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## STUDENT JURORS SURPRISED BY REAL-LIFE COURTROOM CIVILITY

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When Chief Judge Jon Levy hosted his first civil discourse program in his Portland, Maine, courtroom, he was struck by how impressed the high school students were that he and the participating attorneys treated each other with such dignity and respect.

"It's something we take for granted," Levy said. "However, the written evaluations showed that the students were impressed — and surprised — by how well we get along.

"Even though these are very difficult and important issues taken on in an adversarial system, they saw how we live up to our professional responsibilities yet treat each other with respect and decency."

When Levy introduced the [national Civil Discourse and Difficult Decisions initiative](#) on May 20 in his district, he found it to be such a positive experience that he is sharing it with the other judges in Portland and Bangor. Based on the first event's success, another is scheduled for June 16.

"It was exhilarating for me and the lawyers who worked with me on it," Levy said. He described the feedback from the students, teacher, and volunteer attorneys as "glowing."

The teacher appreciated the focus on civility, a behavior he tries to foster in his classroom. He described the pupils' reactions this way: "The students enjoyed it thoroughly and raved about it on the way home. I thought your program was set up well and the judge was so student-friendly that it made the experience for the kids very welcoming and non-threatening."

For judges and attorneys, the program requires only 45 minutes of reading courtroom-ready materials posted on [USCourts.gov's Educational Resources](#) section. For teachers and students, all preparation is handled in the courtroom as part of the event.

Levy was gratified by the way the students rose to the occasion.

"I asked questions almost at the same level I would ask attorneys in my courtroom," he said. "I was impressed by how poised the student attorneys were and how thoughtful their responses were."

The distinguishing characteristic of AO-produced programs is that jury deliberations and civil discourse are the centerpiece of the experience. Every student and learning style is fully involved.

"It was clear from the student jurors' deliberations that they had been listening closely and thinking about every aspect of the case," Levy said.

In their evaluations, student jurors said the experience made a huge impact on them as future jurors. Many commented on how they now feel prepared for jury service and collaborative decision-making. One student wrote: "The differing opinions helped me shape my own opinions."

The fictional scenario the students argued was a cyberbullying issue based on the Supreme Court's 2015 decision in *Elonis v. U.S.*

"It was an excellent case and a great hypothetical because it is very relevant, and the kids had a lot to say about it based on their experience with social media," Levy said, adding that the students raised issues he hadn't considered.

"A program like this brings the public — specifically, high school students — into the courthouse and exposes them to the brilliance of the rule of law," Levy said. "I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that these impressions will last throughout their lives because it was such an unusual and fun experience for them — both the venue and the professionals. In fact, it can be a life-altering experience."

On the other side of the country, Magistrate Judge Theresa Fricke, in Tacoma, Washington, used the same program successfully with college students. [Read her first-person account](#) of the experience.

For more information about the civility program, contact the AO's national educational outreach manager Rebecca Fanning at [Rebecca\\_Fanning@ao.uscourts.gov](mailto:Rebecca_Fanning@ao.uscourts.gov).



*In Portland, Maine, students experience the importance of civility as a legal and life skill in a courtroom simulation presided over by Chief Judge Jon Levy (center).*

