



## MY OPINION

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# Dynamic Teaching

In the opening lines of his 1953 novel, *The Go-Between*, British author L.P. Hartley wrote, “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.”

History may seem different, but understanding it is critical to understanding the present. When we explore our past, we find people who seem a lot like us confronting situations like those we face. This is especially true when it comes to civics education.

Unfortunately, studies show that we are raising a generation of students who have a tenuous grasp of our nation’s history and institutions. As former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor observed during a visit to Austin earlier this year, Americans can name more judges on “American Idol” than they can justices on the nation’s highest court.

Yet rather than bemoaning the lowering of standards that has contributed to the current state, it is worth reflecting on Texas’ standards for what students are expected to learn.

The Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) standards that took effect at the beginning of this academic year require all middle school and high school students to know a series of landmark court decisions. For middle school students, these include cases that many of us may have studied in depth only when we enrolled in law school: *Marbury v. Madison* (1803), *McCulloch v. Maryland* (1819), *Gibbons v. Ogden* (1824), *Worcester v. Georgia* (1832), and *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857).

High school students are required to know 19 additional cases. Some of these are widely known and have become part of the vernacular, such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), *Gideon v. Wainwright* (1963), and *Miranda v. Arizona* (1966). Others, such as *Delgado v. Bastrop ISD* (1948), *Baker v. Carr* (1962), and *Wisconsin v. Yoder* (1972), resonate today, also.

If students have the time and resources to study these cases, they will not only become better students, they will become better citizens of our country. It is left to teachers in this era of limited resources to find the materials and techniques to convey this information in a factual and engaging way. This is where the State Bar of Texas can help.

The State Bar and its Law-Related Education Department have created *Oyez, Oyez, Oh Yay! Civics Resources for Texas Students and Teachers*. This interactive website, which is available online at [www.texasbar.com/civics](http://www.texasbar.com/civics), incorporates background resources and materials about the court cases that Texas middle school and high school students need to know to be successful.

The website includes case summaries, concise statements of the legal issues to be determined, and texts of the actual court decisions. There are links to additional resources, games, and curriculum materials for teachers. Yet perhaps the most exciting addition is a series of videos the State Bar commissioned to help Texas students and teachers. Each video is approximately 12 to 15 minutes and features archival materials, an engaging narrator, and informative interviews with

leading Texas lawyers and law professors. The videos bring the cases to life and amplify their importance to modern life.

Although the cases highlighted in *Oyez, Oyez, Oh Yay!* were decided years ago, they continue to inform policies and continue to affect our everyday lives. As new resources become available, we will add them to the site. If the middle school videos are well received, we will film additional segments on the high school cases. If the TEKS standards are updated, we can easily refresh the website to ensure the information remains timely and relevant.

A project like this does not happen without a lot of hard work. I would like to thank Jan Miller, director of the State Bar’s Law-Related Education Department, as well as the teachers and educators she works with for their help in making this vision a reality.

Miller’s group trains more than 7,000 teachers each year. This summer, she offered them a sneak preview of *Marbury v. Madison*. The response was overwhelming. Teachers cannot believe the breadth of information, nor that it is ready to go, allowing them to focus on other areas of curriculum development. Teachers are astounded that a program of such high quality and attention to detail is available free.

Civics education need not be stuffy or boring. Legal history need not seem irrelevant to our everyday lives. Our nation’s history is filled with stories that are dynamic and engaging. We should teach them in dynamic and engaging ways. ★