

Best Practices in Law-Related Education (LRE)¹

According to the 1978 Law-Related Education Act, LRE is: “education to equip non-lawyers with the knowledge and skills pertaining to the law, the legal process, and the legal system, and the fundamental principles and values on which these are based.”

LRE has been implemented in schools and in communities across the country to teach young people about their rights and responsibilities as citizens and about law and justice. LRE that follows models of best practices has been cited as “promising approaches” in the key document and movement called The Civic Mission of Schools.² Further research shows that LRE has an enormous potential to prevent delinquency, substance abuse, and other behavior problems.³

Although there are many LRE programs nationwide, not all of them are successful. Research and the experiences of many educators have proven that there are several essential components to promising LRE programs. These include the following:

► **Focus on essential knowledge and skills.**

Essential LRE knowledge includes: civil, criminal, administrative and constitutional themes; practical information about the law and public policy; and concepts underlying a constitutional democracy. LRE skills include critical thinking, decision-making, problem solving, communication, cooperation, reasoning and participation. Legal and policy issues should be analyzed in depth. LRE can provide students with practical legal information and practice in skills that will nurture critical thinking and civic participation.

► **Interactive teaching strategies, particularly strategies that foster true student-to-student interaction, are the heart of the program and of each lesson.**

Other characteristics of good instruction are: sharing outcomes with students, drawing on their existing knowledge and strengths, giving them appropriate time to answer questions, and giving students multiple opportunities to practice skills, and involving as many students as possible in all aspects of the class activities.

► **Judicious selection and presentation of issues and materials**

Course materials should provide a balanced view of the judicial system and other aspects of the political system. Controversial issues are also important as they motivate student interest and broaden understanding and tolerance. As such, classes must foster opportunities to allow young people to safely voice their viewpoints. Keep in mind that debate and a free flow of ideas are crucial elements of effective civic participation and that many times there is not one correct answer. The issues, materials and lessons should be characterized by depth of analysis not simply “covering” as much material as possible.

► **A sufficient quantity of instruction is provided.**

While “sufficient quantity” is not a precisely defined term, it is important that students have ample opportunities to practice skills and gain confidence in defending their points of view, making presentations, etc. Programs where LRE is a semester course or is carefully integrated a yearlong course would certainly qualify.

Resource people who are not classroom teachers should look for opportunities to work with the same group of students multiple times. For example, if visiting attorneys have to choose between teaching two groups of students one time each or the one group of students twice, they should choose the latter, if possible.

► ***Repeated opportunities for students to interact with community resource people are offered.***

Community resource persons can raise interest, make classes more interesting, personalize the law, and contribute to positive relationships between young people and their communities. Research in LRE indicates that adult-student bonding is a key to overcoming risk factors.

To be most effective, community resource persons are well prepared and integrated into the interactive class activities. They should not be used simply as guest lecturers. The content presented by the community resource person is part of the course content, and he/she clarifies the law and procedures that directly arise from the session. Community resource people that work with the same group of young people over a period of time have a much more significant impact than those resource people who only teach/train for one session.

Assessment is used as a means to guide and to improve program development and instruction.

Course and lesson outcomes are identified at the beginning and are shaped by the needs of students. Assessment tasks are linked to real-world experiences and application. Students and educators are involved in the assessment process.⁴

► ***Networking and professional development opportunities are provided for teachers (and community resource persons) to reflect on their work and to improve their practice.***

Joint planning sessions and less formal networking events reduce feelings of isolation and strengthen educators' commitment to use LRE methods and to teach LRE content. The involvement of more than one teacher from a site in training helps to enhance and strengthen the LRE program. On-going training strengthens educators' commitments to use interactive methods and practical legal information.

Networks to support teachers, police officers, lawyers, judges, juvenile probation officers, safe and drug-free schools coordinators, and trainers are available through a national network called Youth for Justice and through state LRE centers.⁵

► ***Active involvement of administrators***

Administrators are involved in providing classroom resources, facilitating field experiences, supporting teacher training, and dealing with concerns voiced by other teachers or members of the community.

Administrators can also serve as a resource person in classroom activities. For example, principals can reduce the gap between school governance policies and ideas about justice and procedural due process that may be generated in LRE classes.

Notes:

- (1) Adapted from “What Is Good? Civic Education Programs Representing Best Practices” by Street Law, Inc. (www.streetlaw.org) and from materials developed by the Center for Education in Law and Democracy, which can be found at: www.lawanddemocracy.org
- (2) For more information about the Civic Mission of Schools, please go to: www.civicmissionofschools.org
- (3) For more information about research supporting the link between LRE and delinquency prevention, please go to: <http://www.lawanddemocracy.org/yfjfiles.html>
- (4) For more information and resources about evaluation, see www.youthforjustice.org/evaluation.html
- (5) For more information about Youth for Justice and state LRE centers, please go to: www.youthforjustice.org