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'Get your education,' senator says

By Jeff Matthews 71
jmatthews@thetowntalk.com
(318) 487-6380

It was appropriate that Tioga High was among the first schools state **Sen. Bob Kostelka** visited as part of America's Legislators Back to School Program, since the high school practices an idea the senator considers key to Louisiana education.

The Legislators Back to School Program is designed for elected officials to meet with some of their younger constituents and impart a greater understanding of how government works.

Kostelka, R-Monroe, enjoys participating because it gives him a chance to promote technical skills training in high schools. Tioga offers programs in areas such as welding and nursing.

"If I can leave you with anything, it's get your education," Kostelka told the 70 or so civics students at Tioga on Friday.

"If you don't want to go to college, that's OK. But get some training so you can support yourself and your family. So you can make a life for yourself."

Kostelka, who is running for re-election in Senate District 35, sponsored the Senate version of



Tioga High School Principal Kim Bennett speaks to State Sen. Bob Kostelka, R-Monroe, as they tour the school's auto repair class on Friday. Kostelka was at the school to talk with students in civics classes as part of the Legislators Back To School program. TIA OWENS-POWERS/TOWENS@THETOWNTALK.COM

2009 legislation that created a "career track" high school diploma, including more vocational and technical courses, for students who do not intend to pursue a four-year college degree.

He said his interest in improving vocational and technical opportunities came from his experience as a judge, where "I got so tired of seeing young people go to jail. Mainly, when

you checked them, the correlation was most of them were dropouts.

"Kids who for some reason aren't going to college or dropping out, they need some training so they can get a job," Kostelka said.

"If 'Beowulf' doesn't excite them, maybe small-engine repair or horticulture will. Mainly, you're looking for something that interests them, that's rel-

evant to them. ... We need the work force. You talk to employers, and they'll tell you they need people with technical training. This program is another way to handle that message."

"I am a strong believer in that," said Tioga Principal Kim Bennett. "At Tioga High School, that's one of our strengths, so we were a perfect one for his platform."

Kostelka, whose Senate district now covers Tioga and other parts of north Rapides Parish, spoke to the students about several other topics Friday, including some basic workings of the Legislature, election redistricting and the TOPS education program.

"It has been said by many men smarter than me, 'an unenlightened electorate is the surest way to doom a democracy or a republic,'" Kostelka said. "That's why this civics class is so important. It's important to know how your government works."

"I thought it was wonderful," Bennett said. "For some of these kids, this is the only opportunity they will get to speak to a senator face to face."