

Teaching Students That Judge Judy Is Not a Supreme Court Justice

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Robert A. Katzmman, chief judge of the Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, giving a tour at the Thurgood Marshall United States Courthouse in Manhattan as part of the Justice for All program. Credit Sam Hodgson for The New York Times

The divide between the criminal justice system and much of the public has become an urgent topic of conversation in recent years, with voices rising from all sides.

Now, those voices include one of the most powerful judges in the Eastern United States.

[Robert A. Katzmman](#), chief judge of the Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, has begun a wide-ranging program that casts the entire circuit in an unusual role, not as an adjudicator set apart but as an engaged and approachable teacher.

“The vitality of our governmental institutions, of our courts, depends upon understanding by the public and support from the public; that’s critical to what we do,” Judge Katzmman said.

“But something like 70 percent of Americans can’t identify the Constitution as the supreme law of the land,” he said. “Ten percent of college graduates think that Judge Judy is a Supreme Court justice. That gives you a sense of the context.”

Many students, he continued, might think of courts as a place for punishment. “We want our young people to understand that the courts work for them,” he said.



As part of the program, students learn the basics of legal research and participate in moot court, but also explore robing rooms and have lunch with judges. Credit Sam Hodgson for The New York Times

The program, called [Justice for All: Courts and the Community](#), invites students to visit courthouses across the Second Circuit, which is based in Manhattan and hears cases from Connecticut, New York and Vermont. In those visits, they learn the basics of legal research and participate in moot court, but also explore robing rooms and have lunch with judges. Judges, lawyers and law school faculty members will also engage with grown-ups, participating in teacher-training sessions and offering adults courses in financial literacy.

As part of the project, judges have also helped edit curriculums to be taught to thousands of students in high school law classes.

Luke Young, a social studies teacher at William Cullen Bryant High School in Queens, was an author of the curriculum for several law classes, which will be shared around New York City. He said that the judges were active participants and that he had submitted his work for review three times to members of the Justice for All curriculum committee.

Judge Katzmann is a soft-spoken man with a serene confidence, someone who can talk quietly and still be heard. On a recent fall day, perched in his expansive office — a room flooded with light, surrounded by dramatic, open cityscapes — he proclaimed the space to be “twice the size of our apartment, which has no views.”

That morning, he greeted a group of about two dozen students from Tottenville High School on Staten Island as they filed into a library in the Thurgood Marshall United States Courthouse in Lower Manhattan. The shelves were lined with case law from the United States and Britain, and a group of boys scouted the stacks trying to find the oldest volume — here an 1872, there an 1869.



Judge Katzmman, left, with Victor Marrero, a Federal District Court judge who is the other chairman of the project. Credit Sam Hodgson for The New York Times

A pair of enthusiastic law librarians laid out a few basics of legal research, and then the students were invited to eat sandwiches while interrogating Judge Katzmman and the other chairman of the project, Victor Marrero, a Federal District Court judge in Manhattan.

“What’s the most stressful part of your job?” asked a young man wearing jeans and a tie. Judge Marrero said it was sentencing people, which he described as “wrenching.”

“Do you have your own gavel, or is it, like, a public gavel?” another wanted to know. The courtroom has a gavel and the judges share, Judge Katzmman answered.

After lunch, Judge Katzmman took them through a private passageway for judges that led to the robing room, the most august of locker rooms, with deep leather chairs and individual wooden closets for each judge. They emerged into the imposing grandeur of an empty courtroom, where Justices Sonia Sotomayor and Thurgood Marshall sat for years before being elevated to the Supreme Court.

“If you remember your own high school experience, you were dying to get your hands on something real,” said the Tottenville students’ teacher, John Hundley. “Here it is.”



Students taking part in the program, which also engages with grown-ups, participating in teacher-training sessions and offering adults courses in financial literacy. Credit Sam Hodgson for The New York Times

A boy named Joe thrust his hands into the pockets of his suit and proclaimed that the day made him want to be a lawyer.

Such conversions are not actually the point, however.

“Our goal is not to produce 60,000 lawyers,” said Debra Lesser, executive director of the [Justice Resource Center](#), an organization that helps schools provide law and civics education, and that has collaborated with Judge Katzmman on the project. “Our goal is to make them good citizens.”

[Russell Wheeler](#), a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution, has been involved in the curriculum-writing portion of the project. He said that while judges have long been open to playing a role in education, perhaps by hosting class trips or visiting classrooms themselves, this program reaches further.

“This is a circuit-wide, coordinated effort” to encourage understanding of the judicial process, Mr. Wheeler said. “It’s safe to say most federal courts are generally inactive in this area. They may put a few things up on their website, but this is a more outgoing approach.”

Ms. Lesser agreed that Judge Katzmman was striving for something in greater depth and hoped the payoff would be deeper, too.

“He truly believes opening up the doors to the courthouse will bring more access and more equity,” Ms. Lesser said.

“I’d rather kids come in through the front door than the back door,” she added. “It has to have an effect.”

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