

Transforming Court Spaces into Engaging and Interactive Learning Centers

Courthouses are moving from mere buildings of justice into hubs of learning. Several courts have transformed portions of their spaces into engaging and interactive learning centers that use technology and innovative teaching tools to provide impactful experiences for students and citizens, helping them better understand the judicial branch.

Jennifer Bundy

Civics Education Manager,
Supreme Court of Appeals of
West Virginia

Doug Stein

Civic Education Manager,
Supreme Court of Ohio

Tricia Knox

Marketing Manager,
National Center for State Courts

A growing number of state courts are transforming spaces into unique and innovative judicial learning centers (JLCs), which provide experiential learning for students and adults. These centers use interactive exhibits, role-playing games, problem-solving scenarios, voting simulations, and mock courtroom situations to teach generations — old and new — about the rule of law, the role of the judicial branch, and how courts serve the public.

JLCs make learning about government a fun and enjoyable experience. Unlike traditional historical and educational exhibits in many courthouses and law libraries, JLCs allow visitors to engage with content through touch and participation. By incorporating interactive features such as touchscreen kiosks, quizzes, and games, JLCs provide the tools citizens need to understand better — and explore how to improve — one of the three branches of government.

A Growing Trend

Interactive learning centers are typically located within state supreme court buildings in capital cities, allowing them to leverage high-visitor traffic from student groups, educators, and the public who visit their state's legislature or capitol complex. Currently, nine state supreme courts, starting with Hawaii in 1989 and, most recently, West Virginia in 2023, have transformed space within their buildings into interactive, hands-on learning centers. Other states with dedicated JLCs include Colorado, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, Tennessee, Virginia, and Wyoming. Six states are currently exploring the development of similar centers. Florida offers a JLC alternative — a rare book room and panel exhibits in hallways. Additionally, eight JLCs are in federal courthouses across the United States.¹

“

The practice of democracy is not passed down through the gene pool. It must be taught and learned by each new generation.

Sandra Day O'Connor

*United States Supreme Court Justice
(1981-2006) and founder of iCivics*



The West Virginia Judicial Learning Center occupies two rooms across the hall from the Supreme Court of Appeals courtroom and the hallway in between. The room (above) that is now considered the entrance to the learning center used to be a single-person office. Photo by J. Alex Wilson - Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia.

¹ See United States Courts Interactive Civics Map (Feb. 2025) at <https://perma.cc/A8TL-EKM3>.

Judicial Learning Centers by State

State/Location	Exhibits
The Colorado Judicial Learning Center (Carr Colorado Judicial Center)	Experiential Learning Center with interactive games and exhibits, educational panels, courtroom simulations, multimedia, video, courtroom and library tours, mock trials, public programming, online exhibits. Remodeling and expansion starting in February.
King Kamehameha V Judiciary History Center of Hawaii (Supreme Court building)	Traditional museum with interactive and historical exhibits, historic courtroom, public programming, mock trials. Renovation and redesign planned for 2027.
The Illinois Supreme Court Learning Center (Supreme Court building)	Experiential Learning Center featuring interactive games and exhibits, QR codes, case studies, and timeline displays.
The Michigan Supreme Court Learning Center (Hall of Justice building)	Experiential Learning Center with multiple galleries featuring interactive games and exhibits, historical displays, educational panels, online web-based games, and video.
The Ohio Judicial Visitor Education Center (Moyer Ohio Judicial Center)	Experiential Learning Center with a model courtroom, interactive games and exhibits, historical displays, educational panels, multimedia, mock trials, and videos.
Tennessee Judiciary Museum (Supreme Court Library, historic 1937 Supreme Court building)	Traditional museum-style featuring interactive/ touchscreen kiosks, historical documents, and case studies.
Virginia Judicial Learning Center (Supreme Court building)	Experiential Learning Center with interactive/ touchscreen kiosks, historical displays, and educational panels.
West Virginia Judicial Learning Center (West Virginia Capitol building, across from the Supreme Court of Appeals)	Experiential Learning Center with educational displays, interactive/touchscreen kiosks, and courtroom simulations.
Wyoming Judicial Learning Center (Supreme Court building)	Traditional museum-style with interactive and informational exhibits, and online web-based games.

