



*Federal Courts' Educational Outreach that  
Involves, Informs, Inspires and Ignites*

## 50-Minute Civics

# The Bill of Rights in Your Life

## QUESTION-FORMULATION ACTIVITY

This 50-minute activity is based on a three-minute video [Students Sound Off About the Bill of Rights](#). It is a question-formulation activity, described here, that is ready for immediate use in the distance-learning space as well as in courtrooms and classrooms. All materials are provided here and in the links.

Note: Bill of Rights Day is December 15, but it is celebrated throughout the month.

### Civil Discourse Activity: What's on Your Mind About the Bill of Rights in Your Life?

This activity opens with showing a three-minute, thought-provoking, discussion-starter video [Students Sound Off About the Bill of Rights](#). The video stimulates students to think about an Amendment that has a significant impact on their lives. The video is followed by a question-formulation activity that sets the stage for students to get invested and involved in critical thinking and civil discussion. The activity can be facilitated by a federal judge, or an attorney.

### Roles

- **One Federal Judge:**  
Circuit, District, Magistrate or Bankruptcy
- **One FBA Facilitator**
- **Two FBA Small-Group Volunteers**

### Objectives

- To give students the opportunity to interact with federal judges and increase their understanding of, and confidence in, the federal courts.
- To give students experience with the vital skills of 1) forming and asking questions and 2) engaging in civil discussion on controversial issues with peers and adults.
- To expose students to role models and careers in the courts and legal community.
- To give students the experience of claiming their personal stake in the Bill of Rights and the role of the courts in preserving the Bill of Rights.



### Activity Overview

- **Participants:** High school students
- **Teacher/Student Preparation:** None
- **Judge/Lawyer Preparation:** 15 minutes reviewing the video and the guidance tips
- **Activity Duration:** 50 minutes – one class period
- **Location:** Distance learning space, courtrooms, or classrooms
- **Centerpiece Resource:** 3-Minute Video – [Students Sound Off About the Bill of Rights](#)

**Distribute the Handouts.** Give participants a one-page list of the [Bill of Rights](#). Because students are most likely to show interest in the [First Amendment](#) and [Fourth Amendment](#), two handouts focus on these two Amendments. The statements in these two documents can be asked as questions of the students. Word clouds for the First Amendment and the Fourth Amendment are a springboards for students' questions. Click on the word cloud in the top right corner of each web page and print the image.



#### DISTANCE LEARNING AGENDA

### The Bill of Rights in Your Life: 50-Minute Program Candid Conversations with a Federal Judge and FBA Lawyers

*(5 min)* **For the Judge and FBA Volunteers: Introduce Yourself. Tell Why You Chose the Law.**

The judge explains the role of a judge and gives a brief overview of his/her court and the types of cases federal judges hear. Perhaps, mention a high-profile or historical case.

**The FBA Facilitator:** Tell the students that they will watch a brief video, then break up into two groups to develop questions, followed by a large-group conversation with the judge and the lawyers.

*(15 min)* **Show** [Students Sound Off About the Bill of Rights](#) *(Video - 3 minutes)*

- Put Students into Two Small Groups  
*(Most platforms have this function.)*
  - Group #1 – First Amendment
  - Group #2 – Fourth Amendment

**Directions: Small Groups**

**One Attorney Facilitates Each Group**

- Students in their respective groups underline and discuss key phrases in their Amendment.
- They brainstorm and write down all the questions they can think of about their Amendment and its impact on their lives as teens. Each group selects its top three to five questions. They write the questions in the chat box.

(15  
min)

**Facilitated Civil Discussion with the Entire Group**

After the teams have posted their questions in the chat box, the facilitator calls on students to ask the judge their questions. The judge may refer some questions to the attorneys.

There is likely to be redundancy in the questions, so the facilitator can consolidate similar questions and can ask them of the judge. To keep the students engaged, the facilitator may decide to first ask the students the question, and then ask the judge.

(10  
min)

**Open Floor for General Questions on Any Topic**

Encourage questions about students' rights, the Bill of Rights and the courts, careers in the legal field, and issues that are of concern to students. Again, the judge may decide to refer some questions to the lawyers.

(5 min)

**Wrap Up**

Ask students to write in the chat box one thing they learned about the Bill of Rights in their own lives. Read some of the comments to the group without attributing them to anyone. Ask students to fill out the feedback form.

