



CCE's Jury Project Teaches Students About Key Civic Duty



Serving on a jury is one of our most important civic duties, and yet many Americans react to a jury summons with dread or, at times, indifference.

According to the D.C. Court of Appeals, the juror yield (the number of people in the District who are eligible and available for jury service) for 2012 was 22 percent of the total number of prospective jurors summoned. That percentage is broken down as follows: 39,748 individuals who report for jury duty, 26,268 who go through the *voire dire* process, and 6,102 who end up serving on a jury. One problem is that there are a number of people living in the District who are ineligible to serve on a jury, but there are also those who are eligible to serve but don't answer their jury summons.

The court brings in some of these people for a show-cause hearing so they can explain to a judge why they did not appear for jury duty and to reschedule a time to do so. A bench warrant is issued to those who fail to appear at a show-cause hearing. According to the court, on average two people are arrested each week for failure to appear at a show-cause hearing related to jury duty.

In an ongoing effort to teach young people in the District about the importance of jury service, the Council for Court Excellence (CCE), as it has done for 20 years, brings its School Jury Education Project into the city's public and charter high schools. CCE made 15 school visits in 2012 (sometimes a school is visited more than once). The project allows students to play the role of jury members and to deliberate on a mock trial video produced by CCE.



"The purpose is to teach kids what the jury system is all about and why it's important," said Priscilla Skillman, who recently stepped down as CCE's assistant director but serves as consultant for the organization. "We think it's important to go through jury deliberations so they know what it's like and won't be intimidated."

Washington Lawyer joined CCE on a recent visit to a social studies class at the School Without Walls to teach students about the jury system.

Mock Jury Deliberations

Several of the students in Kerry Sylvia's class raised their hands when Skillman asked who among them will be turning 18 years old soon. More hands appeared in the air as students started asking questions.

"What happens if you just don't show up?" asked one student, who, along with several others, was shocked to find out that one could ultimately face jail time for the offense. There were also inquiries about what happens if a person fails to perform jury duty, if he or she is away when the summons is issued, and how the court decides if a person is unfit to serve on a particular jury.

After the initial question-and-answer session, CCE policy analyst Hillary Evans gave a brief introduction about the School Jury Education Project, which she now leads following Skillman's departure. Next, the class prepared to watch a 20-minute mock trial video based on an actual criminal case in the District. Sylvia asked her students to pay close attention and to take notes as they'll need the information later on in making their determination of guilt or innocence in the case.

After the video presentation, the class was divided into two groups, with desks arranged in circles so that the newly created "juries" can deliberate on what they've just seen. Soon the classroom noise began to rise as students started discussing the case. One "jury" was enthusiastic to the point of almost drowning out the other jury's discussions.

Such eager participation is not uncommon, Skillman said, and oftentimes teachers will find their normally quiet students talking during the jury exercise.

Making a Judgment

The presence of Judge Karen Howze of the D.C. Superior Court made the process more authentic. Howze is one of several judges from the D.C. Courts who participate in the project.

On this particular classroom visit, Howze helped guide the students with their jury deliberations and talked about the jury system. "It's the burden of the government to prove a crime and to produce evidence," she told the class. "When you're on a jury, and this is probably one of the hardest things, you may have a judge on your panel and you may have an 18-year-old who just graduated."

"All this extraneous outside information cannot be the basis of the determination," Howze added, referring to information about a case that jurors may gain outside the trial, such as media coverage.

Finally both "juries" reached a verdict: not guilty.

Howze said the high level of participation seen in this particular classroom was indicative of other classes she has worked in in the three years she has been involved in the project. "The best part is that it introduces kids, who are about to become adults, to the jury process and their obligation," she said.

Sylvia, the social studies teacher, said the project's greatest benefit was getting the students to really think about why it's important that they participate in the jury process. She was already familiar with the project through her time teaching Street Law at Benjamin N. Cardozo High School.

"What often gets left out of D.C. government classes is government and civic responsibilities. [This program] gets kids thinking about what their responsibilities are, and it gets them thinking about why it's important that they participate" in the jury process, Sylvia said.

Before leaving the classroom, Judge Howze posed for pictures with the students, and Skillman and Evans distributed copies of CCE's publication *Community Guide to the Courts* as well as feedback forms.

"The juror experience was fun and informational. Thank you for coming and teaching us so much about law, judges, and juries," one feedback form read. Another student wrote: "Before, I was unaware of the importance of jury duty, but now I understand its importance and how it works."

Currently 13 schools are participating in the project, which is presented in partnership with Georgetown University Law Center's D.C. Street Law Program and American University Washington College of Law's Marshall-Brennan Constitutional Literacy Project. —K.A.