

FROM THE CHIEF

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Chief Justice
The West Virginia Supreme Court



WELCOME TO THE WEST VIRGINIA JUDICIAL LEARNING CENTER

“Do you have a hammer?”

This question was posed to the justices of the Supreme Court of Appeals by a student visiting our courtroom with his fourth-grade class earlier this year. It was a vivid reminder that our perception of our role as West Virginia’s high court may vary from how children see us. And of course, it was funny.

In case you’re wondering, we showed our student visitor the gavel we keep at the bench (but never use) and then explained how trial courts are different than appellate courts.

All five justices enjoy talking to young people about our state courts and greeting student groups who visit the Capitol. We know that educating West Virginians about the rule of law and how our state courts work is a critical element of maintaining public trust and confidence. The unfortunate truth is that our branch of government is not well-understood.

But this is not just a problem for our branch. Only about 20% of U.S. students are proficient in civics, and the number who test below the basic level is increasing, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics assessment.¹

So, the Supreme Court of Appeals is always looking for new ways to teach students about what we do. That’s why we recently opened the West Virginia Judicial Learning Center on the third floor of the East Wing outside our courtroom. I’m thrilled that West Virginia joins a growing number of state supreme courts that maintain such centers to help citizens learn about the rule of law, our branch of government and how courts work for them.

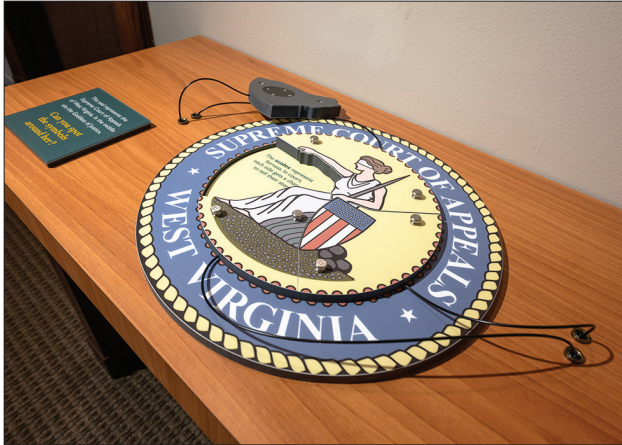
Courts began to focus on civics education outreach when former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor founded iCivics in 2009. “The practice of democracy

is not passed down through the gene pool. It must be taught and learned by each new generation,” Justice O’Connor said at the time. iCivics is a nonpartisan organization that creates games and other resources so that students can learn about American democracy and all aspects of our government.²

The judiciary remain dedicated to civics education in part because we believe that if West Virginians know more about our government, they will be better equipped for civil discourse. As highlighted by our decision to add a civility pledge to the lawyer’s oath a few years ago, the Court strives to model the skill of disagreeing agreeably. We all care about our country, our state and governing wisely, even if we have different ways of expressing it.

If it’s been a while since you visited our beautiful Capitol, I invite you to come and bring your family.

THE WEST VIRGINIA SUPREME COURT



ALL PHOTOS, ALEX WILSON, SUPREME COURT OF APPEALS OF WEST VIRGINIA





The Learning Center is open whenever the Capitol is open. It is an interactive space designed with elementary and middle-school students in mind, but there is something for everyone from toddlers to adults. Even lawyers might learn a thing or two.

Speaking of lawyers, I readily admit that we repurposed your conference room across from the courtroom as part of the Learning Center project. We hope that once you see what we have done with the space, you can forgive us.

Now that the Learning Center is open, we plan to develop activities teachers can use in their classrooms before and after they visit the Capitol. And for students who may be too far away to visit as a class, we will add more educational information to our website.

The Learning Center is one of several multiyear projects completed this year. I am grateful for the hard work of excellent leaders in our Administrative Office who oversee and manage this important work. Here are a few other highlights:

- Our Technology Division upgraded the Unified Judicial Application (UJA) this year, unifying all magistrate court records and making those records accessible to the public on any computer for free.
- We launched a new website designed to make it easier for lawyers and members of the public to find information about the courts.

- We completed the first-ever strategic planning process for the judicial branch, identifying strategic priorities by first listening to lawyers, court staff, litigants and members of the public who completed a survey or participated in focus groups.

All these projects demonstrate the Court's commitment to making the West Virginia judiciary accessible, transparent, efficient and modern. I want our branch to be viewed not only as fair and impartial, but also as ready and willing to solve problems within our purview.

It has been my honor to serve a second term as chief justice this year. While we always have challenges, I am confident that the future of the West Virginia judiciary is bright. I am grateful for and inspired by my colleagues in all 55 counties of our great state. And we all appreciate the hard work lawyers do every day. Please join me in helping 2024 Chief Justice Tim Armstead build upon our progress in the coming year. **WV**

Endnotes

1. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics assessment is designed to measure the civics knowledge and skills that are critical to the responsibilities of citizenship in the constitutional democracy of the United States. The assessment is administered to students at grades 4, 8, and 12. The most recent civics assessment was given in 2022 to approximately 7,800 students in grade 8. *See Assessments - Civics | NAEP* (ed.gov).
2. *See* www.iCivics.org.