

# Gauntlet News - Law students volunteer in elementary schools

## Mock trial raises awareness about the legal system

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Ten law students from the University of Calgary are working in partnership with Pro Bono Students Canada to deliver law lessons to the grade five and six students in Calgary elementary schools.

The U of C law students and the coordinators of pbsc are reaching out to at-risk neighbourhoods where the youth are more likely to interact with the justice system.

The five lessons are taught in one week, and the concluding mock trials are part of an educational project initiated by the Ontario Justice Education Network and implemented by pbsc. It aims to raise awareness about the Canadian legal system in the Calgary youth community.

"This project gives the students some indication of what the law is, so later on in life, if they have some interactions with the legal system, they will have some elementary vocabulary to deal with in a much more confident fashion," said Faculty of Law representative Waqas Iqbal. "Before you get access to justice and before being concerned with things such as the affordability of legal services, you have to know what justice is."

The pbsc coordinator for the U of C chapter, Alex Boissonneau-Lehner, added "With the grade fives and sixes, we have their attention. It is important to ingrain the law as early as possible. We also want to try to create a positive impression of the law to students."

The project's rationale is aligned with pbsc's theme of educating citizens about their rights, legal protections and proceedings. Such knowledge provides a more accurate understanding of the justice system instead of relying on the media's limited and often incorrect portrayal of the law.

Boissonneau-Lehner has confirmed a grade six class in St. Peter's Elementary School is participating in the educational project that will commence at the end of January. He and his pbsc team are currently looking to find one more elementary school to conduct this law initiative.

Several lawyers from McCarthy Tetrault, a Canadian law firm, will be assisting the university volunteers with the delivery of the 150-page lesson plan.

To integrate some fun into this educational initiative, a mock trial involving the fairy-tale characters Hansel, Gretel and the Witch will take place from early to mid-February. In the role-playing scenario,

Hansel and Gretel post the story of the Witch's plotting and attempted murder of them on the internet. As a result, the Witch's gingerbread business has suffered severely. The Witch then sues the children for defamation, alleging their story to be a complete fabrication.

"[Hansel and Gretel] is something children can relate to. The very concept of defamation concerns spreading lies about other people. Kids in grade schools are susceptible to that, especially with the pressures of popularity and conformity. If you engage students with issues that are very relevant to them, while putting a legal veneer over it, it accomplishes a number of objectives: getting them to understand the law and the social harms that would result from bad behaviour," explained Iqbal.

In the mock trial, the grade five and six students will adopt the roles of judges, lawyers and witnesses, applying what they have learned in the five law lessons prior to the trial.

Boissonneau-Lehner commented that changes have been made from last year's educational project. Previously, the students embarked on a field trip to the McCarthy Tetrault offices and the Calgary Court Centre, where they attended a Q&A session led by three judges from the Court of Queen's Bench. Now, the grade six students from St. Peter's can look forward to a special opportunity to attend the Hansel and Gretel mock trial in an actual courtroom setting.

"We are hoping to get the judges from the Court of Queen's Bench to preside over the mock trial," said Boissonneau-Lehner. "This, of course, is contingent to the court and lawyers' schedules."

Additionally, the Alberta Law Foundation has provided pbcs with an operating grant that funds this initiative. The grant covers transportation costs. The McCarthy Tetrault law firm offered supplementary funding for the students' free pizza lunch.

However, the biggest expense of this project is the used and efforts channelled by the U of C volunteers and the McCarthy Tetrault lawyers.

"Time has been donated to help this very important initiative. If you value the amount of time all of those lawyers and judges put in, it would amount to tens of thousands of dollars," said Iqbal. "At the end of the day, what we want is not to give them a show but rather to give them the tools to actively participate in this very interesting and fun exercise."

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Image caption: Last year, volunteers taught grade five and six students about the justice system. The program will happen again this year, commencing at the end of January.

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