

President's Message

by Kevin E. Martingayle



Our Role in Education

THIS EDITION OF *Virginia Lawyer* is dedicated to construction law, and even though construction litigation has long been a part of my practice, I am taking this opportunity to talk about building something else, a more educated and functional world around us.

It is no secret that governmental funding of institutions of education at every level is always challenging and requires tough choices in local, state, and federal budgets. And yet, the value of education in our society is something so well-recognized that it is enshrined in the Constitution of Virginia:

That free government rests, as does all progress, upon the broadest possible diffusion of knowledge, and that the Commonwealth should avail itself of those talents which nature has sown so liberally among its people by assuring the opportunity for their fullest development by an effective system of education throughout the Commonwealth.¹

This statement is more than merely aspirational or philosophical. It is a recognition that a properly functioning government depends on an educated citizenry.

Only a tiny percentage of us will ever hold a public position with direct responsibility for education in Virginia, but that does not mean that we should leave the work to others or shy away from accepting responsibility. To the contrary, attorneys are not only among the most highly educated and well-trained members of society, but we are uniquely skilled in words, logic, and problem-solving. As a parent of two public high school students and one middle school student, my experience has been that educators and adminis-

trators appreciate parental involvement and support, particularly that from professionals such as attorneys.

An example of a terrific success story is the mentoring program at Seatack Elementary School in Virginia Beach. Inspired by a thesis on inter-generational mentoring written by his daughter who was then a student at Princeton, now-retired Circuit Court Judge Thomas Shadrick started the program in 2000. Each third grade student in the school is assigned a mentor who visits once per week and assists with math, reading, and general social development skills. Seatack was selected for the program because the school zone has a disproportionately high percentage of students with financial, family, and other factors that make them more at risk for educational failure and legal trouble. The program's volunteers include many lawyers, as well as other positive role models such as law enforcement officers and a variety of retirees with time and wisdom to share. After more than a decade in existence, the mentor program is thriving, and the feedback from parents, teachers, and administrators is very positive.

Another great way for attorneys to participate in the education of our citizens is hosting paid or unpaid interns. Although most lawyers automatically think of law school "summer associates" when they contemplate working with students, our firm has worked with several high school and college interns over the years, and it has been mutually beneficial and a lot of fun.

One of my favorite educational activities has been serving as a volunteer coach for middle school and high school teams. As trained organizers, communicators, and competitors, lawyers have a lot to offer students participating in academic and athletic

competitions, and I have found that coaches are grateful for the help.

There are many other ways to get involved, including:

- volunteering with parent-teacher associations and similar organizations,
- presenting educational videos and participating in programs organized by various voluntary bar associations,
- speaking on legal subjects in classes and school assemblies,
- qualifying to serve as a hearing officer in school discipline cases,
- providing feedback and guidance to teachers, administrators, and public officials when you see problems and have suggestions for improvement.

Whatever your interest or particular talent, there are meaningful and valuable opportunities to participate in advancing education, thus benefitting and improving our society.

An inscription on the wall of the James Madison Memorial Hall at the Library of Congress is particularly on point:

Learned institutions ought to be favorite objects with every free people. They throw that light over the public mind which is the best security against crafty & dangerous encroachments on the public liberty.²

These words are as true today as they were when written nearly 200 years ago. No group of professionals is more capable of advancing education in so many different ways than the members of the Virginia State Bar. Let's build a better tomorrow by contributing our talents to education today.

Endnotes:

- 1 Constitution of Virginia, Article I, §15.
- 2 Madison to W.T. Barry, August 4, 1822, www.loc.gov/loc/walls/madison.html (last viewed November 3, 2014)