

Texas students got their first glimpse of a new state civics initiative this spring. The Taming Texas Judicial Civics and Court History Project is an innovative program designed to teach seventh-grade students about the Texas court system. Taming Texas couples a new book on judicial civics and court history—the first of its kind in the country—with a classroom curriculum taught by lawyers and judges. In its debut, Taming Texas reached nearly 10,000 students in the Houston area.

The Texas Supreme Court Historical Society is spearheading the project—funded by the society’s fellows—in cooperation with the State Bar of Texas Law-Related Education Department. The Houston Bar Association implemented the project’s classroom activities.

Taming Texas features a two-part curriculum based on information about the state’s courts and stories from the *Taming Texas* book, a copy of which is provided to each classroom. Jan Miller, director of the bar’s Law-Related Education Department, developed the curriculum with input from seventh-grade history teachers across the state. The first lesson covers the rule of law and the origins of the Texas legal system and includes an interactive component on milestones of Texas courts. The second lesson touches on the different levels of the state’s courts, the system’s structure, the types of cases

various courts hear, and the similarities and differences between Texas and federal courts.

The HBA’s Teach Texas Committee recruited 160 judges and attorneys to teach the curriculum in middle schools throughout eight Houston-area school districts, an effort led by HBA President Laura Gibson and committee chairs Hon. Brett Busby, a justice on the 14th Court of Appeals; Hon. Erin Luncford, judge of the 61st Judicial District Court; and attorney David Furlow.

“This is an exciting project that will spread the story of the judiciary to classrooms across the state so that students can learn of the rich history of our courts,” said Texas Supreme Court Justice Paul W. Green. “We appreciate the bar undertaking this important project.”

The centerpiece of the Taming Texas project is a series of books written for seventh-grade students on Texas court history. The first book in the series, *Taming Texas: How Law and Order Came to the Lone Star State*, tells the story of

law and courts in the state from the early Spanish colonial period to the present day. The historical society engaged award-winning author James L. Haley to write the book along with co-author Marilyn P. Duncan, who edited and illustrated the book.

As Texas Supreme Court Chief Justice Nathan L. Hecht wrote in the foreword:

## LESSON PLAN

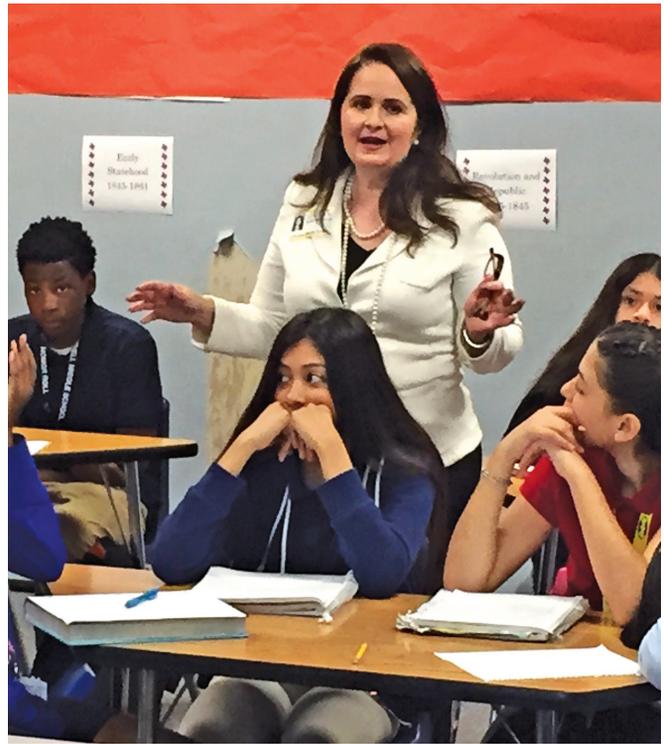
### A new judicial civics project takes off.

BY WARREN HARRIS

Justice Brett Busby (above right), of the 14th Court of Appeals, leads a classroom exercise with students in the KIPP Courage College Prep program at Landrum Middle School in Houston’s Spring Branch ISD.



Texas Supreme Court Justice Jeff Brown interacts with students during a classroom activity on court milestones at Houston ISD's Gregory-Lincoln Education Center in the historic Fourth Ward.



Judge Jennifer Walker Elrod, of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, instructs a class of seventh-graders on the rule of law at O'Donnell Middle School in Alief ISD.

This book is about how [judges and lawmakers have fought against power and prejudice to produce the society we enjoy today] in Texas. Settlers from Spain and Mexico brought with them a civil law tradition that had its origins in Roman law two thousand years ago. At the same time, other pioneers from the United States believed in a common law system borrowed from England. Coming together in this wild frontier, people from very different cultures and backgrounds had to find new ways to settle their disputes and establish order. They recognized women's rights, protected homesteads, tamed the railroads, and fostered the independent spirit that had brought them here in the first place.

The *Taming Texas* book has also received praise from former Texas Supreme Court Chief Justice Wallace B. Jefferson: "A seventh-grade curriculum would be incomplete without an examination of the law's fundamental impact on society. *Taming Texas* serves that purpose brilliantly and, along the way, gives concrete meaning to 'Justice for All' in judicial civics."

The initial *Taming Texas* book has been such a success that the historical society has already commissioned additional titles in the series. The second, *Texas Law and the Frontier*,

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will be published in 2017 and work is underway on the third, *The Chief Justices of Texas*. The series will provide an important resource for teachers; no other state has produced a judicial civics book like *Taming Texas*.

As part of the Taming Texas project, there is a website, [tamingtexas.org](http://tamingtexas.org), where the classroom materials and electronic versions of the *Taming Texas* book are available. Lawyers are invited to download a free electronic copy of the book.

The reach of the HBA Teach Texas Committee volunteers this spring exceeded the most optimistic estimates. "The society's fellows hoped the judicial civics program would have an impact over time," said David J. Beck, chair of the historical society fellows, "but the

enormous success of the Houston rollout took us all by surprise."

The program, Beck noted, will be expanded to other schools in the 2016-2017 school year, with the ambitious goal of reaching every middle school in Texas. **TBJ**



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