

# In a different classroom

Page program teaches the teacher and the student

By RUTH DUNN

He is a teacher, the Capitol is his classroom, and every week a new group of high school juniors comes from all over Minnesota to be Steve Alger's students.

"It's fantastic. I love this job," said Alger, who for the past four years has guided students through the House high school page program, now in its 30th year.

"These kids are the cream of the crop and eager to learn," said Alger, a retired social studies teacher and dean of students from Kenyon. "This is a teacher's dream come true."

Students in the program come to St. Paul to get an insider's view of state government in action — way beyond what students typically experience on field trips to the Capitol.

There may be as few as eight or as many as 12 students in the weeklong program. The groups are set up as a mix of girls and boys from urban and rural areas of the state. They are slightly nervous when they arrive on Monday to start the page program, but by Friday they're reluctant to leave. Some groups develop tight bonds, keep in touch through e-mail and meet again for reunions, said Alger.

Abigail Joynes of Golden Valley applied for the program based on a friend's recommendation that it was a fun experience. She especially enjoyed learning about the history of the Capitol and gaining a deeper understanding of the process of passing bills. "I also honed my debating skills," said Joynes.

While in St. Paul, the high school pages follow a jam-packed schedule. They attend committees and work as pages on the House floor. They learn about the media and lobbyists and meet with their representatives, the secretary of state and representatives of the attorney general's office. Students always want to meet the governor, whoever is in the office.

"By the time they leave, they have a good idea of most of what goes on here," said Alger.

A highlight of the week is the mock committee activity, which always gets high ratings in a feedback survey students take at the end of the week, according to Jake Jewell, second assistant sergeant-at-arms. It's a hands-on learning experience with students researching bills then meeting as a committee to discuss them and offer amendments.

"This type of hands-on experience is vital to understanding how government works," said Jewell, who handles scheduling and other administrative details for the program.

Another highlight is the opportunity students have to talk with House Speaker Steve Sviggum (R-Kenyon) about current issues.

"The more questions they ask, the more they're going to learn," said Alger, who encourages students to ask lots of questions. He also urges students to respectfully challenge the ideas and opinions expressed by people they meet during the week. "We have great discussions," he said.



Steve Alger, the High School Page Program coordinator, points out the House Majority Leader's desk while speaking to a group of pages on Monday, May 9.

## You Should Know

Students can apply in the fall for the high school page program. For more information, go to: <http://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/edprog/over2p.htm>

Every week is unique with a new group of students, and a different array of issues bubbling around the Capitol, and that's what Alger likes most about the job.

He is awed by the depth of knowledge and understanding of issues that students in the program have. "I'm not worried about future leadership, the future is in good hands," he adds.

Students can apply in the fall for the program. For more information, go to <http://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/edprog/over2p.htm>. Participants are reimbursed for the cost of their hotel room and receive a \$50 stipend for food.

## Retirement job

When he retired four years ago, Alger planned to fill his days with golfing but somebody had other plans for him. "Why don't you come work at the Capitol," suggested Sviggum, whose children had Alger as a teacher and coach.

"I'm not the couch potato-type. I like to be involved and active," he admits.

"He's an absolute natural for what he's doing now, being an educator and a people person," said Sviggum.

Travel is also a passion. When the session is over, Alger will guide a group to Italy and Greece. He's taken groups of students and adults to many places, including Russia, China and England. Upcoming trips may be to the Amazon River, Australia and Costa Rica.

Alger's wife, Karen, will join him on trips when she retires from teaching. The couple has two grown children and two grandkids. Being a grandfather is a new role for him and he loves it.