Dear Mock Trial Coordinators, Coaches, Participants, and Families,

We write to announce, with regret, that the 2022 Pennsylvania High School Mock Trial Championships will be virtual. We know that this will come as a disappointment to many of you, even more than it does to us, and so we write to explain our thinking.

The rule applies statewide, to all rounds of Pennsylvania competition (including all district, regional, and state rounds). All rounds of competition will be virtual this year.

This was not a decision we reached lightly, and we acknowledge at the outset that it is in the face of a strong consensus among teams to proceed in person if possible. We spent hours trying to determine how we could do that, and we have ultimately concluded that it cannot be done safely under the circumstances we face.

First and foremost, the survey responses make it clear that there is no practicable way to mandate either vaccination or testing. Supermajorities of both teams and coordinators have explained that circumstances simply will not allow us to guarantee our competitors, judges, volunteers, or venues that everyone in the room will be vaccinated. Nor can we test participants to minimize the risk of transmission. Neither you nor we have the budget for a mass testing effort over a period of months, as our surveys unsurprisingly have made clear.

Second, we have significant concerns about our ability to implement other mitigation strategies, especially masking. Although our students have expressed overwhelmingly their willingness to mask, masking remains a highly politicized issue. Were we to proceed in person, we would require masking in every trial that could be held in-person, but we and our coordinators are concerned about our ability to enforce that mandate, particularly in the face of belligerent recalcitrance, which is unfortunately possible. Exacerbating our executive committee’s concern is that the burden of enforcing a masking mandate against noncompliant students, family, or volunteers would fall on our coordinators.

Finally, our decision is informed by the many decisions being made by health and organizational authorities around the Commonwealth and the country. School districts, universities, government agencies, and third-party organizations are routinely requiring either vaccination or testing before they will allow individuals to gather for athletic contests or social activities.

These concerns came to a head on Wednesday, November 17, 2021, when the Pennsylvania Bar Association (PBA) Board of Governors adopted a policy that all participants in an in-person PBA event are required to show proof of vaccination or a negative test before participating, in addition to wearing a mask. The PBA is our home, the Pennsylvania Bar Foundation is our primary sponsor, and our competition is in every sense a PBA event, a fact of which we have been proud for decades. We support PBA’s effort to keep its members and their families safe and we agree with PBA’s policy, even as we acknowledge that as a competition, we cannot meet those requirements.

Unlike athletic competitions, we are not forced to choose between competing in person and not competing at all. Although it may not be the same experience in every respect, we can do what we do virtually. Moreover, ours is a program in civics education. That by definition includes the things we do as citizens for one another. As a program, we welcome the entire community, and we are delighted every year to have hundreds of students, judges, attorneys, and volunteers participating who face
health challenges or who live with others who do. Some of us have lost loved ones to COVID, and almost all of us know someone who has. These things matter, and after long hours of consideration and debate, and particularly following PBA’s articulation of a clear policy for in-person events that we cannot meet, we have concluded that a virtual format is the only one where we can know that our students, volunteers, and judges and their families are safe.

This was one of the hardest decisions we have ever faced as an Executive Committee. Neither we nor our coordinators were unanimous in our views of the question, when we considered it in the abstract. We understand how harsh a blow this is to everyone who had hoped to be together again this year in person. We feel the same, but we have no choice: safety must be our priority.

District and Regional coordinators will distribute competition schedules in the coming weeks. As always, we can be reached at YLDMockTrial@pabar.org.

- MTEC