

Joining Forces on Adult Civics Education

For decades, federal and state courts have engaged in educational outreach on parallel tracks, each system making the most of its limited resources to bring civics education to young people and their teachers. These programs for grade schoolers and high schoolers have been the bedrock of most court-originated civics education efforts, and with good reason: We are preparing the next generation to be informed and engaged adults — judges, jurors, lawyers, litigants, journalists, and civic-minded citizens.

But what about the parents and other adults involved with today's youth? In framing the audience for civics education, we must take care not to leave out key players in the generational transmission of democracy. After all, a child's first and formative exposure to the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors of civic life begins in homes, neighborhoods, and communities. Shouldn't the civics education community be in triage mode with Millennial parents and Baby Boomer grandparents and their peers? If adults lack knowledge or interest in civics, how can they model what it means to be a good citizen?

The Annenberg Public Policy Center's annual Civics Knowledge Survey is a barometer of civics literacy among adults that documents the dearth of their knowledge about government and how it works.¹ The results make clear the urgency of deploying measures that can inoculate adults against disinformation and deepen court literacy among the adult population.

Ultimately, adults and young people alike need a working knowledge of the same pillars of court literacy — rule of law, separation of powers, a fair and impartial judiciary, jury service, and the mechanics of state and fed-

If adults lack knowledge or interest in civics, how can they model what it means to be a good citizen?

eral court systems. The good news is that the core tenets of adult programs are already embedded in many court civics offerings designed for younger students and their teachers. The existing educational outreach frameworks in both state and federal courts already address key priorities. With minimal modifications, many of the existing programs and resources could be repurposed for adult audiences and even used for mixed audiences of students and adults.

For example, the federal courts' national Civil Discourse and Difficult Decisions initiative (see Page 34) has built-in discussion prompts that students can work through with the adults in their lives.² These prompts set up conversations about how to interact during heated discussions on controversial topics³ and create opportunity for intergenerational dialogue about common social situations that can have legal and long-term consequences for young people and their parents.⁴ Another model for joint adult-student civics programming started at The Judicial Learning Center⁵ at the Thomas F. Eagleton U.S. Courthouse in St. Louis, where robust programs for Scouts and Girl Scouts involve not only adult leaders but the entire family. The Center's programming for lifelong

learners also is a template for other courts.

In addition to slightly retooling the resources currently in use, some assets can be repurposed and reinvented to meet adults where they are — in the home and workplace, in civic and service organizations, in community colleges and adult education programs, in professional development and training programs, and in public spaces, including libraries, museums, and state fairs.

A Path for State and Federal Court Collaboration

Efforts to develop and strengthen adult civics education programs offer a unique opportunity for collaboration between federal and state courts. Both can bring to bear their robust civics education offerings developed for schools and work together to repurpose programs for adult audiences.

State and federal courts' joint projects in the adult education arena are not without precedent. Different models have been thriving in Colorado and Idaho for many years, and they lend themselves to replication and adaptation in other jurisdictions and settings. Our Courts Colorado, launched in 2007, is a joint effort of federal and state courts that brings judges and lawyers into communities throughout the state to teach topics relevant to adults⁶ (see Page 23). The Idaho Citizens' Law Academy, started in 2008, is another state and federal collaboration for adults in communities around the state.⁷

The following are examples of adult education offerings from the federal judiciary. I hope they will inspire new outreach and collaboration between state and federal courts.



Libraries. In the Second Circuit, the Eastern District of New York has been offering adult education programming through the public library system since 2016. Federal judges teach classes on the third branch, and some of the lectures are posted on the circuit's Justice for All: Courts and the Community website, which features videos for adults and students on the courts, the Constitution, and careers in the justice system.⁸ Libraries in all 50 states could be venues for state and federal court program for adults.

Museums. Federal judges in the Eastern District of Pennsylvania routinely participate in regularly scheduled in-person or virtual Judge Chats at the National Center for the Constitution in Philadelphia. This series of 30-minute, question-and-answer sessions reaches thousands of adults and young people every year.⁹ The Judge Chats prototype could be replicated at museums throughout the country.¹⁰

Community Colleges. Community colleges present multiple opportunities for state and federal courts to work together. In the federal judiciary, a district judge and a circuit judge created Civics Education: So You Think You

Know Your Government?, a 10-week course at the Community College of Philadelphia taught by federal judges.¹¹

Podcasts. The Rendell Center for Civics and Civic Engagement in Philadelphia¹² produces several judicially themed podcasts (see Page 39). Judges on Judging is a series of interviews exploring the role of judges and the importance of a fair and impartial judiciary,¹³ and the Grab the Gavel podcast is a collection of interviews with judges by a federal magistrate judge.¹⁴ Listeners hear about “the human side of judges, their diversity and backgrounds and common struggles.”¹⁵ The Bolch Judicial Institute offers Judgment Calls,¹⁶ a podcast series hosted by its director, David F. Levi (a former federal judge), featuring interviews with federal and state judges on their lives and careers. Podcasts are relatively easy and cheap to produce; federal and state judges in some jurisdictions may want to host a joint podcast.

