

WHY ESTABLISHING A CENTER FOR LAW AND CIVIC EDUCATION MATTERS

Mark A. Cunningham

President, Louisiana Center for Law and Civic Education

Civics education is no longer stressed in our nation's schools. It is up to the bar and the judiciary to reach out to students and teachers to ensure that new generations understand the role of the third branch of government.

With our school systems under financial stress and national testing standards focusing on English, mathematics, and science, civics is increasingly taking a back seat to other subjects in our public and private schools. If we want civics to remain or, in many cases, become a core subject in the curriculum of our elementary and secondary schools, lawyers and members of the judiciary will need to take up the mantle. These professionals are the natural constituents of civics education and have access to an existing infrastructure of organizations, such as bar associations and judicial conferences, through which they can promote the teaching of civics.

In Louisiana, members of the bar and judiciary have answered the call to promote the teaching of civics through a model partnership: the Louisiana Center for Law and Civic Education (LCLCE). Formally organized by the New Orleans Bar Association and Louisiana State Bar Association in 1992, LCLCE is a nonprofit organization, which coordinates, implements, and develops civics- and law-related education programs. LCLCE trains educators and assists in the delivery of these programs throughout the state of Louisiana. The lesson plans and programs are interactive, transforming instruction in civics and law-related education into a fun experience for both students and teachers. In a nutshell, LCLCE makes law and civic education come alive in the classroom. The programs implemented by LCLCE include:

Lawyers in the Classroom / Judges in the Classroom. This program matches volunteer professionals from both the bench and the bar with social studies classrooms throughout the state to enhance civics instruction. The volunteer



Students wore wigs they made of cotton balls for this Lawyers/Judges in the Classroom presentation, which culminated in a visit to the Louisiana State Capitol. Attorney Jessica Braun and Louisiana State Rep. Steve Carter were presenters.

professionals work with teachers to implement grade-specific lesson plans to teach students about the courts and the rule of law. The volunteer lawyers and judges also attend classes throughout the year and take an active role in the teaching process. Since its inception, the Lawyers in the Classroom/Judges in the Classroom Program has reached over 11,000 students.

Annual Summer Institute for Social Studies Educators. LCLCE also annually conducts a two-to-seven-day short course for social studies teachers from throughout the state. Participants receive training in interactive teaching strategies that enhance their existing curriculum and activities. Educators receive practical assistance, lesson plans, and in-depth instruction from a distinguished faculty, including members of the bench and bar. Graduates of this program often participate in other LCLCE programs and become committed LCLCE volunteers.

Order in the Court. This LCLCE workshop program provides teachers with instructional materials and lesson plans on the role of the judiciary and the way cases are processed and is taught by a faculty composed of Louisiana state and federal judges, administrative law judges, and hearing officers, who generously volunteer their time.

Law Signature Schools. In this program, LCLCE works with public and private high schools interested in establishing a dedicated track of study for students who want to pursue a career in the law. LCLCE helps these schools design and implement a pre-law curriculum, identifies volunteer lawyers and judges who are willing to serve as ongoing resources for the school, and seeks financial assistance for the school to build a moot court classroom. Schools who successfully implement a dedicated pre-law track of study are certified by LCLCE as a Law Signature School, a designation the schools use to promote themselves and recruit students.

Open Doors to Federal Courts. A partnership between LCLCE and the United States District Courts in Louisiana, this program affords high-school students in Louisiana an opportunity to participate in an all-day, interactive workshop about the structure and function of our federal courts. After a guided tour of the courthouse and informal meetings with attorneys, judges, clerks, and other courthouse professionals, the program culminates in a mock trial to provide students with a firsthand account how cases are tried in the federal courts and what roles attorneys, judges, and juries play in the federal court system.

We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution. LCLCE also operates as the state coordinator for this nationwide program, which is designed to promote a deeper understanding of the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights. LCLCE provides teachers with program resources, such as teacher's guides and lesson plans, and sponsors statewide competitions among schools in which teams participate in simulated congressional hearings.

Centers for Law and Civic Education matter because they ensure that a respect and understanding of the rule of law remains a priority in the education of our children.



Haynes Academy won the “We the People State Competition” and advanced to the National Competition in May 2012 (high-school level).

LCLCE promotes its programs and reaches out to educators through traditional and nontraditional channels. LCLCE publishes a quarterly newsletter, which reaches over 13,000 school superintendents, teachers, legislators, judges, and attorneys. LCLCE also is a common fixture at state and local educational conferences and in state and district education. More recently, LCLCE has started to promote itself through social media such as Facebook. Its central marketing strategy, however, has always been the strength of its programming.

Through its programming efforts, LCLCE has garnered the reputation among educators as the “go-to” organization for civics-related-education resources. These efforts also have led to real changes in the core curriculum of Louisiana schools and in the ability of LCLCE to affect future changes. In 2010, at the urging of the LCLCE, the Louisiana legislature passed legislation increasing the civics credit requirement for high-school graduation from a half-credit course to a full-credit course. LCLCE also has been granted a permanent seat on the state’s Commission on Civic Education in further recognition of its programming and received the 2011 Sandra Day O’Connor Award for the Advancement of Civics Education from the National Center for State Courts. On reviewing the programs implemented by the LCLCE, U.S. Supreme Court Justice (ret.) Sandra Day O’Connor wrote via letter that she was impressed. “With the development of the programs and its training of

educators, LCLCE, along with its volunteer professionals, have benefited numerous students throughout the state of Louisiana. This is exactly what I envisioned would happen throughout the country.”

In considering how to promote civics in your state, it is important to keep in mind that the LCLCE model is not unique to Louisiana. Centers for Law and Civic Education also exist in Alabama, New Jersey, Michigan, and in many other states. These organizations share a common mission. They also have shared a common path to success. To be effective, these organizations have learned that buy-in from the leaders of their legal community is paramount and that nothing is possible without the support of volunteer lawyers and judges. They also have learned that success comes from inclusion. The board of directors of LCLCE, for example, includes not only lawyers and judges, but also prominent educators and public officials without whom the LCLCE would have been unable to accomplish much of what it set out to do. Inclusion also is essential to fundraising, which is a constant challenge to the long-term stability of many centers. Finally, and perhaps most important, resources and strategic support are available through the National Center for State Courts and existing Centers for Law and Civic Education to anyone in the legal community considering the establishment of a center.

In sum, Centers for Law and Civic Education matter because they ensure that a respect and understanding of the rule of law remains a priority in the education of our children. The centers also represent a project that bar associations and judicial conferences can pursue knowing that a roadmap is available to them. We should be hopeful that, in the years to come, Justice O’Connor’s vision of centers in all 50 states will become a reality.

RESOURCES

iCivics. Online curriculum for civics education. www.icivics.org/About

National Center for State Courts (n.d.). "Law-Related Education Resource Guide."
www.ncsc.org/Topics/Court-Community/Law-Related-Education/Resource-Guide.aspx

— (n.d.). "Law Related Education State Links."
www.ncsc.org/Topics/Court-Community/Law-Related-Education/State-Links.aspx