

Courts as Curriculum

High School Students Watch Real Appeals

When the [California Supreme Court](#) planned to hold two days of hearings in Fresno in October 2002, the [Court of Appeal, Fifth Appellate District](#), hit upon the idea of using this rare opportunity to give high school students an exciting firsthand look at appellate practice. Through a program called Courts as Curriculum, the students would observe real appeals in action, as experts explained what was going on, answered questions, and corrected misinformation on the spot. The process would be televised to a wider school audience and videotaped for future students to see.

Appellate Cases Come Alive

One student participant expressed the feelings of many: “Thank you for allowing me that privilege [of taking part]. It was one of the most exciting things I have ever done in my life.”

- Drawing from more than 200 Central Valley schools, the program brought 120 representative students to the Supreme Court session.
- Thousands more students at schools across the state watched the broadcast by a Fresno, a Sacramento, and a cable television station.
- The presiding justice of the Fifth Appellate District provided commentary in the telecast.
- Volunteer attorneys and judges went to the schools to explain the proceedings and discuss the oral arguments with the students. The experts answered students’ questions and cleared up misconceptions.
- Students at the court session had the chance to engage in a question-and-answer session with the Supreme Court justices.

To prepare students for the day, the legal staff of the appellate court and Kern County school personnel compiled written study guides for the government classes. The guides covered

- What the cases at the morning session were about.
- What to expect in oral argument.
- What the court’s job was, and how it would carry out those tasks.

The study guides were posted on [the school district’s Web site](#) and the California Courts Web site.

Later, when opinions were handed down in the cases, court personnel told the students the outcomes of the cases they had witnessed.

Since then, the Fifth Appellate District has invited students to outreach sessions in courthouses around the nine counties of the district once or twice a year, and the video of the 2002 Supreme Court session is still used in schools.

Impacts

- Thousands of students, hundreds of community groups, and hundreds of people involved with the courts have viewed the video, learning how appellate courts truly operate. Judicial procedures came alive for these viewers in a way that classes cannot match.
- The program built a partnership among the schools, the courts, the bar associations, local government officials, and the broadcast media, improving community relations and mutual understanding.
- By using video, the program reached a wider audience and has had an effect over a longer time than a single session would have.
- Although the program was designed for high school students, it has also been used by middle schools, law schools, court management and orientation programs, and community groups, enlightening a broad spectrum of the public.



In Fresno a high school student engages in a question-and-answer session with the California Supreme Court.

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