These and other templates can inspire new adult education initiatives that could come out of federal and state court collaborations on a national scale. Such an effort would leave intact existing offerings to young people and teachers while evol-

ving a joint adult education enterprise. Communication and cooperation on adult education could open new ways of delivering mutually beneficial programs and resources drawn from existing content. A pilot state-federal court initiative could be national in scope and consistent in branding, but program prototypes could be adapted and modified in both systems by courts that choose to participate.

Channels of communication between federal and state court judges already are open, and information-sharing between the two systems is institutionalized. Communication is commonplace between state and federal benches on the community level, and many federal judges are former state judges or state-court practitioners. On the national level, the Committee on Federal-State Jurisdiction (a committee of the Judicial Conference of the United States) meets twice a year to bring together judges from both systems to share and solve problems and to collaborate on continuing legal education programs. The time is ripe to enter a new phase of civics education — together.

— **REBECCA FANNING** manages educational outreach for the federal courts.

¹ *About the Annenberg Public Policy Center*, ANNENBERG PUB. POL'Y CTR. (last visited Feb. 2, 2022), <https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/about/>; *Annenberg Civics Knowledge Survey*, ANNENBERG PUB. POL'Y CTR. (last visited Feb. 2, 2022), <https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/political-communication/civics-knowledge-survey/>.

² *Civil Discourse and Difficult Decisions*, U.S. CTS. (last visited Feb. 2, 2022), <https://www.uscourts.gov/educational-resources/educational-activities/civil-discourse-and-difficult-decisions>.

³ *Civility Self-Reflection Exercise*, U.S. CTS. (last visited Feb. 2, 2022), <https://www.uscourts.gov/about-federal-courts/educational-resources/educational-activities/civil-discourse-and-difficult>.

⁴ *Reality Check Quiz*, U.S. CTS. (last visited Feb. 2, 2022), <https://www.uscourts.gov/educational-resources/educational-activities/reali->

<ty-check-quiz-civil-discourse-and-difficult>.

⁵ *Judicial Learning Center* (last visited Apr. 4, 2022), <https://judiciallearningcenter.org/>.

⁶ *Our Courts Colorado*, COLO. JUD. INST. & COLO. BAR ASS'N (last visited Feb. 2, 2022), <http://www.ourcourtscolorado.org>.

⁷ *Citizens' Law Academy*, IDAHO L. FOUND. (Mar. 19, 2021), <https://isb.idaho.gov/ilf/lre/cla/>.

⁸ *Justice for All: Courts and the Community*, SECOND CIR. CT. APP. LIBR. (last visited Feb. 2, 2022), <https://justiceforall.ca2.uscourts.gov>;

Bench in Your Backyard, SECOND CIR. CT. APP. LIBR. (last visited Feb. 2, 2022), https://justiceforall.ca2.uscourts.gov/bench_in_your_backyard.html.

⁹ *Adult Groups*, NAT'L CONST. CTR. (last visited Feb. 2, 2022), <https://constitutioncenter.org/visit/group-visits/adult-tour-groups/>.

¹⁰ *Judge Chats Lesson Plan*, NAT'L CONST. CTR. (last visited Feb. 2, 2022), https://constitutioncenter.org/media/files/LP_-_Judge_Chats.pdf.

¹¹ *Civics Education: So, you think you know your government?*, CMTY. COLL. PHILA. (last visited Feb. 2, 2022), <https://www.ccp.edu/calendars/events/civics-education-so-you-think-you-know-your-government>.

¹² *About the Center*, RENDELL CTR. CIVICS & CIVIC ENGAGEMENT (last visited Feb. 2, 2022), <https://rendellcenter.org/about-the-center/>.

¹³ *Judges on Judging*, RENDELL CTR. CIVICS & CIVIC ENGAGEMENT (last visited Feb. 2, 2022), <https://rendellcenter.org/professional-development/podcasts/judges-on-judging/>.

¹⁴ *Grab the Gavel*, RENDELL CTR. CIVICS & CIVIC ENGAGEMENT (last visited Feb. 2, 2022), <https://rendellcenter.org/professional-development/podcasts/grab-the-gavel/>.

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Judgment Calls*, BOLCH JUDICIAL INSTITUTE OF DUKE LAW SCHOOL (last visited April 5, 2022), <https://judicialstudies.duke.edu/judgment-calls/>.