

Successfully Using Mock Trial Lessons with Students

Generally, scripted mock trials work well for students in elementary grades (K-5). For very young students, mock trials that are based on characters and story plots from well-known children's stories and fairy tales work well. And for these youngest students, with limited reading skills, the mock trials are performed by adults with questions to keep the students engaged and learning.

Whatever the grade level, with a little thought and preparation, mock trials and mock appellate arguments are an excellent and rewarding experience for everyone - students, teachers, judges and lawyers!

Preparation for a mock trial or appellate argument

To prepare for the visit and mock trial lesson, talk with the teacher for ideas on how best to prepare and what concepts to address with the grade level you are planning to visit. Learn what topics have been covered by the class so you can reinforce prior learning or introduce new concepts. Many of the lessons suggested in this guide include preparation and set-up information.

Generally, younger students (grades K-7th) are fascinated with the judge's robe and gavel. If possible, judges should bring these along on your visit. They may have several questions about these subjects. We also have a handout titled "Some Things Students Want to Know about Being a Lawyer and a Judge" this may be helpful for your review and preparation before a classroom visit.

Suggested important legal concepts to teach students

The basic, fundamental legal concepts always bear repeating. Even adults often find the legal system confusing and can use a refresher. The amount of detail you will provide about the terms and concepts, and the way you will explain them, will vary depending on grade level and the abilities of the students. A review of these concepts serves as an introduction and set-up for the mock trial or appellate argument lesson. Most of the lessons in this guide include this type of set-up information. Generally it includes a discussion of the difference between criminal law and civil law. Which type of case will you be acting out in your mock trial? What is the role of the jury? Talk a bit about the importance of jury service and civic responsibility. How is the court room set-up and what are the roles of court personnel? Explain any legal concepts specific to the case.

Acting out the mock trial or appellate argument

By now you have established a rapport with the students, but you will still need to help make the students feel at ease with the "courtroom" and the process. However, you still want to keep a level of respect and formality during "court" teaching students the behavior expectations while helping them feel comfortable and explaining what to do, where to stand or sit, etc. The goal is to have a positive learning experience that closely simulates a real courtroom.

Make sure to allow for follow-up time at the end to respond to students' questions and reflect on the experience. If possible you may offer to serve as a resource to the teacher and class if they think of questions after you leave. (A word of caution, though, in giving your email address to students.)