



[Home](#) » [Resources](#) » [Educational Outreach](#) » » [Second Circuit's After-School Program Breaks Ground](#)

## SECOND CIRCUIT'S AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAM BREAKS GROUND

Thursday, August 31, 2023 | [Civics Showcase](#)

The Second Circuit, as part of its Robert A. Katzmann *Justice For All: Courts and the Community Initiative*, has launched an innovative, annual civics education program taught by judges and attorneys that brings diverse New York City high school students into the historic Thurgood Marshall U.S. Courthouse in lower Manhattan for an after-school program that exposes them to careers in the law.

The program is a 12-week law course hosted and conducted by the Second Circuit for middle and high school students participating in the Harlem Educational Activities Fund (HEAF), a non-profit organization that offers academic enrichment, personal development, college preparation and career exposure to young people from underserved communities.



The Second Circuit plans to offer this course each spring and hopes that the program will be adopted by other federal courthouses across the nation.

"We have witnessed how school field trips and other one-day programs at the federal courthouse can be wonderful tools for civics education," said U.S. Circuit Judge Joseph F. Bianco, who established the after-school program and the annual court camps initiative in Central Islip, Brooklyn, and Manhattan that has been used and modified in other Circuits. He co-chairs the *Justice For All initiative* with U.S. District Judge Victor Marrero (New York-Southern).

"However, our thought was that offering a three-month course at the courthouse to high school students already interested in the law and the legal profession could be a life-changing experience, especially for students in underserved communities who might not otherwise have full access to law or career programs," Bianco added.

From March through May 2023, students came once a week after school to the Thurgood Marshall Courthouse, where they heard from eight federal judges and from attorneys at the top of the legal profession who discussed their careers and timely legal topics ranging from criminal investigations, prosecution, and defense to counter-terrorism activities.

"The goal of the program was to help the students understand the importance of the law in our society and give them a real-life glimpse as to how different careers in the legal profession and court system provide a unique opportunity to help others and impact the world," Bianco said.

In one class, First Amendment scholar Floyd Abrams and his daughter, U.S. District Judge Ronnie Abrams, explored with the students the importance of the First Amendment, and then led the students in a Zoom discussion with Mary Beth Tinker, a plaintiff in the 1969 landmark Supreme Court case of *Tinker v. Des Moines*.

The students also heard from Damian Williams, U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York, about his inspiring personal story and the day-to-day work of a federal prosecutor. In another class, the students had an in-depth discussion with the Eastern District of New York's Federal Defender Attorney-in-Charge Deirdre von Dornum, about defending the Constitution in the courtroom. The presentation was followed by a conversation with Larry Williams about his involvement in the criminal justice system as a defendant and his road to rehabilitation.

The students took a field trip to visit a Wall Street law firm and talked to attorneys about their careers and professional lives in big law. However, the series went beyond educational to relatable and inspirational. As one student described it on the program feedback form: "Lawyers/judges are a lot more filled with 'personality' than I previously envisioned (just cold-blooded defense of their side or calling out a decision)."

Students learned about the role of the Supreme Court from Nicole Maffei, Civic Education Director at the Supreme Court Historical Society. Students also heard from judges and attorneys how to argue a case before the U.S. Supreme Court. They also heard from Michael Catapano, a lawyer and former NFL football player, before practicing their advocacy skills by presenting arguments debating the greatest sports franchise or musical performer.

The culminating activity was a moot court competition in several courtrooms where family members and other supporters watched students argue the First Amendment issues in the Supreme Court case of *Mahanoy Area School District v. B.L.*

"We could sense the positive impact of the program as the classes progressed from the enthusiasm and intellectual curiosity displayed by the students from class to class," Bianco said. "But, when we received the written feedback from the students at the end of the course, we quickly realized that the impact was even greater than we had ever imagined."

One student echoed the sentiments of others when she wrote, "I am very grateful for this program ... All the guest speakers that came to share their story inspired me because as they told their story, I thought of myself being in their shoes! With each story, I saw myself being happy in the position because I'm doing what I love most."

Another student succinctly summed up the experience this way: "I have thoroughly enjoyed this program from the beginning to the end."

Even though the program was scheduled after a full day of school, one student summarized the response of the participants this way: "This program is a fun after-school program that I look forward to attending every week. My fellow attendees are very friendly and there's always a strong sense of camaraderie in every meeting."

---