**Adjourn.**

**FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROGRAM CONTENT AND LOGISTICS, CONTACT:**

**REBECCA FANNING, FEDERAL COURTS' NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH MANAGER AT THE ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE OF THE U.S. COURTS**

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## Legal Skills as Life Skills

# Federal Courts' Civil Discourse and Difficult Decisions

Civil Discourse and Difficult Decisions is a [national initiative of the federal courts](#) that brings high school and college students into federal courthouses to participate in realistic legal proceedings based on situations in which typically law-abiding teens can find themselves. These court hearings (not mock trials) are realistic simulations that showcase jury deliberations in which all students and learning styles participate in civil discourse.

The program, launched in 2016 in [courtroom settings](#), now is available as a [distance-learning experience](#) using several First Amendment scenarios, including some that incorporate COVID-19-related scenarios. One is based on *Elonis v. United States* applied to a [COVID-19 rumor spread](#) on social media about a high school student.

Virtual proceedings are presided over by a federal judge, assisted by volunteer attorneys, who work with students in small groups using a function available on most platforms. In these groups, students start as lawyers, then they return to the large group and deliberate as jurors.

### Time Commitment

- **Judge and Lawyers:** Spend 30-45 minutes reading the courtroom-ready program materials posted on [uscourts.gov](#); participate in one orientation meeting with the judge in person or by conference call; and commit to a [50-minute](#) virtual courtroom event.
- **Teachers' Time Commitment:** No classroom preparation or pre-reading for the students or teachers. The only time commitment is 50 minutes for the simulation.

*For More Information, Contact the National Educational Outreach Manager for the Federal Courts [Rebecca Fanning](#) at the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts at 202-502-2611.*



### Learning Objectives – Benefits to Students

Students leave the program with sharpened tools for civil discourse and decision-making and a heightened awareness of situations they may not realize can have legal and long-term consequences. They also experience the differences between media portrayals of the court system and real-life courtroom dynamics. Participants interact with the human face of the justice system – judges, attorneys, and other professionals. Their courtroom experience motivates them to serve willingly on juries when called.

### Roles and Resources

**Students.** All students serve first as attorneys in two groups – for the plaintiff and for the government. Then they return to the large group and all serve as jurors. **Adults.** A federal judge presides over the simulation, then goes over the Reality Check Quiz and takes questions. An attorney volunteer facilitates the program and the jury deliberations; and volunteer attorneys (two or four, according to local preference) prepare the student attorneys, then the student jurors. **Resources.** Each role has an online folder of handouts with detailed guidance. The ready-to-use handouts are found in the Activity Download in the upper right corner of the program landing page. Here is [an example](#) using the COVID-19 social media scenario.

- **Volunteer Attorney Coaches Prepare Two Student Attorney Teams – All Students**  
The attorney coaches present the case information in the courtroom, then prepare the student attorneys in two small groups. After the preparation period, the arguments before the judge begin. Students use the raise-hand icon so that the judge can recognize those who volunteer to present their argument.
- **After the Arguments, All Students Return to the Large Group and Serve as Jurors**  
The judge explains the role of jurors, in contrast to the role of advocates. The judge swears in the jurors. The attorney coaches guide students through the Arguments Worksheet, which is an issue-spotting activity. This warm-up is followed by jury deliberations led by the attorney facilitator, who ensures that as many students as possible have the opportunity to speak. Due to time constraints, the verdict is a show-of-hands vote that does not have to be unanimous.

### What Happens in the Courtroom Program?

#### 1. Icebreakers: Reality Check Quiz and Civility Self Reflection Tool

Students start by taking an attention-getting [Reality Check Quiz](#) that tests their knowledge of situations that can put them in legal jeopardy. At the end of the program, they discuss the issues with the host judge and leave with insights that have practical applications in their lives.

## 2. Civil Discourse Skill Building

This facilitator-guided activity has two parts: 1) Students use a [self-reflection tool](#) to become aware of and discuss their own civil discourse attitudes, behaviors, and language, and 2) Students establish their own [ground rules and group norms](#) for civil discussion.

## 3. Courtroom Simulation

The program is not a mock trial. It is a modified courtroom simulation that is a hybrid of appellate arguments and jury deliberations designed to create opportunities for all students and learning styles to participate. They play two roles. All students are lawyers in the first part of the simulation. All students are jurors in the second part of the simulation.

- Students work in two small groups as lawyers. All group members have the opportunity to make arguments by using the raise-hand icon and being called on by the judge. Attorney volunteers prepare students by talking them through an issue-spotting activity using the Arguments Worksheet.
- After the arguments, all students are sworn in as jurors and the judge explains the differences between the roles of advocates and jurors. Attorney volunteers facilitate the deliberations. Due to time limits, the verdict is arrived at by a show-of-hands vote.

