



LAW-RELATED EDUCATION CAN CHANGE THE DIRECTION OF A CHILD'S LIFE

By Monica Nuckolls

Law-related education is one of the most powerful tools State Bar of Michigan members have to connect with nonlawyers and teach them the consequences of engaging in illegal activities. It not only introduces others to law as a profession but also helps shape the minds of young people and improve the quality of life in our communities. There is an old saying I heard a lot while growing up: "When you know better, you do better." Law-related education helps people know better.

The beauty of law-related education is that any State Bar member can use it as a tool to permanently change countless lives. This can be accomplished by being active in a large group or organization with law-related education as part of its mission, developing a program for your local community, or by simply reaching out to individuals and sharing your knowledge about the law. As State Bar members, the responsibility is ours, the opportunity for positive change is huge, and the time is now.

During the past several years, my father, Hon. M. T. Thompson Jr., and I have developed three law-related programs that help build character in children and young adults. All three programs are designed to:

- promote the development of self-management skills through decision-making exercises that allow children and young adults to examine real-life situations and consider the choices and consequences presented by each situation;
- teach children and young adults what constitutes unlawful and risky behavior and how to avoid dangerous and unsafe situations; and
- promote responsible citizenship and appropriate behavior.

Character training is delivered through a set of real-life stories about children and young adults. The characters in the stories come from the same types of neighborhoods, share similar backgrounds, and face the same kinds of problems, pressures, and

temptations as the young adults we are trying to reach. Some of the stories involve children trying to cope with adverse environments; others involve children who have made bad choices and had to face the consequences.

Making Choices and Facing Consequences

Our drug-education and crime-prevention program, Making Choices and Facing Consequences, is split into two volumes. The stories in the first volume deal with gangs, bullies, and violent crimes. The stories in volume two revolve around drugs and alcohol. Each story builds to a point of importance and presents the character or characters with one or more critical choices. Good choices have good consequences. Bad choices have bad consequences. The choices have urgency and meaning for the young adults who regularly face many of the same issues. The beauty of the program is the power of the stories, how they are told, how they engage young adults, and the teaching opportunities they present. Working through these real-life situations improves decision-making skills and helps develop a choices-vs.-consequences approach to making decisions.

In 2008, we used these materials in Saginaw for a pilot program called the Boyz-2-Men Manhood Training Program for 119 young men between the ages of 8 and 18. In 2010, we conducted a pilot program called Project Future for 350 youths in Saginaw and 110 youths in Pontiac. Studies conducted by Delta College and Oakland University concluded that Project Future reduces the likelihood of young adults participating in gang- or bully-related activities and violent crimes and also reduces drug and alcohol use.

Weekly Bully Beat Down

In 2010, we developed the *Weekly Bully Beat Down*, an anti-bullying weekly reader consisting of 10 separate editions used in 13 school districts around the state. The Delta College and Oakland University studies confirm the program's ability to reduce episodes of harassment and bullying among students and help create a bully-free educational environment.

How Criminal Justice Works in Michigan

Another law-related education project my father and I worked on is a publication called *How Criminal Justice Works in Michigan: Understanding Our Courts, Criminal Justice System & Bill of Rights*. Its purpose is twofold. First, it promotes responsible citizenship and behavior standards by helping students understand the United States Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the courts and criminal justice system, and important concepts such as justice, responsibility, and individual rights. It is also designed for individuals who want a general overview of how Michigan's criminal justice system works. It examines and explains each step of a criminal case from arrest to adjudication, including the constitutional rights, privileges, and safeguards entitled to every American

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citizen suspected or accused of committing a crime. We believe that a better understanding of how the criminal justice system works will lead to increased confidence in it.

My experience with these programs has convinced me that law-related education can change the direction of a child's life. Every time I talk to a child involved in one of our programs, I ask myself why more State Bar members are not engaged in this type of activity. We can no longer afford to view this as optional public service work. If we want to live up to everything our bar card calls us to be, it is mandatory. I urge you to get involved. Whether you join an organization with law-related education as its goal, start your own program, or take a more individualized approach, I implore you to do something. Our children and our community need you, and the State Bar of Michigan is here to help.

For more information on how you can get involved, please contact me at (248) 751-7800 ext. 7752. ■



Monica Nuckolls is an associate professor and vice chair of the Torts Department at Thomas M. Cooley Law School. She also chairs the Law Related Education Subcommittee of the SBM Law Related Education & Public Outreach Committee and is a member of the Michigan Center for Civic Education Board of Directors. She has co-authored several books aimed toward teaching young people about the law and promoting responsible citizenship.