

Danville Express

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An event on Thursday meant mostly to listen to teens from three of the four San Ramon Valley high schools turned into more of a question and answer session for Congressman Jerry McNerney (D-Pleasanton).

Students asked about everything from the federal deficit to school funding, although one area, gay marriage, seemed to draw the most questions and comments.

Of the half-dozen or so students who asked or commented on the hot-button issue, only one said he believed marriage is meant for between a man and a woman. Others noted that atheists can marry, and one student noted that gay marriage is sanctioned in Buddhism, although disallowed by law.

The hour-long talk also covered something the students have a particularly vested interest in: education. That included questions about the No Child Left Behind Act, teacher tenure, and federal funding for schools.

One student mentioned the nationwide dropout rate of 25 percent.

"There's a culture in some areas of the country ... it's not too cool to be smart," McNerney responded. "There's a cultural shift we need."

McNerney also warned the group that there's a growing, well-educated workforce worldwide that wants the luxuries Americans have.

"They want those things and they look at it as a zero-sum game," he said. "They want to take it away by being better students. ... It's up to you guys.

"My challenge is do it -- get good at something," he continued.

Asked about taxes, the congressman said a balance has to be struck when it comes to balancing the budget and the country's \$14 trillion deficit. He said some accommodation needs to be made for small businesses to keep jobs in the U.S.

The students also asked about the national health care measure passed in 2010; McNerney explained that it's being phased in over four years.

Still, he said, the U.S. has the highest per-capita cost of any country in the world.

McNerney's plan is to consider the students' input, then choose one of their topics for a discussion on the floor of the House of Representatives.