

Supreme Court offers a civics program for students

By Chief Justice David K. Thomson

The Supreme Court of New Mexico launched a program in 2021 to help young people learn about our system of justice and the role of courts in resolving legal disputes. The concept of the Rule of Law Program was straightforward: We learn by observation.

With that in mind, the Court invites schools and students to participate in the sixth year of the Rule of Law Program by observing an oral argument in a criminal case on April 1 in Portales at Eastern New Mexico University.

Since the inaugural program with an oral argument in Santa Fe, the Court has traveled to Farmington, Española, Albuquerque, and Las Cruces to allow students to watch our judicial branch of government in action. About 950 students have attended oral arguments in person or viewed them online in the past two years as part of the Rule of Law Program.

In Portales, the Court will consider an Otero County man's appeal of an aggravated drunken driving conviction. Students will learn from the case about a person's constitutional right to a fair trial and the steps followed in court to mitigate against possible bias in prosecutive jurors.

The appeals process itself offers students a lesson in how the parties in a legal dispute can turn to a higher court to correct what they view as an error in a lower court's decision and a possible injustice in the outcome of a case.

During the oral argument, attorneys will outline the legal reasoning in support of their client's position in the case and respond to questions from the justices. After the argument, members of the Court will deliberate in private and return to announce a decision if the justices reach an agreement during their deliberations.

The Court's goal with the Rule of Law Program is to bring the law alive for young people. Students observe what happens when New Mexico's highest court is asked to interpret the law and apply it to resolve a pending appeal in an actual case.

The Court posts information about the program on its website, including lesson plans and background materials about the case prepared by the Supreme Court Law Library to help teachers who plan to have their students attend the oral argument in Portales or watch it remotely.

We hope that students who participate in the program will gain a greater understanding of the rule of law – the principle that all people and institutions are accountable to a system of fair and equitable laws. Students also can learn about the role courts play in preserving this principle on which our nation was founded.

In the year we celebrate the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, the Rule of Law Program provides an opportunity for educators and students to explore the legal underpinnings of our democratic form of government.

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(Photo courtesy of the New Mexico Supreme Court)