

Superior Court of California County of Santa Clara

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The Constitution Lives Through the Courts and Through Us

Before taking office, every judicial officer takes an oath to support and defend the United States and California Constitutions, to bear true faith and allegiance to them, and to faithfully discharge the duties of the office. Those words reflect an enormous responsibility. Supporting and defending the Constitution is not simply a condition of employment; it is a calling. Each day, judicial officers are entrusted with interpreting and applying constitutional principles to protect individual rights, ensure due process, and administer justice fairly.

September 17 is Constitution Day, commemorating the signing of the United States Constitution in 1787. The occasion is more than a tribute to a historic document preserved in the National Archives. It is an opportunity to recognize that the Constitution remains a living framework for our democracy, the foundation of a judge's daily work, and a force that touches every person's life.

Two hundred fifty years ago, the Declaration of Independence articulated the nation's core ideals: that all people are created equal and possess rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The country then needed a system of government capable of advancing those ideals. The Constitution created that framework, dividing authority among three coequal branches and establishing separation of powers and checks and balances. Its opening words, "We the People," affirm that government derives its authority from the people it serves.

The Bill of Rights further protects freedoms that can be easy to take for granted, including freedom of speech and religion, as well as protections for privacy and individual liberty. In our courtrooms, the Constitution guarantees due process, safeguards individual rights, and requires government power to remain within defined limits.

Courts play an essential role in safeguarding these principles, but the strength of our democracy also depends on each generation learning about the Constitution, understanding our system of government, and participating in civic life. Judges, educators, parents, court professionals, and community leaders all share responsibility for preparing the next generation to participate thoughtfully and effectively.

For judges, allegiance to the Constitution does not end when the courtroom doors close. Judicial officers have a particular responsibility to help the public understand the third branch of government, including judicial independence, separation of powers, and the rule of law. When courts engage with their communities and explain constitutional principles in accessible, everyday terms, they strengthen the connection between the judiciary and the people it serves. Greater understanding of the judicial branch also promotes public confidence in the justice system.

California is fortunate to have a strong advocate for civic learning and engagement leading its judicial branch. Soon after taking office, Chief Justice Patricia Guerrero affirmed her support for the

[Power of Democracy Initiative](#), which connects students directly with judges and brings meaningful civics education into K–12 classrooms. Through Judges in the Classroom, courthouse visits, school assemblies, mock trials, age-appropriate discussions of constitutional rights, question-and-answer sessions, and other activities, students learn firsthand about the Constitution and the judiciary’s role. These experiences help educators make civic learning relevant while inspiring informed and active future citizens.

This year, the Power of Democracy Initiative challenged courts throughout California to connect judges with at least 250 students in their counties between Constitution Month in September and Bill of Rights Day on December 15. The Superior Court of California, County of Santa Clara, enthusiastically accepted the challenge and is on track not only to meet it, but to exceed it.

As part of the Court’s annual Constitution Month activities, judicial officers are visiting fifth-grade classrooms across the county throughout September. The Court focuses on fifth graders because that is typically the first year students encounter the Constitution in their school curriculum. By sharing real-world examples of how judicial officers apply the Constitution in court, we hope to bring the document to life, spark curiosity, and encourage civic engagement.

The Court’s outreach does not end with Constitution Month; that is only the beginning. Consistent with the Power of Democracy Initiative, we are committed to engaging K–12 students in civic education year-round, both at school sites and in courtrooms. Through Judges in the Classroom, educators may invite judicial officers to speak on a wide range of topics, participate in assemblies, or swear in student councils. Students may also visit a courtroom to observe proceedings or participate in a mock trial.

Together with mentorship programs and opportunities to learn about the legal profession, these efforts connect young people directly with judicial officers who have committed themselves to public service and the fair administration of justice. They also encourage future leaders to consider their own roles and responsibilities in protecting and advancing the guarantees of our Constitution.

Civic education and engagement should not end at high school graduation. They are the foundation of a lifelong commitment to democracy. Adults can participate by learning more about the Constitution, serving as jurors, voting, becoming involved in local leadership, or serving on a civil grand jury. I encourage every member of our community to use Constitution Day as an opportunity to learn about the judicial branch, discuss constitutional principles and shared civic values, and participate in civic life. Collectively, we are responsible for continuing the work inspired by the Declaration of Independence and guided by the structure of the Constitution.

The Constitution endures because each generation chooses to understand it, protect it, and put its principles into practice. As the Preamble calls upon us to do, we must “secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.” Through civic education and meaningful connections between courts and communities, we can help ensure that the next generation is prepared not only to inherit our democracy, but to strengthen it.

As Chair of the Santa Clara County Superior Court Community Outreach Committee and Vice-Lead of the Power of Democracy Initiative, I encourage educators to explore the civic-learning and engagement opportunities available at PowerofDemocracy.org and through the Santa Clara County Superior Court’s website. Parents, community members, court employees, and attorneys can also support this work by sharing these resources with their local schools. Together, we can help equip

the next generation with the knowledge and confidence to participate meaningfully in our democracy.