Dear Mock Trial Friends and Colleagues,

As we all look around the world today, it is easy to see the challenges we all face. But with those challenges come opportunities, opportunities upon which we can capitalize if we are willing to be flexible and to embrace new modes of approaching our traditional work.

It is therefore with a sense of optimism that we announce that the state Mock Trial Executive Committee has voted unanimously to hold the Pennsylvania High School Mock Trial Competition and, ultimately, the Pennsylvania High School Mock Trial Championships virtually this year. In taking this action, we join the national competition, as well as a growing number of states. The decision is based on many factors, including:

- Our first priority must always be the health and safety of our competitors and their families. Every round of mock trial necessarily involves at least 18 people gathering - 12 team members, 2 coaches, and a minimum of 3 scoring judges, 1 presiding judge, and most involve a half dozen or more additional individuals (other team members, timekeepers, a fourth or more judge, coordinators...). Gatherings of 15-25 people from different schools and areas concern us all, and they pose a risk for a transmission event that could put dozens if not hundreds of lives at risk.

- We strongly believe that the Pennsylvania competition should be as uniform as possible, so that teams throughout the state compete using the same competitive format and platform as one another and as the State Championships.

- It has become apparent that the COVID-19 pandemic is not yet fully controlled, and it appears likely that we will continue to face significant limitations on school activities and public gatherings in the near future. Mock trial rounds are only four months after school starts, and occur at what is the heart of the traditional influenza season, when we can reasonably expect that competing students may have fevers or flu-like symptoms that would prevent them from competing in person during the COVID era.

- Schools throughout Pennsylvania are opening in a variety of conditions, and significant numbers of Pennsylvania secondary school students are opening virtually or in a hybrid-limited model.

- Schools throughout Pennsylvania are reducing or eliminating extracurricular activities. Although mock trial competition is a winter activity, mock trial practice begins in the fall.

- Critically, we cannot ensure that even if our teams would be willing to meet that we would have courthouse space in which they could meet. Many of our courts are currently on reduced access. Some are not even holding criminal jury trials right now. Asking them to allow multiple groups of approximately 20 people from across the region to enter their space is a much larger and more expensive request than it was a year ago. Moreover, we can anticipate that accidental exposure may cause fluctuation in the availability even of spaces that are presently open. That could throw mock trial plans into chaos at the last minute at the district, regional, or even state level.
Finally, there are risks to indecision on this point. Relying on things to get better puts us in a position where we might still have to make this announcement in December, when we have less time to adjust to circumstances and where we will have committed fiscal and other resources to competitions that cannot occur. By deciding now, we conserve those dollars and that energy for solving problems over the next few months and allowing schools and teams to do the same.

We recognize, of course, that holding mock trial virtually poses its own challenges. Our hope is that by announcing this early in the competition year, we can all devote our energies to facing those challenges together.

The first and most important of those challenges is access. For teams that can safely gather in a location with WiFi access, such as a school, we are hoping that this issue will be limited. For other teams that have to rely on home internet, it may be greater. And we appreciate that many of our students may not have the requisite technology on a consistent basis. We at the PBA and on the Mock Trial Executive Committee have already begun trying to figure out new approaches to supporting our competing teams.

We are committed to working with schools on the same approaches. We encourage you to reach out to your coordinators and/or to the statewide Executive Com team with individual issues, even issues at just your school. Let us know what hurdles you are facing, and we will see if we can help you clear them. Knowing what's happening at the ground level allows us to adapt our competition to your needs, and it allows us to keep the robust participation that makes Pennsylvania mock trial so special.

The second challenge is adapting Pennsylvania mock trial to a virtual setting. This is a challenge shared by our peer states and by our national competition. The National High School Mock Trial Championships has issued its revised rules on an expedited basis, and we are in communication with other states about their approaches. We expect to have revised rules for a virtual competition published in early to mid-September, and we will adjust those rules as the year continues.

The third challenge is enthusiasm. It's not going to be the same as seeing you all. But we are excited by this new challenge and the opportunities it presents. We are counting on you to join us in looking to mock trial as a way to help our students feel normal and to continue the work of civic education, which has never been more critical.

Make no mistake: this was a hard decision. But having made it, we believe that Pennsylvania can continue to lead the way nationwide and that our competition this year, while different, can be every bit as powerful, meaningful, and fun as it has been in years past. We have a great, fun case in the works, and we look forward to sharing it with you in a few months.

We will be reaching out again soon, and we encourage you to reach out to us in the meantime. This year is going to require flexibility and good humor from us all, in this as in all things. But together, we can make this work.

Stay safe, stay happy, and remember: it's almost mock trial season!

- Your Friends at the Statewide Mock Trial Executive Committee