Experiential Learning

By leveraging technology and multimedia, JLCs use experiential learning through digital interactive games to help visitors understand new and often complex legal concepts. Legal problem-solving games like “You Be the Judge” and “Make Your Case” immerse participants in the roles of judges, lawyers, and jurors. In one game, the judge reinforces the importance of the judiciary by stating, “You, as the judge, make the ultimate decision.” These activities often incorporate current legal issues and real-world scenarios, encouraging critical thinking and connecting legal challenges to daily life. Other games, such as “Our Constitution Game,” “Balance of Power,” and “Assembling the Rule of Law,” reinforce civic concepts learned in school.

To inspire the next generation, several states offer “Hear from a Judge” kiosks where visitors can listen to judges share personal stories about their lives, answer questions about what it is like to be a judge, and discuss what they would be doing if they were not judges. West Virginia has an audiovisual exhibit, and a wall panel dedicated to nonjudicial jobs in the court system, like local court clerks, secretaries, court reporters, technology professionals, probation officers, and security personnel.

This innovative approach to teaching and learning transforms civics education into a fun, engaging experience that is accessible, memorable, and inspiring, especially for younger audiences. Even the youngest visitors can learn about the law through play with Scales of Justice by placing different-sized blocks labeled “Evidence,” “The Law,” and “Past Cases” on a scale, demonstrating how these elements can carry varying weights in different cases yet remain balanced.



At Wyoming's Judicial Learning Center, visitors can make legal decisions in-person and online with interactive games like “You Be the Judge.” As the judge, you'll analyze evidence, rule on three unique cases, and then compare your sentencing decisions with other players.

Interactive Games: You Be the Judge, Make Your Case, Hear from a Judge, Our Constitution Game, Assembling the Rule of Law, Balance of Power

Enhancing Courthouse Tours

Out-of-school learning experiences such as courthouse tours, mock trials, and mock oral arguments are longstanding outreach opportunities courts use to complement classroom education. However, as emphasized in NCSC’s “Beyond Civics Education” guide, courthouse tours alone are not enough to strengthen civics education; additional strategies are needed to improve public trust and confidence.²

JLCs enhance the courthouse or capitol tour experience by providing visitors with a deeper understanding of the judiciary’s role in society and its impact on everyday life, helping fulfill the judiciary’s role in public education and encouraging greater trust in the court system.

In both Illinois and West Virginia, after touring the supreme court courtrooms, visitors can explore interactive exhibits in nearby learning centers that demonstrate how the judicial branch shapes society and how individuals can participate in the judicial process, whether by being a juror or a voter or by pursuing a career in the court system.³

Similarly, in Ohio, students touring the Thomas J. Moyer Ohio Judicial Center learn about the state’s judicial branch, the appellate process, and how supreme court decisions affect the laws and citizens of Ohio. They then visit the court’s Visitor Education Center, which includes interactive exhibits illustrating cases impacting young people and families, demonstrating how courts and communities are connected.⁴



After taking the tour and exploring the Visitor Education Center, visitors of all ages often remark that they had no idea how influential the judiciary is in our daily lives.

