

# TEACHING TOOLS: NYS UNIFIED COURT SYSTEM

## MIDDLE SCHOOL INTRODUCTION

This set of four projects was developed to create a series of teaching tools geared toward middle school students in grades 6 through 8. Drawing on concepts from the core curriculum, with a particular focus on Social Studies Standards 1 and 5, these activities were developed to help students build on their knowledge of the role of the judiciary in our society. These projects are geared toward equipping students with the ability to apply the fundamental concepts of justice, fairness and due process to the circumstances they encounter every day.

1. “Fairness – In the Classroom and in the Courtroom”

This project is intended to teach students about the concept of fairness and to foster an appreciation for the difficult responsibilities judges fulfill when they decide a case. A visit to a New York civil court and/or a meeting with a civil court judge is suggested to maximize students’ comprehension of the process that takes place in an actual courtroom. Finally, a negotiation/case settlement exercise allows students to utilize what they have learned about the civil court system in a hands on problem-identification/problem-solving setting.

2. “History and Judicial Review”

This project focuses on the concept of fundamental rights that are preserved in the Constitution and protected by our independent judiciary. These exercises provide an interesting way to integrate information about the appellate process, particularly at the level of the United States Supreme Court, with the social, economic, and political history that is the focus of the Core Curriculum. A day of detailed analysis of some Supreme Court cases allows the students to see how these decisions can affect the rights of individuals and of certain groups in society. These cases highlight both “judicial independence,” as well as the interdependence of the judiciary with the political atmosphere of any given period. A follow up research project allows students to delve into the details and subsequent history of one of the cases. Finally, the students are given the opportunity to “re-argue” the case they researched in an exercise that emphasizes the importance of gathering all of the facts, understanding all of the law, and being able to support and rationalize the final decision.

3. “Justice: The Constitution and the Criminal Courtroom”

This project is designed to teach students about the fundamental right to justice that they enjoy as citizens of the United States, as governed and protected by the Constitution. The first exercise will provide experience analyzing primary documents and learning the litany of rights, including due process, guaranteed to a person accused of a crime. The second exercise allows students to demonstrate that they have mastered the significance of these rights and can recognize when the rights are being applied in actual criminal trial situations. The third exercise involves inviting a criminal law authority from the community into the classroom.

4. “Citizenship and the Immigration Experience”

This project is designed to encourage students to investigate the reasons why various groups of people were and are interested in immigrating to the United States and becoming United States citizens. The first activity involves research projects meant to provide basic information and historical perspective regarding general immigration patterns and also provides students

the opportunity to learn about how their own ancestors came to the United States. The second activity provides an opportunity for students to utilize the Department of Justice's web sites to learn about the naturalization process and encourages them to become involved in a local Immigration and Naturalization ceremony.

We hope that each component will prove useful in educating students regarding the legal system, and that teachers will choose to use all or part of these materials to implement the lessons mandated by the Social Studies core curriculum.

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