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April 27, 2021

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Street Law wins 2021 Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics Award

\$200,000 prize to develop rule of law curriculum

PHILADELPHIA – Street Law, Inc., a nonpartisan organization that educates people about civics, practical law, and government, has received the 2021 Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics Award from the Annenberg Public Policy Center to develop a curriculum for middle and high school students on the rule of law in the United States.

The \$200,000 prize, announced in advance of Law Day (May 1), will be used to create and pilot the new curriculum, which will be offered to schools at no cost. The project will culminate in a nationwide Rule of Law Teach-In for Constitution Day 2022.

Rule of law is a founding principle of the United States and a bedrock of democracy, as Street Law said in its proposal. “It ensures that no one is above the law, that laws are publicly and widely known, that laws apply equally to all and are equally enforced, and that disputes are settled by an independent judiciary.” And yet, Street Law said, that textbook definition “is in contrast with many Americans’ lived experiences.”

The project was selected by a group of judges for the Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics, a project of the [Annenberg Public Policy Center](#) (APPC) of the University of Pennsylvania.

“The judges felt that a project focused on the rule of law was urgently needed,” said Ellen Iwamoto, who directs APPC’s civics programs. “They loved the idea of developing a curriculum not only rooted in theory but also tied in with current events. The teach-in’s potential for reaching a wide audience is also very exciting.”

The rule of law ‘suffering’ in the U.S.

The past year has provided a renewed focus on the rule of law. Following the storming of the U.S. Capitol by a mob that sought to prevent Congress from certifying Joe Biden’s election victory, more than 150 law school deans released a statement that said: “The violent attack on the Capitol was an assault on our democracy and the rule of law.”

“Certainly, January 6th indicated to the nation, if not the world, how clearly the rule of law has been suffering in the United States,” said Jen Wheeler, Street Law’s director of teacher professional development programs and curricula. But, she noted, what some see as a crisis has been building for years.

In its Rule of Law Index, the multinational World Justice Project rates countries using a variety of measures, including whether a country's justice system is accessible, affordable, and free of discrimination. The United States ranked 21st in 2020, falling for the first time out of the Top 20 countries.

Street Law's project

Street Law, which was started by a group of Georgetown University law students in 1972, is based in Silver Spring, Md. The organization specializes in teacher professional development programs, curricula and other teaching materials, and international programs that bring education about democracy and rule of law overseas. It has created rule of law curricula for other countries, and this project will create such a curriculum for classrooms in the United States.

"We view schools as a great grassroots opportunity to teach about the rule of law, teach what makes up the rule of law and what makes it so valuable, and what role we play as ordinary people," Wheeler said. She added that the proposed curriculum will be tested through a curriculum development process by experts who will ensure that it's free of bias.

The curriculum will combine theory and fact, history and contemporary life: "If young people do not have the opportunities to process the disparities they observe between rule of law in theory and rule of law in their lived experiences, and if they do not find ways to constructively engage in improving rule of law, then rule of law may suffer a deeper breakdown," the proposal says.

"We don't teach people what to think, we teach them how to think," said Jennifer Whatley, Street Law's chief program officer. "We're going to be educating people as to what the rule of law is and let them make their own decisions as to what the rule of law looks like in the United States."

Street Law's plan is to create 8 to 12 lessons suitable for middle and high school classrooms that can be taught as a unit or as standalone lessons. Once complete, the curriculum will be freely available [on its website](#).

The Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics Award

Street Law's project was selected from proposals submitted by some of the 38 partners in the [Civics Renewal Network](#), a consortium of nonprofit, nonpartisan organizations dedicated to strengthening civic life in the United States. CRN was founded as a project of the Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics (LAIC), whose award aims to help an exemplary project that would improve civics education in the nation's elementary, secondary, or high school classrooms. The competition is open to partner organizations in the Civics Renewal Network.

The first LAIC Award was presented in 2019 to the [Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate](#) to create resources to help 8th through 12th grade teachers conduct productive [civic conversations](#) on difficult issues. That project is in development.

The [Annenberg Public Policy Center](#) was established in 1993 to educate the public and policy makers about communication's role in advancing public understanding of political, science, and health issues at the local, state, and federal levels. Find [@APPCPenn](#) on Twitter and [Facebook](#).