

## Local Community Schools Planning Special Events, Enriching Curriculum for Debate

Contributed by Staff Report  
07/03/2008

OXFORD, Miss. - While the University of Mississippi busily prepares to host the first presidential debate of the 2008 campaign, local public schools also are planning to capitalize on the excitement generated by the event.

Picture a parade of adorable kindergarten kids dressed up as past presidents, or high school art students dissecting a political cartoon from the Kennedy-Nixon race.

The two local school systems, Lafayette County Schools with 2,378 students and the Oxford School District with 3,400 students, are using every opportunity to incorporate the Sept. 26 debate in their curriculum this fall. From history and government classes to music, math, science and art, school officials say every grade level from kindergarten through high school will be involved.

Lafayette County Superintendent Michael Foster called the debate a once-in-a-lifetime learning opportunity.

"History is being made right here in our community," Foster said. "We want our students to have a better understanding of the democratic system, how every vote is important, and how the issues raised in this debate are important to every citizen."

{flv}OxEleDebate{/flv}

Watch video of Oxford Elementary students mock voter registration.

Lafayette elementary school students will participate in everything from patriotic parades and "A Walk Through the White House" to a demonstration of how to use a voting machine.

Lafayette fourth-grade teacher Tammy Moore said the White House tour involves decorating each classroom to resemble a room in the president's home and decorating the hallways to display a fact about 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.

"We want to show our students how the president is elected, how important the office of president is and how the president's decisions affect their lives," Moore said.

Meanwhile, fifth-graders are to research and present a paper profiling each of the nation's 43 presidents.

In the week leading up to the debate, Lafayette middle school and high school students will hear from guest speakers U.S. Sen. Roger Wicker and Democrat senatorial candidate and former Mississippi Gov. Ronnie Musgrove, Sen. Gray Tollison of Oxford and Circuit Court Clerk Mary Alice Busby.

Across town, the Oxford schools also plan a full slate of activities in the fall.

"By developing these special learning opportunities, we hope to create a sense of involvement in our students that goes well beyond the walls of the classroom," said Oxford Schools Superintendent Jerry Webb. "We know it is unlikely they will get to see the debate, but this is a way for them to participate in the process and become more civic minded."

Kindergarteners at Bramlett Elementary are to dress as presidents and their first ladies and march in a Parade of Presidents on Sept. 24. Third-grade students at Oxford Elementary are to create a timeline of the events leading up to the presidential election from the primaries through the national conventions to the election and the inauguration.

Oxford Middle School teachers plan to have their students examine the evolution of political advertising in every election since 1952. They also will conduct a mock election reflecting the campaign platforms of the two candidates who will face off in the debate at Ole Miss.

"We asked our teachers to look at election issues with practical

implications," said Brian Harvey, personnel director for the Oxford school system, who until recently was principal at OMS. "It was suggested that our students examine the boundary between propaganda and information in political advertising. We believe it will help them become better citizens."

Among the high school programs, including music and drama, Oxford High art students are to analyze the messages behind political cartoons, campaign buttons and bumper stickers. During the week of the debate, classes are to focus on domestic issues the candidates are to debate such as global warming, the mortgage crisis and the economy.

UM School of Education Dean Tom Burnham praised the efforts of the two school districts for incorporating the debate into their classes.

"Hosting a major national event like a presidential debate is something the entire community can take great pride in," Burnham said. "The efforts by the Oxford and Lafayette public schools demonstrate why they are among the finest schools in the state."

Leaders from both of the school districts invite school teachers and administrators from around the state to contact them to discuss details about debate-related activities. Betty Duke, with the Lafayette School District, can be reached at 662-234-3271; Whitney Byars, who serves on the Oxford School District Board, is available at 662-513-4886.

Lafayette Middle School has earned an exemplary rating from the state for the last 10 years and Lafayette High School has been named a superior performing school. Oxford Middle and High School each earned a superior performance rating from the State Department of Education.

The university was selected by the national Commission on Presidential Debates from among 19 sites to host the first presidential debate. The event is to be broadcast live from the Ford Center for the Performing Arts and covered by an estimated 3,000 journalists from throughout the world.

UM has planned numerous educational programs in conjunction with the event, including political science symposia, economic lectures, engineering seminars and an honors course on public policy, as well as a major voter registration drive.

For more debate-related news, go to <http://debate.olemiss.edu>.