
PHILADELPHIA BAR ASSOCIATION
YOUNG LAWYERS DIVISION
ORATORICAL CONTEST

I. Project Description

Like many Bar Associations, the Young Lawyers Division of the Philadelphia Bar Association is dedicated to serving the community in various ways, including sponsoring projects at local schools to attract students to the legal profession. The annual Michael K. Smith Oratorical Contest provides Philadelphia public school students in grades 4-8 with an opportunity to make an appellate-style argument before a panel of young lawyers serving as judges. The Young Lawyers Division's district-wide contest is the culmination of oratorical contests held at individual schools throughout the District, the winners of which advance to the district-wide competition. Participating students learn how to argue, reason and think on their feet, as well as practice their public speaking.

II. Project Planning/Development

A. Identification of Need

Several years ago, Michael K. Smith, a young Philadelphia attorney, died prematurely. Michael was very active in community service projects and pro bono legal work. The Oratorical Contest was established in his memory and named in his honor.

School children need to be challenged and motivated, as well as be able to see the ultimate goal of their education. As attorneys, we aspire to provide students with a positive image of our profession and provide an incentive for them to maximize their educational opportunities. This project has been well received by the teachers, students, parents and young lawyers in the Philadelphia School District.

B. Determination of Project Goals and Design

1. Decisions to be made

a. Options - Project Goals

The goal of this program is to provide students with a positive image of attorneys, ambition to continue their education, and confidence gained from their ability to speak in public, prepare a legal argument and think on their feet. This program is also intended to provide attorneys with a sense of personal fulfillment. Young lawyers have found this project enjoyable and, even if in a mock setting, it enables them to witness an oral argument from a different perspective.

b. Options - Project Design

There are several components to this project. First is the preparation of the case problem. Usually, two or three attorneys prepare the problem based on the ABA's current law week theme. For example, the past law week focused on the First Amendment, so the problem involved a student's right to wear an offensive t-shirt to school. The problem includes both the factual and procedural history, and is approximately three pages long. After a scenario is written, the attorneys also provide the relevant law, along with two or three cases and their summaries, from which the students can prepare their legal arguments. The problem is then provided to participating schools in the district.

After the problem is prepared and distributed, the chair of the committee meets with teachers who will administer the preliminary contests in their respective schools. The purpose of this meeting is to review the case problem and rules. In addition to introducing the problem and explaining the overall contest structure and guidelines, teachers are offered practical tips for conducting their contests. Teachers are advised, for example, that students should not reiterate the facts and procedural history to the judges' panel, as the panel is already familiar with them; instead, students should focus on the legal argument.

Informed teachers can then return to their respective schools and conduct the preliminary contests that will yield participants in the YLD's district-wide contest. Each school may present one student per grade group for participation in the district-wide competition.

Finally, attorney-volunteers, students and teachers gather to conduct the district-wide competition. Prior to beginning the presentations, students are gathered in an assigned room, and the rules are again explained. Among the most significant rules which should be repeated in this meeting are: No student may view another student's argument until after his or her presentation is completed; students should only present legal argument -- no facts or procedural history should be explained; and presentations are limited to fifteen minutes each. The students remain in the assigned room until it is their turn to present their argument.

The number of panels required to conduct the competition depends upon the number of participants. There should be at least five attorneys on each panel. While there is no limit to the scope of the program, students in Philadelphia are divided into two groups: grades 4-6 and grades 7-8, with one group presenting in the morning, and the other in the afternoon. The students are then scored on their presentation on several different factors, including the content and originality of their argument and their oratorical skills. After the scores are tallied, the top three winners in each group are awarded a "scholarship" in the form of an education bond.

Each student presents his/her argument individually, and in private, so that other students are not given an unfair advantage. Students are permitted to choose which side of the argument they will present. Since there is no right or wrong position on the case problem, participants are not scored based on their selection. (The problem should be carefully balanced.) Students are given fifteen minutes for their presentation. The students should be prepared to speak for about 7 minutes, so that they will be able to fill the time if the panel is "cold." Panels often interrupt older students to ask questions early in the argument, while younger students are given approximately five minutes to speak without interruption (unless they need the help), so that they will feel more comfortable when the questions begin.

2. Decision-making process

This project, as explained above, has received the full support of the senior bar, as well as the Philadelphia YLD Executive Committee. The co-chairs of this event are given discretion in taking steps to implement the contest, and need little in the way of committee or other approval in doing so. On the other hand, the participating school district will be involved in making several major decisions. It is best to have one representative from the school district as a contact. The school district contact person will be responsible for helping to set deadlines and dates, as well as reviewing and implementing the rules by which the students and teachers must abide.

3. Considerations in project planning

a. Community Resources

It is important that this project be implemented with the full cooperation of the participating school district. While only the public school district was invited to participate in the contest in Philadelphia (because of the ease of dealing with a single entity – the school district – as well as its large size), private schools should also be considered for participation in the program.

b. Personnel

The number of volunteers needed depends greatly on the number of participants. As far as young lawyers are concerned, a chair and/or co-chairs must be identified to spearhead the project. The implementation of this program is a large time commitment, covering several months -- organizing the event, coordinating with the school district, meeting with the teachers, preparing letters summarizing the entire contest and problem for the volunteers, and running the contest require considerable attention.

