

## Justice's class plan: Law lessons for all kids in public schools

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Florida's top judge wants children in every public school to learn about the American justice system, not just from teachers, but from attorneys and judges who volunteer to talk about the law, our courts and our Constitution.

Justice Teaching aims to pair an attorney, judge or other legal professional with every elementary, middle and high school in Florida.

It's a goal that Florida Supreme Court Chief Justice R. Fred Lewis has set partly out of concern about the effects of an uneducated public. A survey by the Florida Bar last year showed only 59 percent of Florida adults knew the three branches of government, and fewer than half knew the meaning of "separation of powers."

"I fear where we will end up," Lewis said. "[Democracy] so depends not only on educated, but involved, citizens. I don't want our young people bailing out."

Lewis said some people chuckled when he floated his idea of finding more than 2,500 judges and attorneys to teach students at every public school for free.

"We set our goals high, and we're going to reach those," Lewis said.

Training is already under way for some of the 2,100 legal professionals who signed up. By next year, Lewis hopes the program will be in full swing with volunteers teaching students in civics, social studies or government classes.

Attorneys and judges won't be allowed to tell war stories in front of the classroom, Lewis said. Part of what the training encompasses is teaching the attorneys a professional, educational approach, he said. Attorneys and judges paired with a school will give talks on different subjects at the behest of a teacher, Lewis said, and they'll leave any agendas at the door.

Educators in South Florida are eager to see how the program might fit into their schools.

"It sounds like a great program, and we're looking forward to learning more about it," said Louise Ball, social studies curriculum specialist for Broward County public schools. "We're very interested in programs that enhance our curriculum here in Broward County."

The lessons will complement what middle school students already are learning as a result of a law mandating a semester of civics. Palm Beach County already required an applied civics course in middle school, but most of the state's school districts did not.

Sally Rozanski, social studies administrator for Palm Beach County schools, welcomes the idea of attorneys and professionals coming into the classroom.

"We already have judges that get invited to speak, but it's sporadic," Rozanski said. "I think what [Lewis] is doing is going to be great."

Every region of the state has a judge serving on the Select Committee on Justice Teaching, with a judge from the District Court of Appeal a lead contact for that region. The committee also includes members of the Florida Bar and representatives of the Florida Association of District School Superintendents and the

Florida Law Related Education Association.

In Palm Beach County, Superintendent Art Johnson met with Chief Judge Kathleen Kroll and Judge Fred Hazouri of the 4th District Court of Appeal in October to discuss Lewis' vision. Initially, the program will be implemented in Palm Beach County in middle schools, featuring topics such as the Bill of Rights.

Kroll hopes students will come away with a better appreciation of the responsibility involved in democracy, she said.

"I think people generally take for granted the many freedoms we have without thinking there's any cost," Kroll said. "Quite frankly, we all do."

Separately from the Justice Teaching program, Kroll and Circuit Judge Peter Blanc recently conducted a local justice-teaching institute, bringing middle school teachers to the courthouse for a firsthand look at the judicial system. A full-time court education program consultant will be hired as a liaison between the courthouse and the school district.

Lewis said he realized the effect that he and other judges and attorneys could have on students when he gave what was supposed to be 1 1/2-hour talk at Florida State University that turned into a 3 1/2-hour discussion of the court system's structure and function. As he was leaving, one student thanked Lewis and said he learned more about the Constitution and Florida government in that time period than he learned in his entire time at school.

That's when Lewis concluded that there were many others who could offer the same valuable knowledge and he began to put his plan in the works.

"I would hate to think that I would leave this world in a worse position than when I came into it," Lewis said.

*Legal professionals interested in volunteering or learning more about the program can go to [www.justiceteaching.org](http://www.justiceteaching.org).*

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