

South Florida Sun-Sentinel Editorial Board
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ISSUE: High court hopes to bring a criminal justice curriculum to public schools.

Florida's public schools owe the state's top judge a proverbial teacher's apple for a good idea. Chief Justice R. Fred Lewis of the Florida Supreme Court wants youngsters to learn about the justice system in the classroom.

His proposed Justice Teaching program would pair an attorney, judge or other legal professional with an elementary, middle or high school teacher. The good news is that the idea isn't simply a concept. About 2,100 legal professionals already have signed up and are undergoing training. By next year, Lewis hopes the program will be operating in full swing.

Lewis wants to help educate a public that is largely uninformed about the law and the legal process.

A Florida Bar survey last year, for example, showed that only 59 percent of adults in the state know the three branches of government, and fewer than half know the meaning of "separation of powers." It's not the ideal of an informed public.

The program is a perfect complement to the state's efforts to create civics classes. Florida has a law mandating a semester of civics. That's a start, but educators and lawmakers shouldn't stop there.

Educators should embrace the volunteer effort by the legal community and devise a curriculum that not only provides the basics on constitutional rights and how the judicial branch operates, but also offers practical approaches that will help deter youngsters from entering the criminal justice system. For example, in a realm where ignorance of the law is no excuse, there's plenty of room for attorneys and judges to discuss the relative ease of violating the law and the lasting impact of a felony conviction.

Lewis is on to something, and it wouldn't hurt for the new leaders in Tallahassee's other two branches of government to show more cooperation in making sure that this volunteer effort is a successful one.

BOTTOM LINE: The idea is long overdue and provides for a better understanding of an important branch of government.