



2025 Students Inside Albany

The 2025 Students Inside Albany (SIA) Conference was held from May 18–21, with 42 students in attendance, representing 40 local Leagues, MAL Units, and Inter-League Organizations (ILOs). Participants came from all corners of New York State, from Long Island to Buffalo and from Plattsburgh to Binghamton, ranging from high school sophomores to seniors. The students brought with them great energy and enthusiasm to learn about New York State government and civic engagement.

The program began on Sunday evening with a presentation by Erica Smitka, Executive Director of the League of Women Voters of New York State (LWVNY). She provided a comprehensive overview of the structure and functions of New York State government, highlighting the roles of each branch and explaining the differences between state, local, and federal government.

On Monday morning, students toured the New York State Capitol, where they learned about the history of the building, including the stories behind the engraved stone faces and the hidden fireplaces in the Senate Chambers.

That afternoon, back at the hotel, students participated in a session with Assemblymembers John McDonald III and Rebecca Kassay. The legislators shared insights on effective lobbying, including how to approach lawmakers, build persuasive arguments, and engage in productive dialogue. Students were highly engaged, asking thoughtful questions. Both Assemblymembers looked forward to having the students shadow them later that day.

Before returning to the Capitol, students toured the Chambers of the New York State Court of Appeals, where they learned about the state's judicial system. They were invited to explore the courtroom and took photos posing as future judges and attorneys. Afterward, students visited the Legislative Office Building, located up the hill from the Capitol, and met with their assigned Assemblymembers. The students were introduced on the floor of the Assembly Chamber and had the opportunity to sit alongside their legislator during the session.

In the evening, students heard from Dan Clark of the *Times Union* and Alexander Gault of the *Watertown Daily Times* and *Johnson Newspaper Corp.* The journalists discussed their coverage of state politics, how they choose stories, the demands of real-time reporting for social media, and their personal career paths. The session offered students an inside look into political journalism and the media's role in democracy.

On Tuesday, the focus shifted to advocacy. Clyanna Lightbourn, LWVNY Campaign Director, led a session on political activism, discussing her work on initiatives such as the *Democracy During Detention Act*. She explained the League's approach to lobbying, coalition-building, and engaging with lawmakers.

Kayla Mumtaz, Legislative Affairs and Community Engagement Specialist for the Alliance for Quality Education (AQE), followed with a presentation on AQE's advocacy methods and community outreach strategies. Her perspective allowed students to compare different approaches to advocacy used by non-profit organizations.

Later that day, students shadowed their State Senators. Due to ongoing COVID-era protocols, access to the Senate Chamber floor was limited. However, all students observed the session from the Gallery, and a few were given brief access to the floor for a closer look and photos. The group then heard from SIA alumna Leah Goldman, who credited the program as a pivotal moment in her life. She shared how her SIA experience led her to her current role as Director of Intergovernmental Affairs for the NYS Senate Majority.

That evening, Albany Common Councilmember Meghan Keegan and Assemblymember Gabriella Romero spoke to the students about what it takes to run for public office. They covered key topics such as collecting petition signatures, fundraising, participating in public forums, constituent engagement, and working collaboratively with colleagues. The students were eager to learn about the political process and were encouraged to consider running for office, particularly at the local level.

On Wednesday morning, Erica Smitka led a debrief session where students reflected on what they had observed in both the Assembly and Senate Chambers. Much of the conversation focused on legislative procedures, voting processes, and the role of leadership in each chamber. When asked whether their views on government had changed, all students indicated a stronger interest in civic education and public policy.

The final educational session focused on voting in New York State. Students learned how to register and vote, including options for those heading to college in the fall. Those who were eligible and had not yet registered were invited to complete a voter registration form.

To formally conclude the program, each student was individually recognized and presented with a certificate of participation. Several students shared that they had been offered summer internships in legislators' offices, a testament to their engagement and the value of the program.

In addition to the educational programming, students enjoyed recreational activities including a night of bowling and an evening stroll at the Empire State Plaza, offering opportunities to relax, bond, and reflect on their shared experience.

Some quotes from students' evaluations exemplify the impact of the program:

- "[My state government] feels more approachable. I liked how we learned to be effective and educated citizen lobbyist."
- "I had no idea what the government was like before this. It made me want to help in my community and the state."
- "I [now] know my voice matters and my representatives want to hear my concerns"
- "I think I would run for assemblymember."
- "I definitely was surprised at how much the state dictates in our daily lives."

- “It pushed me out my comfort zone and showed me how to represent important issues I care about.”

Thanks to our volunteer chaperones: Mary Rosch (LWV of Albany), and Ann Leiter (LWV of Central Nassau). Thank you to our sponsors: New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) and Stewart’s Shops. We couldn’t host this program without the tremendous work and support of our sponsors and our volunteers!



2025 Students Inside Albany Survey Results



