

“Court In The Classroom”



Judge John J. Russo
Administrative and Presiding Judge

“Court is now in session!”

In February of 2014, the Cuyahoga County Common Pleas Court began a new program to reach out to kids across the county. Instead of busing them to the Justice Center, we took the Court to them.

With the help of the Lakewood City Schools, we conducted two Court sessions before the 8th grade classes of Garfield and Harding Middle Schools. The kids got to see defendants sentenced to probation for non-violent crimes and witnessed plea changes that showcase how a person’s constitutional rights are protected.

How does this work? We simply create a courtroom on the assembly stage! The Judge has a table in the center while the defense and prosecuting attorneys have tables to either side. The Judge finds two cases (a pleas change and a probation sentencing) that would have an impact on 8th graders. The two sides are then notified of the location change. Previous cases have involved drug possession, sexting and attempted burglary.

We also have two sheriff’s deputies on hand, along with the Judge’s bailiff and a licensed Court Reporter.

The idea is to allow kids to see the legal process in real time. They see that poor choices have consequences. And rest assured, we would not bring a case before the kids where we believe someone would be a danger. Parents are also notified of the proceedings by the school in advance in case they do not want their child to attend.

It is amazing to watch the kids as the cases play out. They have been attentive and full of questions. The legal system at work truly is fascinating.

[Check out the Plain Dealer’s story!](#)

If your district would be interested in hosting a session of Cuyahoga County Common Pleas Court, please contact Community Outreach Coordinator Darren Toms at dtoms@cuyahogacounty.us.

Suggested Stage Layout

Sheriff's
Deputy

Judge

Defendant/
Defense Attorney

Prosecuting
Attorney

- Microphones at each stage table.

Edge of Stage

Court
Reporter

Students



Items To Consider

- Schedule two periods at the start of a Friday school day. We need about 1.5 hours.
- We try to schedule one plea change and one sentencing. We look for cases that could directly impact 8th graders. Note: Due to the legal process, changes could be made!
- We request a separate seating area for defendants/attorneys, preferably a small room. They should not have to be seated with the kids.
- We can provide a “Courts In Ohio” handout a few weeks ahead of time so teachers can work it into their curriculum. Once finished, we will also provide a link to our jury introduction video so they can watch it ahead of time.
- We will have the Judge begin by speaking briefly to the kids about the fact that they are now in a Court of Law and the rules for decorum. He/she will then don the robe and proceed to hearings.
- Have the school principal choose two deserving students to gavel the court into session.
- When a case is adjourned, we will have one of the sheriff’s deputies escort the defendant out of the building. This way we can be assured that they leave properly.
- If possible, try to have a wireless mic. Many Judges like to walk among the kids as they speak to them.
- We find that it’s best during the Q&A that the Principal point to kids who are raising their hands to ask questions. They know the students and which ones will ask good, serious questions.