

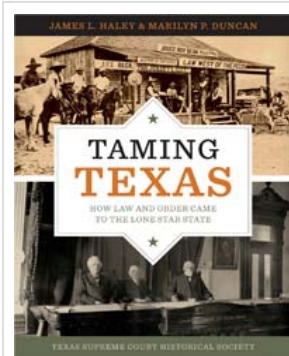
‘Teach Texas’ Teams Lawyers, Judges for 7th Grade Judicial Civics

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By Patricia Baldwin

Thanks to the successful Teach Texas pilot program in Houston-area schools this spring, future seventh graders in Texas will learn about the state’s court system and how the history of the courts is intertwined with the rest of Texas history.

Along the way, the professional image of lawyers and judges is likely to be polished as shiny as a teacher’s apple.



The textbook “Taming Texas” helps seventh grade students understand how the Texas court system works.

More than 8,700 seventh graders have been reached this spring, said Laura Gibson, president of the Houston Bar Association, who adopted the judicial civics education program as her presidential initiative.

“So many schools have signed up, I’m a little worried that we’re wearing out volunteers,” noted the partner at the Houston office of Dentons.

She explained that the Teach Texas program matches a lawyer and a judge to team teach back-to-back sessions in a school.

The program uses a textbook published by the Texas Supreme Court Historical Society and curriculum developed by the Law-Related Education Department of the State Bar of Texas. Financial support comes from the Fellows of the Historical Society.

Gibson credited Charter Fellow and Bracewell partner Warren Harris with presenting the idea of the pilot project to her. She signed on enthusiastically.

Harris, also past president of the Texas Supreme Court Historical Society, recalled a dinner celebrating the 2013 publication of a history of the Texas Supreme Court by author James Haley. A conversation that evening bemoaned the fact that history books often just sit on shelves.

Thus, the wheels of Teach Texas started turning.



Participating in a recent Teach Texas lesson at the Gregory-Lincoln Education Center in Houston: seventh grade teacher Kelton Parker; Texas Supreme Court Justice Jeff Brown; Houston Bar Association President Laura Gibson; eighth grade teacher Vincent Branch; and Bracewell partner Warren Harris.

Haley and co-author Marilyn Duncan adapted historical research to a seventh grade level and worked with educators to create a textbook, “Taming Texas: How Law and Order Came to the Lone Star State,” which met the state’s curriculum standards.

However, Harris noted, “Giving a book to the teachers wasn’t what we wanted to do.”

He added that the project’s organizers believed that judges and lawyers are “uniquely qualified to teach” judicial civics.

“We want to humanize the profession,” he said.



Texas Supreme Court Justice Jeff Brown and Houston attorney Warren Harris conduct a Teach Texas class at the Gregory-Lincoln Education Center in Houston.

He said that many students who have dealt with a lawyer have had a family member with a criminal problem or have been impacted by divorce. Such students likely have formed a negative impression of the legal community.

"There's a huge benefit to getting lawyers into the classroom," Harris added.

Harris said the judicial education program will be rolled out statewide during the spring semester 2017.

Harris and Gibson recently joined Texas Supreme Court Justice Jeff Brown in a class at the Gregory-Lincoln Education Center in Houston.

"I had a good time," Justice Brown commented. "I was very impressed with how much students already knew. They hear about the legislative and executive branches, but not much about the judicial branch.

"I have always appreciated how much professional bar associations do for the community."



Texas Supreme Court Justice Jeff Brown interacts with students at the Gregory-Lincoln Education Center in Houston.

Justice Brown told the students that he decided to become a lawyer when he was in eighth grade. Actually, he noted, he wanted to be president of the United States. When he looked at a list of the presidents and their occupations, he noted that most were lawyers.

So he studied to be a lawyer. But, he added with a laugh, he no longer wanted to be president.

Gibson said that the HBA's longtime philosophy of community involvement is one of the best ways to "show young people they can decide to be a lawyer."

In fact, she pointed out, one student in Justice Brown's class asked him how long it took to be a judge.

"A lot of education," he answered, enumerating the various steps for the student.

At the end of the class, Justice Brown led the students in an interactive game to solicit their views on the importance of various events in the history of the Texas courts.



Texas Supreme Court Justice Jeff Brown interacts with students at the Gregory-Lincoln Education Center in Houston.

Jan Miller, director of the State Bar's Law-Related Education Department, said classroom activities are designed to reinforce what the attorneys and judges are teaching.

"We also tried to make the classroom centered activities interactive so that speakers and students would work together," she said.

Co-chairs of the HBA Teach Texas Committee are Brett Busby, Justice of the 14th Court of Appeals, David Furlow of the Law Office of David A. Furlow, and Erin Lunceford, Judge of the 61st Civil District Court.

To view Justice Jeff Brown in a class at Gregory-Lincoln Education Center in Houston, visit: <https://vimeo.com/158540984>

For more information about the HBA Teach Texas effort, visit: <http://www.hba.org/committees/teachtexas/>

For more information about the statewide effort, visit: www.tamingtexas.org

Do you have a special avocation, hobby or other lifestyle interest to share? Please email patricia.baldwin@texaslawbook.net.

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