

HMDC Elementary Model Congress Class (Fall 2024)

Activity: Courtroom Proceedings (Simulation)

Water Crisis Courtroom Activity

Introduction

This courtroom activity simulates a trial related to the recent water contamination crisis in our city. Students will participate in a mock trial, taking on various roles within the court system to better understand legal proceedings and decision-making processes. The activity will provide hands-on experience in critical thinking, public speaking, and understanding different perspectives within a legal context.

The case centers around a group of local teenagers who allegedly contaminated the city's water supply as a prank. These teens are accused of using food coloring and other substances to turn the water brown, causing widespread panic and a public health scare. The prank resulted in significant disruption to city services, economic losses for local businesses, and unnecessary strain on the healthcare system as residents feared for their health.

Students will be assigned roles such as the judge, prosecuting attorneys, defense attorneys, witnesses, and jury members. Each group will have time to prepare their case, including developing questions for witnesses and opening/closing statements. The mock trial will follow simplified court procedures, allowing students to experience the process of presenting evidence, cross-examining witnesses, and ultimately reaching a verdict. This immersive experience will help students to better understand some of the complexities of the legal system and the importance of using evidence-based decision-making in a courtroom setting.

Objective

Students will participate in a mock trial, taking on various roles within the court system to understand legal proceedings and decision-making processes.

Roles

1. **Judge:** Oversees the courtroom to ensure legal procedures are followed. The judge rules on objections, instructs the jury on the law, and maintains order during the trial. If the defendant is found guilty, the judge may determine the sentence.
2. **Attorneys:**
 - **Prosecuting attorneys:** Represent the government or state. Their role is to present evidence and legal arguments to prove the defendant's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt and ensure that justice is served.
 - **Defense attorneys:** Represent the accused, protecting their legal rights. They challenge the prosecution's evidence and aim to create reasonable doubt, working to secure an acquittal or reduce the defendant's penalties.
3. **Witnesses:**
 - **Eyewitness:** A person who directly observed the event in question. Their testimony is based on what they personally saw, heard, or experienced during the incident.
 - **Expert Witness:** A professional with specialized knowledge in a particular field, such as medicine, forensics, or engineering. Their testimony helps the court understand technical aspects of the case that are outside the common knowledge of the jurors.
 - **Character Witness:** A person who testifies about the personality, behavior, and reputation of a defendant or another individual involved in the case. Their testimony is often used to establish the credibility or trustworthiness of a person.
4. **Jury:** A group of impartial citizens who listen to all evidence and arguments presented in the case. They then deliberate privately to reach a verdict of guilt or innocence, based on the facts and the judge's instructions on the law.

IMPORTANT: Each group will pick someone to be the witness and we help them to prepare for the trial. However, once the trial begins, if we are not participating as a witness or an attorney, then we will be assigned the role of being a member of the jury. As such, we need to be fair-minded and pretend that we were not involved with helping either side to prepare = we must be neutral.

HMDC Elementary Model Congress Class (Fall 2024)

Activity: Courtroom Proceedings (Simulation)

Charges

1. **Terroristic Threat (Felony):** Actions that cause widespread fear or panic in the community, even if not intending to cause actual harm. This includes creating a situation that makes people believe they are in serious danger.
Typical sentence: 5-10 years in prison and/or up to \$10,000 fine.
2. **Reckless Endangerment (Felony):** Knowingly doing something that creates a big risk of serious injury to others. It's about creating a dangerous situation, even if no one actually gets hurt.
Typical sentence: 1-5 years in prison (felony) and/or up to \$5,000 fine.
3. **Criminal Mischief (Felony):** Intentionally damaging, destroying, or messing with someone else's property, including public property. This covers vandalism and tampering with things that don't belong to you.
Typical sentence: 1-10 years in prison (felony) and/or fines based on damage amount.

Witness Statements

Prosecution Witnesses

1. Detective Michael Brown (Police Investigator) Detective Brown stated that he led the investigation into the water contamination incident. According to his statement, the department received multiple reports of discolored water and growing panic in the community on the morning of July 15th. Their investigation quickly led them to focus on a group of local teenagers who had been seen near the water treatment facility the previous evening. Detective Brown reported that during initial questioning, one of the boys confessed to the prank, though he noted that the boy's parents were not present at the time and Miranda rights had not been read. The detective described finding empty containers of food coloring and other chemicals near the facility, which matched the substances found in the water supply.
2. Dr. Emily Chen (Health Services) Dr. Chen provided a statement as the chief medical officer at City Hospital. She reported a significant increase in emergency room visits following the water contamination incident. According to Dr. Chen, while most cases were related to anxiety and panic, some patients exhibited mild symptoms such as nausea, skin irritation, and stomach discomfort. She emphasized the strain this put on hospital resources, with staff working overtime to manage the influx of worried residents. Dr. Chen stated that although no severe health consequences were observed, the potential for more serious outcomes was a major concern during the initial stages of the crisis.
3. Mark Rodriguez (City Water Engineer) In his statement, Mr. Rodriguez, the lead engineer for the city's water system, detailed the extent of the contamination and its effects on the water supply. He reported that while the substances introduced by the teenagers were not severely toxic, they could have had more serious consequences if mixed differently or in larger quantities. Mr. Rodriguez described the extensive work required to flush the system and ensure water safety, including multiple rounds of testing and the implementation of temporary water distribution points throughout the city. He emphasized the significant cost and manpower required to address the contamination and restore public confidence in the water supply.
4. John Smith (Security Guard) Mr. Smith provided a statement regarding his encounter with the accused teenagers on the evening of July 14th. He reported observing a group of boys loitering near a broken gate at the water treatment facility. Mr. Smith stated that he approached the group and asked them to leave the restricted area. He noted that the boys had buckets and were mixing some compounds that had a strong odor. While he did not perceive an immediate threat, Mr. Smith admitted that he did not escort the boys from the property, instead returning to his patrol. He expressed regret at not taking more decisive action at the time.