Stacey Gall

Ohio Visitor Education Center Tours Coordinator

2 CCJ/COSCA Public Engagement, Trust, and Confidence Committee. (2024). Beyond civics education: A health and wellness guide for getting our public trust and confidence back in shape. Report and recommendations. <https://cdm16501.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/ctcomm/id/320>

3 See more about Illinois at <https://perma.cc/N2QQ-KEX7>.

4 See more about Ohio at https://www.courtnewsOhio.gov/happening/2024/TransportationGrants_090924.asp.

Case Studies: Ohio and West Virginia

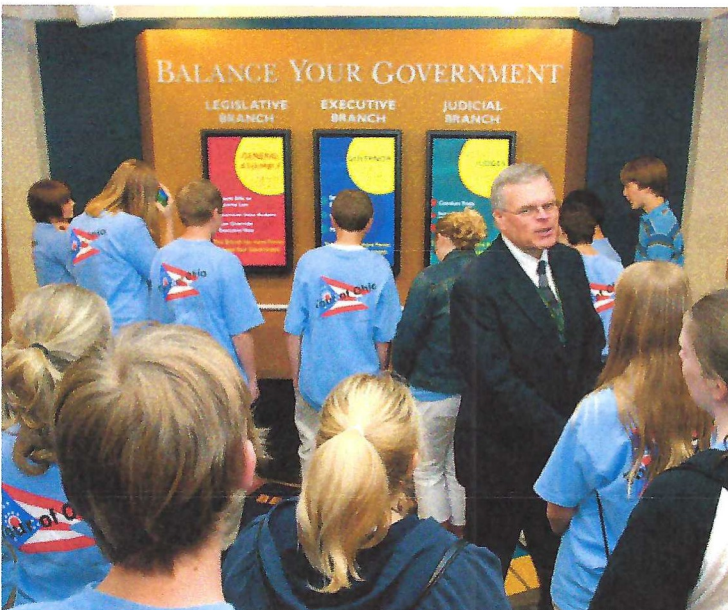
Midwest neighbors, Ohio and West Virginia, offer a case study in contrast. Despite their differences in size and resources, both states have successfully established JLCs within the resources of their court. Ohio's JLC opened in 2005, while West Virginia's opened in 2023.

SPACE

Creating a JLC requires thoughtful consideration of the available space. While some courts have the advantage of designing expansive educational centers, others must operate within the constraints of their existing buildings. Larger spaces accommodate more hands-on, interactive exhibits, whereas smaller spaces are better suited for electronic displays.

Ohio

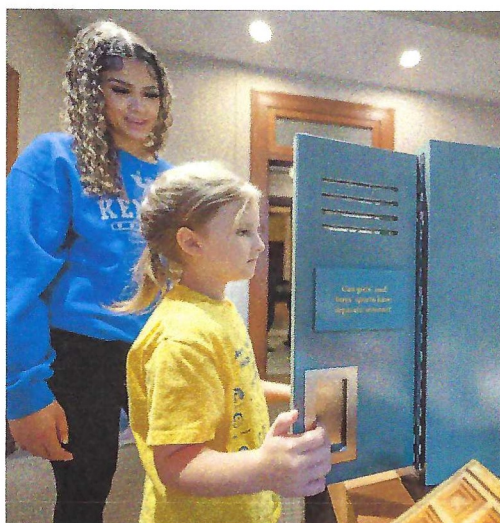
The Ohio Visitor Education Center (VEC) is a 4,400-square-foot space located on the ground floor of the 15-story Art Deco styled Moyer Judicial Center, formerly known as the Ohio Departments Building, directly beneath the Ohio Supreme Court courtroom. The VEC was designed to complement the building's historic architecture and provide an engaging learning environment.



The Supreme Court of Ohio's Visitor Education Center features a display that is activated by foot traffic and shows students and guests examples of each branch of government.

West Virginia

The West Virginia JLC is a compact space, occupying 462 square feet (a hallway and two rooms) within the West Virginia Capitol building across from the Supreme Court of Appeals courtroom. The center demonstrates what can be accomplished in a limited area without compromising the integrity of a historic building. A subcommittee of award-winning civics teachers provided guidance about content and curriculum.



