

Engaging judges and teachers to boost civic education

Federal judges, court professionals, outstanding teachers, and civics education providers came together at a national conference in St. Louis this spring to amplify existing court outreach programs and develop innovative ways to educate the public about the Constitution and the role of the third branch.

The Honorable Robert A. Katzmann Conference on Civics Education and the Federal Courts — held in April at the Thomas F. Eagleton U.S. Courthouse — brought together more than 140 participants from the courts, the academic and legal communities, and civics education organizations from across the nation to exchange ideas and best practices. The one-day conference was inspired by the first national federal courts’ civics conference convened by the late Judge Robert A. Katzmann in New York City in 2019.

“As Chief Justice Roberts has said over the years, civics education is part of our responsibility as judges,” said Judge Rodney Sippel, U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Missouri, chair of the Committee on the Judicial Branch of the Judicial Conference of the United States. “This national conference, the second since 2019, presented an opportunity for us to learn from different communities and to share information among courts that are active in civics education with the goal of improving constitutional literacy and understanding of the role of the third branch.”

A team of judges and court professionals coordinated the conference, which included sessions on partnerships with communities, educational programming, courthouse learning centers and infrastructure, and opportunities to learn from teachers.



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— JUDGE RODNEY SIPPEL

Participants explored a range of topic areas, starting with an analysis of data about trust and confidence in the judiciary that shows a lack of public understanding of the courts.¹

“Like James Madison Fellows who teach in communities across the country, I welcome the opportunity to offer insights from my teaching experience in Tulsa’s historic Greenwood District to the broader national conversation on the role and responsibilities of the judiciary in civics education,” said Anthony Cherry, a historian and high school teacher in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Cherry was one of 15 James Madison Fellows selected by the James Madison Memorial Fellowship Foundation to participate in the conference.

The day started with a recorded message of encouragement from U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. and included an online conversation with retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Stephen G. Breyer, for whom Boston’s new learning center on courts and the Constitution is named.

Conference sessions provided valuable connections and information for judges and courts who are working to create more opportunities for judges to engage with students, par-

ticularly through classroom visits and courtroom simulations that teach the Constitution and landmark Supreme Court cases using contemporary, teen-relevant scenarios.

The program also featured the inaugural presentation of the Katzmann Civics Award, which honored “Civil Discourse and Difficult Decisions,” a national initiative that teaches students how to apply legal skills as life skills to resolve disputes and make sound decisions based on considering the potential consequences of their actions.²

“The federal courts have a longstanding commitment to civics education over the past 25 years that includes a broad portfolio of web resources, institutes for teachers, court camps for students, realistic courtroom simulations, classroom visits, and adult education,” said Judge Robert J. Conrad Jr., former chief judge of the U.S. District Court for the Western District of North Carolina and current director of the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts. “Judges across the nation are active in civics education that they offer in courtrooms, classrooms, and communities.”

For more information on related civics programs and resources, see www.uscourts.gov/about-federal-courts/educational-resources/educational-activities.

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¹ See Shawn Patterson Jr. et al., *The Withering of Public Confidence in the Courts*, 108 JUDICATURE 22, 24, 28–30 (2024), https://judicature.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2024/07/ANNENBERG_Vol108No1_9.11.pdf.

² See Eric Surber, *Teaching Civility Through Civics*, 107 JUDICATURE 9, 9 (2024), <https://judicature.duke.edu/articles/teaching-civility-through-civics/>.