HMDC Elementary Model Congress Class (Fall 2024)

Activity: Courtroom Proceedings (Simulation)

Witness Statements (*Continued...*)

Defense Witnesses

1. Dr. Alex Patel (Environmental Scientist - Expert Witness) Dr. Patel provided a statement based on his analysis of water samples from the contamination incident. He reported that while the substances used in the prank caused noticeable discoloration and odor, they did not pose a significant health risk to the population. Dr. Patel's analysis showed that the concentrations of contaminants were well below harmful levels. He stated that the public reaction, while understandable, was disproportionate to the actual health threat posed by the contaminated water. Dr. Patel emphasized that the incident was more of a nuisance than a genuine public health emergency.
2. Dr. Sarah Johnson (Psychologist - Expert Witness) In her statement, Dr. Johnson provided expert insight into adolescent brain development and decision-making. She explained that teenagers' brains are still developing, particularly in areas responsible for impulse control and understanding long-term consequences. Dr. Johnson stated that this developmental stage can lead to poor judgment and risky behavior, even in otherwise well-behaved teens. She emphasized that this doesn't excuse their actions but provides context for understanding why teenagers might engage in such a prank without fully comprehending its potential impact.
3. Coach Robert Thompson (Character Witness) Coach Thompson provided a statement attesting to the character of the accused teenagers. He reported that he has known the boys for several years through their participation in school sports programs. According to Coach Thompson, the boys have consistently demonstrated good sportsmanship, teamwork, and leadership on and off the field. He described them as responsible, respectful, and well-liked by their peers. Coach Thompson stated that the alleged actions seemed out of character for these students, and he believes they would not have intentionally caused harm to the community.
4. Lisa Martinez (Water Treatment Plant Worker) Ms. Martinez provided a statement regarding the security measures at the water treatment facility. She reported that there had been ongoing concerns about the facility's perimeter security, including the broken gate mentioned by the security guard. Ms. Martinez stated that she and other employees had raised these concerns with management multiple times in the months leading up to the incident. She described how local teens often used the grounds around the facility for sports and hangouts due to the lax security. Ms. Martinez emphasized that while employees were vigilant, the ease of access to the facility was a known issue that had not been adequately addressed.

Procedure

1. Opening Statements: Attorneys present initial arguments Prosecution and defense attorneys each deliver a brief overview of their case to the jury.
2. Witness Testimony: Witnesses provide evidence Each witness is called to the stand, sworn in, and questioned by the attorneys.
3. Cross-Examination: Opposing side questions witnesses After direct examination, the opposing attorney has the opportunity to question each witness.
4. Closing Arguments: Final statements from attorneys Both sides summarize their case and argue for their desired verdict.
5. Jury Deliberation: Jury discusses and decides The jury retires to a private room to discuss the case and reach a verdict.
6. Verdict Announcement: Judge reads the decision The jury returns to the courtroom, and the judge announces the verdict.

HMDC Elementary Model Congress Class (Fall 2024)

Activity: Courtroom Proceedings (Simulation)

Conclusion

This mock trial activity provides students with a hands-on experience of the legal system, demonstrating the complexities involved in determining guilt or innocence in a court of law. Through this simulation, participants gain insight into the roles of various court officials, the importance of evidence and testimony, and the process of legal decision-making. For Model Congress students, this activity reinforces the connection between lawmaking and law enforcement, highlighting how the laws they debate and create have real-world implications in the justice system. It also emphasizes the importance of careful consideration in both creating and interpreting laws, as these decisions can have significant impacts on individuals and communities.

How to prepare...

1. **Opening Statement:** Anyone interested in being a lawyer should choose the preferred side (prosecution or defense) and prepare an opening statement ahead of time. It should be 1 to 2 minutes long and clearly present the case. Each side can have multiple lawyers, and each may give an opening statement if desired. However, at least one lawyer from each side must speak when called upon.
2. **Closing Statement:** Those wishing to be a lawyer should select a side (prosecution or defense) and prepare a closing statement. It should be 1 to 2 minutes long and should clearly present the case. Make sure to leave room in the outline to mention specific points raised during the trial that strengthen the argument. Each side may have multiple lawyers, and all may give closing statements if they choose, but at least one lawyer from each side must speak when called upon.
3. **Questioning Witnesses:** When asking questions, we must ensure that they relate directly to a specific part of the witness statement. During cross-examination, if the witness makes any statement, it is permissible to ask questions related to that statement.
4. **Limited Objections:** If a lawyer asks an unclear, unrelated, or unfair question, it is appropriate to state, in a clear voice, "Objection!" As in Robert's Rules of Order, the lawyer must wait to be recognized by the judge before explaining the objection. We should feel free to make objections, but also be mindful not to irritate the judge. If the opposing side makes mistakes, it is their fault, and the judge/jury may become frustrated with them, which could make our case appear stronger.
5. **Witnesses (Advice):** When speaking as a witness, we have the freedom to explain things in our own way. It is important to remain respectful of the court, but we can say or do almost anything with one key rule: we must not contradict the witness statement. Our goal is to help our side win by answering questions in a way that supports our position, and when the opposing side asks questions, we should avoid making it easy for them. Be polite, but avoid phrasing answers in a way that could appear to support the other side's case.

The best way for us to prepare is to read the witness statements and better understand what we think happened. Then when we divide into groups, we can use that knowledge to give quality advice to the lawyers and witnesses we are assigned to work with.

Good luck!