One tabletop exhibit in the West Virginia Judicial Learning Center focuses on landmark cases on topics of interest to students. The cases concern locker searches, the right to get a bus to school, the timing of girls' and boys' sports seasons and whether students can be suspended from extracurricular activities for having bad grades. Photo by J. Alex Wilson - Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia



The hallway outside the Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia's courtroom contains three independently operated touch screens that each contain information about the same eight topics, including the state court system structure and history, juror responsibilities, court system jobs and a court knowledge quiz. Photo by J. Alex Wilson - Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia

BUDGET

Funding can be a significant challenge, but strategic planning and resourcefulness can make a difference. Whether through state funding, grants, or partnerships, funding must ensure long-term sustainability.

Ohio

The total cost of the Ohio VEC was \$1.2 million, funded through the capital budget for

the building renovation. The center attracts over 10,000 visitors annually, offers field trip transportation grants, and hosts various educational programs and outreach events. The center's ongoing operations are funded through the Supreme Court's operating budget.

West Virginia

A combination of state funds and grants from the West Virginia Bar Foundation and local groups paid for the West Virginia JLC's total cost, which was less than \$755,000. Using a grant, the court commissioned two paintings for the space: *The Age of Laws* by Michael Teel and *Justice* by Blake Wheeler. A high school shop class won the bid for fabricating benches and window seats/HVAC covers. In its first full year of operation in 2024, the center received more than 1,000 visitors. Its nominal ongoing operating expenses are covered in the Supreme Court's budget.

EXHIBITS

The success of a judicial learning center often depends on the quality and variety of its exhibits. Interactive displays, digital resources, and hands-on activities help bring legal concepts to life. Designing exhibits tailored to different audiences ensures that visitors of all ages leave with a deeper understanding of the judiciary.

Ohio

The Ohio VEC features three courtroom settings where visitors serve as decision-makers in trial proceedings, an interactive scale that allows visitors to balance the three branches of government, and videos that debunk common myths about courts portrayed in television and movies. Student groups watch a three-minute video titled *A Day in the Life*, which explains the work conducted at the Ohio Supreme Court.⁵

The center also includes 25 exhibits covering a wide range of legal topics, including:

- Freedom of speech
- Search and seizure
- Student-athlete rights
- The role of the courts in society
- Careers in law

The center's exhibits align with state curriculum standards and are designed to spark reflection, discussion, and critical thinking among visitors, especially students.

⁵ See "A Day in the Life" video at <https://www.ohiochannel.org/video/a-day-in-the-life-of-the-supreme-court-of-ohio>.

West Virginia

The West Virginia JLC offers interactive electronic exhibits, activity stations, and explanatory wall panels that educate visitors about basic legal concepts and terms, and the state's judiciary. Activities include a supreme court seal puzzle, balance scales for visitors to test their skills, and mini school lockers filled with information about court cases that are relevant to students. Exhibits include:

- History and structure of the West Virginia court system
- Protection of rights and safety
- Landmark cases
- Careers in the judiciary

The center's exhibits are tailored to a variety of age groups, from elementary school students to adults. Work is under way to create online programming.



One of the two rooms in the West Virginia Judicial Learning Center was previously used by attorneys waiting their turn to argue before the Supreme Court across the hall. The space that once held an eight-seat conference table now contains two corner kiosks, each displaying an interactive electronic "You Be The Judge" exhibit; a hands-on court stamp display; lockers with information about landmark school cases; explanatory wall panels; and (unseen) a hands-on scales of justice with balancing blocks. Photo by J. Alex Wilson - Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia

Transforming Court Spaces

Ohio and West Virginia demonstrate successful learning center projects despite differing budget, funding, and space constraints. While not every court has the budget or capacity to support a fully interactive JLC, many courts, regardless of size or jurisdiction including trial and appellate courts, can transform their spaces into engaging learning opportunities for visitors.

Below are examples of improvements courts can make based on different budget levels.

