

## **Helpful Tips for Law Students and Lawyers Teaching Youth in Detention**

Thank you for your interest in working with detained youth. The founders of the National Youth Justice Alliance (NYJA) began volunteering at the Youth Services Center (YSC) in the District of Columbia as an outgrowth of teaching high school students in public schools. The idea of NYJA was born when we quickly realized how few volunteers enter detention facilities for youth, even in a jurisdiction with highly educated, civic-minded adults who could really make a difference. We quickly found that this void exists around the country. You are doing a tremendous service to the students as many of them do not have consistent role models in their lives.

What follows is a list of suggestions compiled after our experiences at YSC.

### **1. Introductions**

- Share as much as you are comfortable sharing with the youth, including your name, occupation, and interest in teaching them.
- Ask the youth students to introduce themselves without mentioning the nature or details of the crimes with which they are/were charged (most facilities prohibit faculty from finding out about the crimes with which they are/were charged).

### **2. Setting ground rules**

- Clarify your role as volunteer teacher. Make sure the students understand that although you are a lawyer, you are not *their* lawyer. As such, no privilege attaches to any communications they share with you about the crimes they allegedly committed. By the same token, you should be careful **not** to give legal advice. You cannot give legal advice.
- Do not discuss charges. Make sure the students understand it is a good idea to avoid the temptation to discuss the charges against them because anyone can be used as a witness against them. In fact, when you make this clear to the students, explain why you cannot give legal advice and why they shouldn't share information about their current or past cases with anyone - not you, a corrections officer (CO), or any of their peers.
- Use as few supplies as necessary. For safety reasons, anything you bring to class must be collected and accounted for after class, so it's probably best not to bring too many things with you. Especially avoid bringing in any pens, pencils, paperclips, staples, and other sharp items without first checking with your contact at the facility. Feel free to bring books and pocket constitutions, but under most circumstances, the students won't be able to keep them.
- Identify and utilize resources effectively. There should be a CO and hopefully also a teacher with you in the room while you teach. In the District of Columbia, there is a required ratio of one CO for every 10 students in a classroom at all times. COs and teachers can be good allies, so it's important to introduce yourself to them and let them know that you want them to participate as well.

### **3. Teaching formats**

- Be creative. The more creative you are with your lesson planning, the better. For example, students in detention, like other teenagers, have short attention spans and enjoy creative and competitive activities. The following formats work well:

- \* Debates
  - \* Role playing cases or hypotheticals
  - \* Roundtable discussions (which may require moving the furniture around in the classroom)
  - \* Jeopardy review at the end of class
- Encourage students to read and reflect. When you are reviewing any text (article, Constitution, cases), ask for volunteers to read. Students enjoy reading out loud and it keeps the whole group more engaged.
  - Seek existing resources. Besides the lesson plans that can be found on the internet, the lessons posted on the NYJA web site are specifically developed and recommended for this setting.
  - Incorporate basic elements. Each NYJA lesson incorporates the following three concepts:
    - \* **Inform** - students will learn about civic and constitutional engagement
    - \* **Empower** - students will learn information that will make them feel more engaged in the society around them; teachers will learn new aspects of the reality of liberty and civic engagement
    - \* **Apply** - teachers will learn something new about youth in detention and will convert this knowledge into positive action; students will incorporate what they have learned into their daily lives in some way

#### 4. Teaching Tips

- Be approachable. Be a good listener. Do not talk or yell over the students. Remain calm even in the face of disruptions in the classroom. Stay at eye level with your students - traditional lecturing format where you stand at the front of the room doesn't work as well. Remember that you have to earn trust in a really short period of time, so it's important to use body language that will convey your intentions to the students.
- Be realistic. If you've had other teaching experiences, this will probably be different. This isn't going to be what you expect in terms of a quiet audience of ready-to-learn young people, so be creative and be willing to go with the flow. Also, you will get better each time you teach, so give yourself the freedom to fail. Without failure, you won't have success.
- Be prepared for bureaucracy. There may be last-minute lock-downs and other interruptions to school functioning that may affect your ability to teach at the time you were supposed to teach. Try not to let these frustrations interfere with your goals.
- Create discrete, digestible lessons. Since the youth are coming and going from the facilities, each lesson you teach should be separate and discrete. Do not assign homework. Make sure to ask students what they have learned at the end of each class.

#### 5. Share your experiences

Please send us your teaching stories, quotes from students, and ideas so we can post them on our site. We encourage you to submit lesson plans that worked well, lessons that didn't work so well, and other thoughts and reflections.

