

# Teachers' Courthouse Seminar

## Inspiring Lively Classes About the Criminal Courts

California high school seniors are required to take a class in government, and one component of that curriculum is a description of the scope and operation of the state trial courts. Most teachers of high school government classes, however, aren't formally educated about the trial courts.

Of the nearly 100,000 students who graduate from Los Angeles County high schools each year, more than a few slump in their seats during government class with eyelids at half-mast, not realizing that they might someday find themselves before trial courts (as defendants, plaintiffs, jurors, or witnesses), unprepared and at sea.

The Superior Court of Los Angeles County reasoned that if teachers had a better grounding in the operations of trial courts and more exciting and relevant teaching materials, their lessons would be livelier, more accurate, more relevant to students' lives, and more likely to capture students' attention and involvement. The court developed the Teachers' Courthouse Seminar, to give high school government teachers an authentic experience in the criminal justice system. Held at different court locations throughout the year, the program aimed to change the way educators teach about the court system and the constitutional values that the courts uphold.

The program encourages teachers to

- Spend more time teaching about the court system.
- Communicate more accurate information after they see firsthand how the courts work.
- Instill in graduating high school students a greater appreciation of and respect for the courts.

The program has two major components: a one-day seminar for teachers at a local courthouse and a CD of teaching materials to take back to class.

The carefully designed schedule of the seminar day includes all aspects of the criminal process—arraignments, preliminary hearings, suppression motions, plea bargains, trials, and sentencing. It gives the teachers the chance to meet key personnel, including bench officers, deputy district attorneys, deputy public defenders, and court staff at the proceedings. Then the teachers have lunch with judges, commissioners, and referees from the sponsoring courthouse. After lunch, they learn to use court and legal Web sites as teaching aids, and they are introduced to the CD, which contains video, audio, text, and graphic materials they can use to better explain the criminal justice system. Finally, the teachers meet with the bench officers who preside in drug courts and juvenile courts.

### Scenes Relevant to Students' Lives

Teachers bring a CD of materials back to class to help them explain the criminal justice system. A highlight is a video that presents three scenarios from criminal pretrial proceedings:

- A suppression motion
- A motion to withdraw a plea of no contest (because of immigration consequences)
- A three-strikes hearing

In each scenario, prosecuting and defense attorneys, working without scripts, argue motions to a judge. The scenes illustrate the role of courts in applying laws and protecting individual rights. California Supreme Court Justice Carlos Moreno introduces the video in Spanish and English.

## Impacts

- Seminars held at 11 courthouses in 2002–2003 had an average attendance of 15 teachers each, reaching an estimated 29,700 students in government classes each year.
- The program has expanded in each of its first three years.
- In response to a mail survey designed to evaluate the success and motivating effect of the program, participating teachers praised the program and the court for offering it.

## Feedback From Teachers

“As an attorney teaching high school, I was impressed by everything about this program. This was by far the most useful seminar that Los Angeles Unified School District has offered. Thank you.”

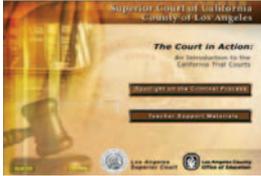
“When you are studying the Constitution, it seems so foreign. You want to relate it to real life. This [the court process observed] is the Constitution at work!”



Judge Richard Fruin, the head of the Teachers' Courthouse Seminar program, joins teachers as they get a lesson in civics at the courthouse.

**THE COURT IN ACTION:  
SPOTLIGHT ON THE CRIMINAL PROCESS**

IN ORDER TO INTRODUCE 12<sup>TH</sup>-GRADE GOVERNMENT TEACHERS TO THE COURT AND ITS PROCEEDINGS, THE LOS ANGELES SUPERIOR COURT SPONSORS DAY-LONG TEACHERS COURTHOUSE SEMINAR PROGRAMS.



This interactive CD is distributed as a part of each program. It is designed as a classroom tool to help teachers educate their students about the California trial courts.

In addition to a welcome and an introductory overview of the various steps in the criminal process, the CD contains three 30-minute video reenactments from real-life criminal cases.

The participants are bona fide members of the justice system: judges, deputy district attorneys, deputy public defenders, and deputy sheriffs. For each reenactment, suggested discussion questions link the scenario to relevant topics in a high-school Government course.

There is also a Teacher's Support Materials area, which includes sample lesson plans and suggestions for using the CD to meet state curriculum standards. The CD also includes a glossary of legal terms, as well as commentaries on the United States Constitution, all of which can be printed and distributed for classroom use.

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