



Constitutional Civics Program Celebrating the Constitution

Summary

The ACLU of San Diego & Imperial Counties offers a program that engages scores of volunteer attorneys who bring the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights to life for thousands of San Diego County middle and high school students in a nonpartisan, interactive program that celebrates Constitution Day every year on September 17.

Constitution Day History

In 2004, Congress established "Constitution Day" as a holiday to recognize the signing of the United States Constitution in 1787, and mandated that all publicly-funded educational institutions provide educational programming on the history of the Constitution on that anniversary, September 17. The U.S. Department of Education announced the enactment of this law and declared that it would apply to any school receiving federal funds of any kind.

Constitutional Civics Program Background

In 2007, with the guidance of retired Third Circuit Court Judge H. Lee Sarokin, the ACLU launched a pilot project to teach San Diego County students about the great American values embodied in our founding documents.

Recruiting public and private sector attorneys, the ACLU matched them with middle and high school teachers in San Diego city schools. In 2007, volunteer attorneys spoke to **43 classes**, reaching students from third through twelfth grades. The reviews from teachers, students and volunteer presenters alike were universally enthusiastic.

Following the success of the 2007 pilot project, the ACLU sought to broaden the program's reach, and worked closely with educators, school district personnel, parents and attorneys to publicize the initiative more broadly. The program has grown exponentially each year.



Attorney presenter encouraging the debate in El Cajon.



Actor Richard Dreyfuss engages middle school students.

Constitution Day 2010

This year, more than 180 attorneys volunteered to present to **330 classes** on Sept. 17th. Presenters included prosecutors from the offices of the U.S. attorney, district attorney and city attorney; public, federal and appellate defenders; the State Bar; San Diego's law professors; three judges; Navy JAG; corporate counsel from Qualcomm and Solar Turbines; and attorneys in private practice and from major law firms including:

Allen Matkins; Cooley Godward; DLA Piper; Fish & Richardson; Foley & Lardner; Geller Rudman; Jones Day; Latham & Watkins; Luce Forward; Morrison & Foerster; Procopio Cory; Seltzer Caplan; Sheppard Mullin; Solomon Ward, and Sullivan Hill.

As a special surprise guest lecturer, actor **Richard Dreyfuss** (pictured above) spoke to 8th graders at Earl Warren in Solana Beach!

Why It Works So Well

The ACLU provides resources to speakers and teachers, including three detailed study guides on the United States Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and landmark Supreme Court decisions. We have prepared a trainer's guide and PowerPoint that includes background on numerous topics, questions with which to engage the students in dialogue, and key court cases to use to illustrate key constitutional lessons. The ACLU conducts several optional trainings and provides a document detailing the educational standards that are met by using the lessons employed in the presentation.

The students love it, because the speakers talk about real cases and issues that kids face, and they get to debate these important questions. The attorneys love it, because most haven't had the chance to discuss constitutional law since law school, and they are free to develop their own presentations. And the educators love it because the students are challenged and inspired.



Assistant DA speaks to 3-6 graders.

Accolades

The information fit perfectly into my discussions about the Constitution, but had practical and relevant stories of today that the students could relate to because the cases were about their issues and their peers. – Hoover High teacher

I found the resources and preparation to be fantastic and invigorating, and liked interacting with the students. – DLA Piper partner

All presenters came with energy, creativity, and, especially for "lay people," and an uncanny ability to connect with students in the classroom. – Earl Warren Middle School teacher

The most rewarding element was engaging with the students and realizing how much more socially aware they are than I'd suspected. – Cal Western law professor

After the presenters were gone, the conversations initiated from their visit have continued. As an educator, that's a winning day in my book. – La Costa High teacher