

## Boys State takes over Florida Legislature

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(Photo: Alvin McBean/Democrat)

They met in the House of Representatives chambers Thursday morning to debate stricter gun laws and requiring CPR classes for anyone who wants a drivers license.

Sounds radical? It wasn't your usual gathering of state legislators. Rather, a group of about 525 high school students filled in for representatives as part of the 73rd session of The Florida American Legion Boys State.

Dressed in burgundy polo shirts and khaki pants, the lively group of rising high school seniors argued passionately on a variety of topics.

"The process of going up and debating your bill is a unique one," said Brandon Pearson from Oasis High School in Cape Coral. "This is something I could see myself doing as a career someday, so this mock trial gives me a real picture of how the actual House and Senate will operate."

Boys State is a one-week leadership program in which qualified male students in their junior year become part of the operation of local, county, and state government.

The idea of the program is to teach participants the rights, privileges and responsibilities of franchised citizens. Over the course of the week, delegates participate in a series of three classes covering Florida history, legislative procedures and judicial law. During that time, a city and county government, full legislative branch and cabinet officers are elected.



Members of the Boys State Leadership program listen in as Florida Supreme Court Chief Justice Jorge Labarga shares insight about his profession. (Photo: Alvin McBean/Democrat)

The legislation that created the most stir during the session was a bill to tighten gun laws. The bill suggested that a background check is conducted on owners every six months, along with psychological background checks and two personal references in order to buy a firearm in Florida.

Proponents argued that adding a stricter gun law ultimately would reduce the number of mass shootings. The opposition argued the bill would have a negative financial impact.

After hearing arguments from both sides, the group was unable to reach an agreement and the bill was tabled for later consideration.

Pearson, the author of the bill, found the experience educational. The seriousness of the issue hit home.

“With the recent event that has happened in Orlando as well as all across the country, I think gun control needs to really be addressed,” said Pearson. “When looking at the Orlando shooting, he used a legally-purchased gun but was on an FBI watch. If that doesn’t concern anybody I don’t what will.”

While Pearson was moved by the substance of the debate, other participants relished the process of debate and public speaking. Paxton Rhoads of Plant High School in Tampa, who was elected governor, had trouble speaking to a crowd prior to the session but has learned to overcome it through the various training.

“I’ve learned a lot of leadership skills like public speaking, said Rhoads. “Before this, I was always nervous about getting in front of a big crowd and speaking to them, now it seems to just roll off the tongue.”



Florida Supreme Court Chief Justice Jorge Labarga shares insight about his profession with members of the Boys State Leadership program. (Photo: Alvin McBean/Democrat)

Director Frank Sardinha III, a former Boy State participant, likes the diversity of the group and sees the participants as future leaders in Florida.

“This is not a program where you apply and pay your way. It is done on merit,” said Sardinha. “We are as diverse as our state is with students from all social and economic backgrounds. We try to instill in them an appreciation for the way government and politicking work.”