



Justiceville, U.S.A.

LRE's newest initiative teaches kids about citizenship, geography, and government.

BY HANNAH KIDDOO

At first glance, it might seem like any other city—cars rushing down Main Street, firefighters responding to emergency calls, children anxious to hear the final bell at school, and even the occasional peaceful protest. But unlike Dallas, Los Angeles, or Chicago, this particular metropolis can only be visited online. Welcome to Justiceville, U.S.A., the latest civics and government project from the State Bar of Texas Law-Related Education Department.

In Justiceville, students can study citizenship, geography, and government by exploring the animated city's numerous points of interest, like the fire station, bank, courthouse, and library. A click on the Justiceville City Hall, for example, allows visitors to meet the mayor, who explains her job of overseeing local departments and leading council meetings. Down the street, a friendly mail carrier at the post office talks about his duty to deliver letters and packages, rain or shine.

Once students are familiar with the Justiceville map, they can play games to test their knowledge of the city and its residents. Younger learners answer questions about the roles people play in the community and are quizzed on navigation and coordinate mapping with basic grids. Older students are challenged to distinguish which levels of government

perform responsibilities throughout town, such as collecting taxes, overseeing vehicle inspections, and determining high school graduation requirements. And the lessons don't stop when students log off; printable maps and trading cards correspond with the online layout.

LRE Director Jan Miller explained that the department has long had curricula on these areas of government, but Justiceville is its first resource to tie them together on a digital platform. "We'll always stick with our lesson plans," she said, "but students are changing, and you have to have something that's going to be engaging."

The LRE department has often been ahead of the curve with creating entertaining educational projects and innovative teaching tools. Thanks to the support of groups such as the Hatton W. Sumners Foundation Inc., the Texas Bar Foundation, and the State Bar of Texas, these projects have been provided to teachers at no cost since 1975. Almost 30 years ago, Miller was one of those educators attending her first LRE event: a law and humanities conference focused on the U.S. and Texas legal systems.

"It was just revolutionary to me. All hands-on strategies," Miller said. "As a new person, just coming out of school, it gave me that grounding of *I can try anything.*"

Miller joined the LRE department as an employee in 1992 and took over as director in 1997. She says that technology has been the biggest change in the course of her tenure. "Kids coming out of university are so much more

comfortable with the technology than veteran teachers,” she said. “Our job is to make sure that both groups feel comfortable and have materials they can use.”

Collaboration with active educators helps keep that material relevant. Many LRE resources are tailored to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills testing standards, and for each new project, Miller and her team seek reviews from select teachers across the state and then adjust it accordingly.

The teacher-advisers, for example, suggested that Justiceville offer lessons that would work for a younger age group. “We first targeted that second- to fifth-grade group, and they said we should start earlier,” Miller explained. So they did. And those fun spin-off games that reinforce the skills learned in the animation? They were sourced through feedback and modeled after activities that were already popular in classrooms. “The key in our success is listening to the teachers and what they need.”

Already, Justiceville, U.S.A.—which officially launched on August 1, 2015—has been successful in schools.

“We know that students learn best when they are actively engaged,” said Lisa Wellborn, elementary social studies coordinator for Plano Independent School District. “Justiceville games allow this to happen in a seamless way. Students enjoy clicking on the various community workers, watching

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the animations, hearing the sounds, and listening to the roles.”

Texas teachers aren’t the only ones benefiting from LRE’s projects. Miller hears from educators in other states who have accessed and implemented the department’s resources. “That’s the nice thing about these projects,” she said. “Not only are they helping teachers in Texas but also those outside of Texas. And that just helps kids in general, which is our main goal.”

To explore Justiceville and learn more about other LRE programs, go to texaslre.org. **TBJ**

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