

Ukiah students learn about the court and U.S. Constitution



Judge Jeanine Nadel orchestrated a mock trial in her courtroom where the students served as judge, jury, attorneys, witnesses and court staff. (Contributed photos)



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On Sept. 28, the Mendocino Superior Court hosted more than 100 fifth-grade students from the Ukiah Unified School District to augment their understanding of how the U.S. Constitution is the foundation of our justice system.

All fifth-grade students in the Ukiah school district spent the month of September learning about the Constitution, including the Bill of Rights, court cases that have shaped our democracy and the role of an independent judiciary in the United States.

The field trip to the courthouse was designed to reinforce what the students were learning and to show them that the Constitution underpins how the justice system works. Such principles as protection of individual rights and due process, appointment of counsel for indigent defendants, trials before a jury of one's peers, and other tenets of the U.S. Constitution are visible reminders of the Constitution and are among the daily activities in every trial court.

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The field trip was originally conceived by Ukiah teacher Rocio Ramos. When she contacted the court to see if a field trip would be possible, the court enthusiastically agreed to collaborate with her. Ms. Ramos said, "We are excited to introduce our fifth-graders, who are studying the branches of government and historical court cases, to our local judicial system. This is a way to connect students in a positive format to the legal system and strengthen our community relationships while inspiring them to be civically engaged. You never know, one of these students might become a Supreme Court justice one day!"

Court Executive Officer Kim Turner, who took the lead in organizing the activities, said, "This is a golden opportunity for students to have a first, positive exposure to the court system and to our judges. So many people are reticent about coming to court, finding it confusing and difficult to navigate. My greatest hope is that students will leave the courthouse today with an appreciation for the important work that is done here each day and with an understanding about the importance of the rule of law. The court strives to be open, accessible and helpful to all Mendocino residents. I hope that we conveyed this to the students."

Students met first with Ms. Turner talking about California trial courts. Then, students observed hearings in four courtrooms. In addition, Judge Jeanine Nadel orchestrated a mock trial in her courtroom where the students served as judge, jury, attorneys, witnesses and court staff. After courtroom observations, the students convened in the Jury Assembly Room and Judges Faulder, Dolan and Shanahan answered their questions about being a judge, difficult cases, Constitutional issues in court, and a variety of other topics.

Both Ukiah Unified School District and the court hope to make this learning experience an annual event.