No Cost

- Mock trial or moot court scripts posted online
- Court tours by employees or volunteer docents
- Student essay contests
- Live Q&A with a judge (via social media or video conference)

Up to \$4,000

- Off-site court programs: Appellate courts hold argument dockets at local courthouses, schools, or college campuses.
Example from West Virginia: costs cover staff travel expenses.
- Offsite educational displays (exhibits, posters, panels, or banners) in locations like sheriff's offices, libraries, or museums.
- Tactile and decorative displays.
Examples from West Virginia JLC: scales of justice and table \$3,604; embosser activity with vitrine case \$3,517.

Up to \$120,000

- Augmented or virtual reality experiences.
(*West Virginia court staff provided content which created significant savings.*)
 - » Hallway three-screen interactive exhibit with individually operating screens covering eight topics each.
Example costs from West Virginia JLC: software \$88,000; hardware/housing \$30,256; total \$118,256.
 - » AV presentation on how cases move through the court system.
Example costs from West Virginia JLC: software \$54,700; hardware (two kiosks) \$17,781; total \$72,481.
 - » AV presentation for You Be the Judge interactive exhibit.
Example costs from West Virginia JLC: software \$89,000; hardware (two kiosks) \$24,041; total \$113,041.

Possible Funding Sources: State Funding, Grants from Nonprofit Organizations, Historical Societies, State and Local Bar Associations, Corporate Sponsorships, Educational Institution Partnerships

To overcome space constraints, courts can repurpose underutilized areas such as libraries, hallways, rotundas, conference rooms, or office spaces. For example, Tennessee's State Judiciary Museum, located in the Supreme Court Law Library in Nashville, features exhibits about historical cases and the litigants, lawyers, and judges involved in them. Other exhibits include information about the origins, history, and current operations of Tennessee's legal system.⁶

The Florida Supreme Court Law Library in Tallahassee offers a JLC alternative with its Rare Book Room, which showcases historical law texts and documents. This room is complemented by museum-style informative wall panels displayed in the lawyer's lounge and hallways that highlight the state's judicial history and court structure.⁷ Visitors leave the courthouse with a unique perspective on the evolution of justice in Florida.

Additionally, courts should consider the functionality of the space, ensuring that it is inviting and strategically placed for maximum visibility and access, ideally on the first floor if possible. This approach not only complements existing court services but also prioritizes the safety and security of all visitors.



Tennessee's State Judiciary Museum in Nashville features exhibits about historical cases and the litigants, lawyers, and judges involved in them.



Informative wall panels line the hallway outside the Florida Supreme Court courtroom, highlighting the state's judicial history and court structure.

⁶ See Tales of the Tennessee Judiciary at <https://perma.cc/2H38-A98X>.

⁷ See more about Florida exhibit at <https://perma.cc/T763-GA39>.

Sustainability

Getting started can be challenging, but maintaining a program is often the most difficult aspect. Ohio and West Virginia took similar approaches when developing their learning centers. The list below provides a helpful starting point for courts to consider when planning a project, with an emphasis on sustainability.

Steps to Developing a JLC

1. **Identify a Champion:** Find a passionate advocate within the judiciary to lead the team.
2. **Form a Committee:** Assemble a dedicated project team to drive the development of the center.
3. **Identify a Project Manager and Develop a Plan:** Outline goals, target audiences, and devise funding strategies.
4. **Determine Budget and Funding:** Investigate various sources such as grants, state budgets, and potential partnerships.
5. **Design Exhibits:** Plan⁸ and design exhibits⁹ that integrate technology and diverse learning methods to enhance visitor engagement.
6. **Evaluate the Center:** Use visitor feedback to update educational needs to continuously improve the center.
7. **Sustain the Center:** Secure a permanent funding source to ensure long-term success.
8. **Offer Online Resources:** Elementary and high school educators should also have access to your JLC's online teaching materials that prepare tour groups for their visit.

JLCs need ongoing maintenance and continuing exhibit updates, ideally around the ten-year mark. To maintain the quality of displays, civic education staff should establish a strong working relationship with housekeeping and facilities to ensure display units are cleaned of fingerprints, vacuumed, and touched up to address nicks or worn areas.

