



The Judicial Branch's Civics Academy

An Important Collaboration between the Connecticut Judicial Branch and the Bar

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At its core, the success of any democracy is dependent upon the informed and effective participation of its citizenry. Civics education is intended to not only teach the importance of our governmental structure, but also the role and the opportunity for each citizen to engage in it. According to a poll released in October 2022 by iCivics and More Perfect, nearly 70 percent of likely voters agreed that civics education is more important now than it was five years ago. We couldn't agree more.

For just over a year, the Connecticut Judicial Branch and the Connecticut Bar Association (CBA) have collaborated to develop and present a civics program for upper-elementary school students. The Judicial Branch is pleased to report that as of today, the program has reached more than 1,000 students across the state, with additional schools regularly coming on board.

Discussions regarding what would become the Civics Academy began in 2022, as the Judicial Branch moved to broaden the

curriculum of educational resources it makes available to educators and students. The Branch engaged with Steve Armstrong, social studies consultant from the State Department of Education, and then-Connecticut Bar Association President Dan Horgan to identify existing resources and potential gaps in civics education. Through ongoing conversations with the Bar, it became clear that the CBA's Young Lawyers Section (YLS) had already discussed this question and had answered it with its *Lawyers in the Classroom* program.

Against the backdrop of a worldwide pandemic, the YLS remotely rolled out its program during the 2021-2022 school year, making available to elementary school students a pair of lawyers who presented the program. The work of the YLS was impressive and was the foundation upon which the bench and bar collaborated to build the Civics Academy.

In addition to the robust and interactive curriculum, what makes the Civics Academy unique is the judge-lawyer team



approach to teaching. Trained by educationalists beforehand, judges and attorneys pair up in teams of two. The current intended age group for this curriculum is grades 4 through 6. The judge-lawyer team delivers a 50-minute age-appropriate lesson plan specifically geared toward helping young students understand their role in a democratic society. The diversity of the judge-lawyer faculty works to connect with and hopefully inspire the children to someday pursue a career in the legal profession as an attorney or a judge.

The first section of the lesson plan is *Rules and Fairness*; the second, *Representative Democracy*; and the third, *Democracy and You*. Age-appropriate exercises and activities within those sections reinforce the curriculum content. Because the lesson plan is self-contained, classroom teachers do not need to prepare their students for a visit by Civics Academy faculty. The student-centered curriculum is fun, interactive, and structured in a way that avoids creating extra work for teachers.

The Civics Academy was officially launched in February 2023, and since then, both the feedback and the numbers are consistently impressive.

First, the Numbers as of the End of November 2023:

- ▶ The Academy had completed visits to 20 schools in 13 cities and towns: Andover, Bristol, Colebrook, Eastford, Goshen, Hampton, Hartford, Meriden, Norwalk, Southbury, Voluntown, Washington, and Wethersfield. In addition, visits were pending to schools in Bridgeport, Bristol, Groton, Hamden, and Hartford.
- ▶ Eighteen judges had completed visits, with some doing two, and 15 attorneys had completed visits, again with some doing two and one attorney doing three.
- ▶ The Academy had presented to roughly 1,000 students.

And Next, the Feedback:

- ▶ From a student: “[W]e are part of a democracy. We can help do something to change what is unfair. Even if we are kids, we still have that power. Other kids have done it, so can we. I think this part is important because we can take action when something isn’t right, we can make a difference.”
- ▶ From another student: “The most important thing I learned during the presentation was the value of fairness. I think that is important because if we treat everyone fairly, there will be no fighting, and everyone will be safe.”
- ▶ From an educator: “The fifth-grade teachers and students LOVED having the judges and attorneys.”
- ▶ From an attorney: “It was the best experience! How eager these young minds were to learn and what wonderful curriculum and teachers they have!”
- ▶ From a judge: “Please thank the students and teachers for welcoming us into their classrooms. The students were intelligent, engaged and engaging. The future of our nation is bright in the hands of these children.”

There has never been a more opportune time to undertake such an ambitious initiative. It is also our chance to impress upon the students that they have a vital role in our democracy—just like everyone else. Through the Civics Academy the students learn why this is important to them, their families, their community, their state, and their country.

For more information about the Civics Academy, please email Alison Chandler, Program Manager for Education and Outreach, at alison.chandler@jud.ct.gov. We look forward to hearing from you. ■

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