Two or three attorneys will be needed to prepare the case problem. This is a time-consuming undertaking, but will be most rewarding. Once the authors identify the basic case problem, the problem narrative must be written, and legal research must be conducted to find cases that fit the problem and, importantly, can be understood by the students. These cases must then be summarized for the students.

On the day of the contest, at least 5 volunteers are needed for each panel, and each panel can judge about three students per hour. Each session (morning, grades 4-6, and afternoon, grades 7-8) lasts about 2 hours for the actual contest. Therefore, at least 5 attorneys are needed for every 6 students. The entire session (including orientation, contest and awards presentation) will last about three hours. Separate volunteers are desirable for each session. Each lawyer is asked to volunteer for a three hour time period.

c. Revenue availability/fund raising

This project can be implemented at little or no cost, although funds are necessary to award the winning students with a scholarship bond, if that is the desired prize. Scholarship sponsorships may provide one funding option. Last year, the Philadelphia YLD divided \$1,500 among the contest winners.

d. Other...Include equipment/physical needs

This project requires a room large enough for a typical oral argument, including panel

members and orator. A podium or lectern is recommended. In addition, there should be an area for the teachers and parents to observe. Each member of the panel should be provided a score sheet to evaluate each participant. Another large room is necessary in order to orient the students at the commencement of the day, to serve as the assigned room where students will remain as they await their turn to present, and to host the awards presentation.

II. Implementation...How to replicate your project

A. Timetable

Four months before the contest -- The volunteer authors should begin preparation of the problem so that it will be completed in time to present to the teachers at the introductory/planning meeting. The chairs should also confirm the location for this event. The school district administration building may be an option, but actual courtrooms, if available, would be even more exciting for the students. Last, the chairs should ensure that the rules of the contest are in written form that teachers and students can follow.

Three months before the contest -- The chairs of this committee should meet with the school district representative and teachers to distribute and explain the problem and the rules. It would also be helpful if at least one author is present at this meeting to assist in explaining the problem. In addition to explaining the problem and the rules, examples of two possible questions are provided for each side of the argument, so that the teachers have an idea of what the panel may ask and what the students should expect.

Two months before the contest -- The chairs should begin to solicit volunteers for the panels. In addition, the chairs need to confirm which schools/students will be attending so that enough volunteers can be recruited. The chair should also prepare a summary for the volunteers to make their job easier.

B. Recruitment and Training of Volunteers/Personnel

Emails should be sent to the affiliate's members to obtain both volunteer authors and panelists. In advance of the event, panelists should be provided with a summary, as well as a complete copy, of the problem. It is also advisable to provide panelists with sample questions in order to avoid "cold" panels. Last, before the students begin the presentations, the chair should meet with the panelists to go over the problem and scoring. If all of this is done, the panelists should be well prepared to handle the students' oral arguments.

C. Publicity

This project has not been publicized outside of the legal community. The school district is left to decide how to publicize the project within their individual schools and community. This issue will depend on your particular school district and community. Whatever the affiliate may decide about publicity, it is advisable to stay in contact with participating schools and remain involved throughout the process. The success of this project depends, in large part, on the commitment of the individual schools and teachers.

This program is promoted within the organized bar by the YLD in the manner in which other programs or events are publicized: via a weekly email and monthly mailing as well as a succinct

announcement in the monthly bar publication. This provides an opportunity to obtain volunteers and support throughout the bar. After the event, an article is provided for the monthly bar newspaper.

D. Day-to-Day Operations

This project is not ongoing in the sense that it does not require day-to-day operations. The project is always extremely successful and is an annual event. If the recommended timetable described above is followed, no emergencies should arise, and the event will almost run itself -- once the problem is written and the volunteers are conscripted.

IV. Evaluation and Impact

This project provides a forum for students to improve their public speaking, legal reasoning, quick thinking, and to gain confidence. It also exposes them to the kind of work some attorneys perform for clients every day.

After the contest concludes, the student-participants, parents and teachers are invariably extremely grateful. Although only one student per grade group participates from each school, many students are provided this worthwhile opportunity in the preliminary contests. This provides an excellent learning experience which students can carry with them beyond the contest and into the future. Young lawyers similarly value the opportunity to be of service and to interact with local youth.

It is suggested that you solicit feedback from participants throughout the contest as well as after its conclusion. Comments and suggestions from participants are invaluable to ensure the project is as successful as possible, while guaranteeing its continued relevance and vitality, from year to year.

V. Bibliography/Other Resources

Attached are the following documents which will assist in implementing this project:

- (1) Response form pertaining to participation in Oratorical Contest;
- (2) Rules of the Contest; and
- (3) Competition Score Sheet.

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