8 See more about exhibit planning at <https://perma.cc/H87F-LGC5>.

9 See more about exhibit development at <https://perma.cc/HA4B-BLQX>.

Why now?

According to the National Assessment of Educational Programs, the average civics score for eighth graders in 2022¹⁰ remained below the proficient level. Additionally, the 2024 State of the State Courts¹¹ poll shows confidence in state courts stands at approximately 63 percent. The Annenberg Public Policy Center's 2024 Constitution Day Civics Survey¹² reveals that while 65 percent of Americans can identify all three branches of government, a significant portion — 35 percent — cannot, indicating that over a third of the adult population lacks a fundamental understanding of our government's structure. In this context, JLCs play a crucial role in bridging the gaps in civic knowledge prevalent today. Importantly, they can help increase public trust and confidence in the judiciary by making the law and legal concepts more relatable and understandable.

¹⁰ See NAEP Report Card at <https://perma.cc/YD7R-SJ5C>.

¹¹ See National Center for State Courts. (2024, December 20). Nearly two-thirds of Americans express trust in state courts, says new poll. <https://ncsc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/ctcomm/id/372>

¹² See Annenberg Public Policy Center survey at <https://perma.cc/5MP4-RMD8>.

“

We see students from all across Ohio, and although each group varies in total civics knowledge, all groups seem to know the least about the judicial branch of government.

Stacey Gall

Ohio Visitor Education Center Tours Coordinator

“

With our West Virginia Judicial Learning Center, we will no longer be the mysterious branch of government. We try to tell students and adults about our branch, and what we do in the judiciary: that is, we help people. We help people who are in trouble or who have been wronged. We help people who are seeking some kind of redress, and we help people stay safe. We help children find a place where they can be safe and secure. That's why we want people to understand more.

Beth Walker

Former Chief Justice of West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals, 2023

Begin Today: Evaluate and Elevate

What does this mean for courts today? It means that now is the time to evaluate and elevate your court space, revitalizing unused or underused areas. With this charge, and despite space, budget, and funding limitations, courts — regardless of level, including local and municipal courts — can explore new and innovative ways to transform court spaces into hubs of learning and engagement.

No matter the content or delivery methods, all court educational efforts share a common mission: to educate the public about the judiciary and the legal profession, inspire and engage a new generation, and demonstrate why courts matter. By embracing this mission, courts can enhance their space and strengthen their connection with the public they serve.

Take the first step: begin with a pilot program or a small-scale project to build momentum.



In Colorado's "Make Your Case" exhibit, visitors play key roles as prosecutor, defense counsel, and jury in a criminal court case that follows the entire process, from opening statements through the verdict, as they decide the fate of Ms. Hand, accused of stealing gloves from Ski Outlet.

Begin Today: Reflection

Question to start: What is something you wish the public knew about your court?

Action: What can you do now, using the space you currently have, to engage the public in what you wish they knew about your court?

Community Connections

Have a plan to promote the groups that visit. These strategies can enhance the connection between your court and the community and help foster a sense of transparency and encourage public participation.

- **Leverage Social Media:** Use social media platforms to highlight public access to the courthouse and the engaging activities available to the community.
- **Adhere to Privacy Policies:** Be mindful of privacy regulations concerning the use of photos featuring minors. For instance, in Ohio, court photographers typically capture images of students from behind to respect privacy concerns.
- **Consider Local Rules:** Review existing local rules to determine if they restrict photography and recording. If necessary, revise these rules to permit visitors to take pictures and videos in areas outside of courtrooms.
- **Encourage Sharing:** Remember that visiting schools and groups often share their own photos on their social media channels. Include these options in your “tour information packet,” ensuring visitors are aware of the opportunity to connect and share.



The King Kamehameha V Judiciary History Center helps preserve, interpret, and educate about Hawaii's legal history through the lens of law, public policy, and the courts.