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One Judge, One School: Legal Implications of COVID-19 Dominate Virtual Discussion with Wildwood Students

“All rise.”

Wildwood Middle School students visited the courts from home on Thursday as they were treated to a virtual lesson from Atlantic/Cape May Superior Court Judge Benjamin Podolnick.

The hour-long conversation – part of the Judiciary’s popular One Judge, One School program – ranged from broad academic topics, such as the role of courts in society and the importance of checks and balances in government, to more trivial items of interest, such as the frequency with which the judge bangs his gavel. The students also got a peek at His Honor’s home office, which doubles as a virtual courtroom these days.

Not surprisingly, the interaction hit a peak when the conversation steered to the COVID-19 pandemic that has forced New Jersey schools to operate from home since mid-March. Referencing court challenges to stay-at-home orders in other states, Podolnick asked the students if they thought government had the right to require citizens to stay home.

“Yes, I think so,” said sixth-grader Alan Sanchez-Dolores. “Because they want to protect us. If people get infected, then other people will get infected too.”

Entering both sides of the stay-at-home issue into evidence, Podolnick asked the students to imagine a whole sports arena full of people out of work. Should government consider the economic impact when imposing a stay-at-home order?

Sixth-grader Kaden Palmer crystallized the issue for his classmates.

“I think saving people’s lives is more important than money, even though it’s very hard,” Palmer said.

Podolnick, a family court judge, told the class he has heard cases from divorced couples in which one parent is concerned that the other parent is not taking proper precautions to prevent their children from becoming infected. What if one parent is a healthcare worker, Podolnick

asked, and has a higher risk of getting infected with COVID-19 and passing the infection on to their children.

Seventh-grader William Steffen offered a plea for health care workers.

“Just because someone works at a hospital, it doesn’t mean they shouldn’t be able to see their child,” Steffen said.

Each student asked a question of the judge while teachers Jennifer Hanna and Gloria Vegilante-Cooper proudly looked on.

“It was awesome for the kids to have this experience and be able to ask questions,” Hanna told the judge. “We spent the first month of school on the Constitution, so this reinforced everything.”

For the record, Judge Podolnick told the students he has never had to bang his gavel. So far, he said, a stern look from the sheriff’s officer has always been enough to maintain order in the court.

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