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Candidates schooled on what is going on in the classroom

Three West Contra Costa board hopefuls sit in on classes to interact with students and parents

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Teacher Wendy Gonzalez's third-graders jumped around excitedly Thursday as their special guests — West Contra Costa Unified School District board candidates — leaned over one at a time to stick planets they each held into the proper places in a Styrofoam solar system.

Clearly too big for the miniature-sized student chairs they sat in at Richmond's Ford Elementary School, candidates Antonio Medrano, Marguerite Meade and Audrey Miles patiently listened and actively participated as a lesson on the solar system was taught three different ways.

"The third one was the best because it was more hands-on and interactive," Miles said after the candidates were asked to comment on each approach.

Medrano, Meade and Miles came to Ford as part of an "After-School Special" workshop to interact with students and parents and learn about "what's really going on" inside the classroom.

All eight board candidates were invited. Charles Ramsey, Madeline Kronenberg, Robert Brower, Anton Jungherr and Martin Gottlieb did not attend.

Parents and students also participated in the workshop, which featured a bilingual candidate question-and-answer session and a student Aztec dance performance complete with drum beats and elaborate costumes.

The event was sponsored by the Bay Area-based Justice Matters, a nonprofit group that advocates for racial equality in schools.

"The candidates are going to be making decisions about our kids, so they need to know what's really going on in the classroom," Gonzalez said.

The candidates were asked to share their favorite experiences in elementary school and how, as board members, they would address implementing lesson plans with less focus on tests and more focus on helping all students learn.

"I wish all of the current board members would have been there," Meade said. "They could have benefited."

"I learned a lot," Medrano said with a laugh. "I learned that Pluto isn't one of the planets anymore."

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