



ST. LEO SCHOOL students returned to the Junior Kentucky Youth Assembly earlier this month. Pictured, from left, are teacher-advisor Nicole Blandford, Sara Sandman, Olivia Ramsey, Elaine Murner, Dalton Phillips, Sam Smith, Chloe Hunt, teacher-advisor Helena DiBiasie and Ashley Kolaya, regional director of the Kentucky YMCA Youth Association. (Photo by Bob Vlach)

## Students learn about being leaders at Youth Assembly

BY BOB VLACH  
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Six middle school students from St. Leo debated and presented bills at this year's Junior Kentucky Youth Assembly (KYA) on Dec. 6, 7 and 8. The three-day conference sponsored by the Kentucky YMCA Youth Association offers hands-on experiences to students from across the commonwealth.

"They go to the Capitol," said YMCA regional director Ashley Kolaya, "where the

actual state senators and representatives work and debate. And they get to experience that firsthand."

St. Leo teacher-advisor Helena DiBiasie said students also gain insight into how they can make the community better through their actions.

"They become more confident in their speaking abilities – not just at the conference, but when they're at school," said teacher-advisor Nicole Blandford. "These are the kids we

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see that are repeatedly taking a lead role ... They're not afraid to voice their opinion ... They become more confident in themselves as leaders. Even though they are just middle school students, they are *not just middle school students.*"

Chloe Hunt earned an Outstanding Speaker Award at this year's KYA Conference. She embraced her opportunities to debate bills in the chambers of the state Capitol, and was recognized for her efforts by teacher-advisors from across Kentucky.

"It's not necessarily how much you get called on (to speak)," said Chloe, "it's what you say when you're up there and how well you've prepared for it."

She liked explaining her reasons for supporting or opposing a bill, but was also surprised she received an Outstanding Speaker Award given the hundreds of other middle school students who spoke during the KYA Conference.

Sixth-graders Dalton Phillips and Sam Smith received the Outstanding Premiere Bill award for their presentation of a bill requiring a foreign language class beginning in kindergarten and continuing through high school.

"At an earlier age," said Dalton, "it's easier for a kid to memorize and learn a foreign language." He said knowing another language also offers advantages in the job market.

"Every (St. Leo) student had to come up with several ideas of bills, and then they voted on their two favorite bills," said Blandford.

Olivia Ramsey suggested St. Leo present a bill on requiring a foreign language. She and two other St. Leo students, Elaine Murner and Sara Sandman, also participated at last year's KYA Conference.

Returning to the conference for a second year gave them broader insight into the workings of state government. They were also given opportunities to debate bills with students from across Kentucky, which Sara said gave her a better understanding of the many dif-

ferent opinions out there.

"It was a lot of fun," said Elaine.

Two students each from the sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade represented St. Leo at this year's KYA Conference.

St. Leo students will represent Uganda at this year's 2010 Junior Kentucky United Nations Assembly, Feb. 28 to March 2. Students involved with KUNA, also sponsored by the YMCA, will participate in the World Hunger Service Project.

"It's about looking not only inward but outward at our community, our state and then globally beyond that," said Blandford.