

Bringing the Rule of Law to Young Teens

VBA-Virginia Law Foundation Project Could Reach Every School in Virginia

by Dawn Chase



What if every middle school student in Virginia could experience the epiphany of understanding what the rule of law is?

Perhaps the exposure would make students value their citizenship more, inspire leadership, and engender respect for law and the role of lawyers in our society.

With that in mind, Virginia Bar Association President G. Michael Pace Jr., a Roanoke lawyer, has launched the VBA Rule of Law Project — an ambitious plan to pair attorneys trained to teach the rule of law with professional educators so lawyers can effectively spread their message statewide about the treasure we have in our law-based system of government.

The statewide scope and high-quality educational approach are made possible by a \$50,000 grant from the Virginia Law Foundation (VLF) to the VBA Foundation. The grant is one of the first since the VLF revised its grant-making process to provide larger amounts with longer reach.

Pace, who is the son and spouse of educators, has assembled a task force of teachers and school administrators to work with lawyers to devise a curriculum that is developmentally appropriate for its target classes — seventh and eighth graders — and is consistent with the Virginia Standards of Learning.

The project will first be offered at schools in Roanoke County, Roanoke City, and Salem. To prepare teachers, the project sponsored a Rule of Law Symposium taught in early December by Dean Rodney A. Smolla of the Washington & Lee University School of Law.

The heart of the program is the volunteer attorneys, who, Pace hopes, will be provided by the state's voluntary bar associations. The volunteers will be required to take training in how to teach the rule of law. Total attorney time commitment will

be less than an hour for training plus an hour for each class the lawyer agrees to attend, Pace said.

Pace envisions that the course materials and organizational blueprint eventually will be available online, so that bar associations statewide can bring the Rule of Law Project into every middle school in Virginia. Pace hopes other states, and even nations, might find the curriculum useful.

Most of the VLF's \$50,000 grant will be used to develop a DVD that features prominent lawyers and judges talking about the history and meaning of the rule of law. The list of four presenters has not been firmed up yet, Pace said.

The DVD development cost is estimated to be \$25,000, and another \$10,000 will be needed to develop the project's website, according to the VLF grant application. The remaining \$15,000 will support task force meetings for curriculum development, training programs for teachers and lawyers, and program materials.

Thomas W. Payne Jr., the VLF's development director, said the VBA Rule of Law Project "will really make a difference. It is a real credit to the legal community." Payne described the program to the Virginia State Bar Council in October as an example of the kind of projects the VLF is searching for.

Pace said he hopes the project will make today's middle schoolers "much better advocates for the rule of law than their parents have been.

"I want them to understand that the rule of law is what sets America apart ... and that, absent the rule of law, life here would be much, much different. We have to understand it and preserve it."