## 4. Reality Check Discussion

The program uses the Reality Check Quiz to stimulate reality-based observations and lessons in a candid conversation with the host judge about real-life teen situations that can derail a student's future.

## 5. Q/A with the Host Judge

As the Reality Check discussion winds down, the judge opens the floor to student questions on any topic. The judge sets the stage for a candid conversation about students' concerns and interests. This component, typically, is the most highly rated part of the program, according to the evaluations that students fill out before leaving the event.

*For More Information, Contact the National Educational Outreach Manager for the Federal Courts [Rebecca Fanning](#) at the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts at 202-502-2611.*



# How to Reach and Recruit Schools for Federal Court Programs

## The Problem

How do I make schools aware of court programs so that they can participate in them? Whom should I contact? What if they don't respond? What about transportation? And lunch?

## The Top Tips

1. Get Input from Dynamic Teachers.
2. Cast a Wide Net with an Email, then Take the Initiative to Follow Up.
3. Have a Table or Panel of Judges at a Social Studies Meeting or Conference.

*A Note About Transportation:* Transportation isn't an issue in the distance learning space. However, when courthouse programs resume, here is some context. Schools have a transportation budget for field trips. It is best to have a teacher request transportation at the beginning of the academic year, even if the program is planned for the spring. However, it often is possible to successfully request a bus later in the year.

*A Note About Refreshments:* Refreshments aren't a consideration in the distance learning environment. For in-person courtroom programs, schools don't expect refreshments. Food complicates the logistics at the courthouse and becomes a funding issue. Teachers, typically, need to have students return to school in time for lunch. The programs in the [educational resources section](#) of [uscourts.gov](http://uscourts.gov) are tailored to this schedule. The typical program start time is 9 a.m. with adjournment at noon.

## For Quick Results, Start Here

**Most school districts** have a social studies coordinator, a social studies specialist, or a social studies curriculum specialist. You will find this person on the school district's website.

They maintain an e-mail list of all social studies teachers in the state or the school district and communicate regularly with them. Ask if you can put an announcement in the next e-mail to teachers.

*This bulletin is part of a series on educational outreach success tips by the Federal Courts' National Educational Outreach Manager Rebecca Fanning at the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts. Contact: [rebecca\\_fanning@ao.uscourts.gov](mailto:rebecca_fanning@ao.uscourts.gov) 202-502-2611.*



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## Ask for Input from Dynamic Teachers

### How to Reach Teachers Who Will Make It Happen

The following sections list sources that know the social studies landscape and the dynamic teachers in your state.

### Center for Civic Education – State Coordinators – Very Responsive

State coordinators of the [We the People](#) program communicate regularly with teachers about social studies enrichment opportunities for educators and their students. Courts consistently get good results. [Find your state coordinator](#).

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## Cast a Wide Net

### Contact Your State Department of Education

**State departments of education** have a social studies specialist, who is the statewide point person. [Find yours in this directory](#).

**Most school districts** have a social studies coordinator, a social studies specialist, or a social studies curriculum specialist. You will find this person on the school district's website.

### Districts have several professional development days throughout the academic year.

Ask the school district's social studies specialist how to get on the program and/or host the program at the courthouse where you can give a presentation. They maintain an email list of all social studies teachers in the state or the school district and communicate regularly with them. Ask if you can put announcements in the specialist's newsletter or other communication vehicles.

## **Put Out the Welcome Mat**

### **Write a Blanket Email Announcement – Then Follow Up**

To ensure that every school has equal access, send a message to social studies teachers on the state's social studies email list. [See the form letter](#) toward the bottom on this page on the Federal Bar Association's civics outreach section.

This letter, written by Judge Michael Newman, Southern District of Ohio, when he was president of the Federal Bar Association, got an 80 percent response rate from schools in Dayton, OH. Over time, this contact led to a partnership between the judge and the Dayton public schools' social studies specialist that opened many doors.

### **If You Don't Get a Response, Follow Up**

It's common for school districts and schools not to respond. When that happens, call the district or school office to get advice on how to proceed, then send another e-mail and copy the person with whom you spoke.

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## **Be Visible – Present at a Nearby Social Studies Conference**

### **If You Want to Make a Presentation to Teachers – Start Here**

The National Council for the Social Studies has state, and regional affiliates that, typically, host the largest gatherings of social studies teachers in each state.

[Go to this listing](#). When you find your state, click on **About** to find the names of board members near you. Someone on that list can advise you which conference to participate in, the value and logistics of setting up an exhibit table, and how to offer to make a presentation. You can also ask your state's social studies specialist for recommendations.