Angela.](#)

About NCSL's Legislator's Back to School Program

The America's Legislators Back to School Program is an annual nationwide event that "kicks off" the third week of September and runs through the school year. NCSL makes available, free of charge, [publications](#) and [videos](#) for high school, middle/junior high school and elementary school students to be used by state legislators visiting classrooms in conjunction with the program. For more information, or to request copies of materials, contact Angela Andrews at atbtp@ncsl.org.