

Classroom to the Courtroom

Northern District of Illinois and American Bar Association join forces with teachers to explore judicial precedent, separation of powers and the human side of judging.



Educators from across Illinois listen during the Judge John F. Grady Summer Institute for Teachers.

For Catherine Hawke, the arithmetic explains the mission. Thirty-seven teachers gathered in a federal courtroom represent far more than 37 individuals.

Each educator will return to a classroom filled with students, carrying new knowledge, firsthand experiences and a more personal understanding of the federal judiciary.

That mission, and its advancement during a summer teachers' institute on July 16, 2026, in the Ceremonial Courtroom of the Dirksen Federal Building, represented a small part of the legacy of the late U.S. District Judge John F. Grady, the namesake of the

institute co-sponsored by the Northern District of Illinois and Hawke's American Bar Association. Judge Grady's former law clerks launched the program six years ago in tribute to a judge who often said his school teachers had a great influence on the course of his life as a prominent attorney and district judge in Chicago.

"By touching one teacher, we are in contact with so many students," Hawke said.

As deputy director of educational programs for the American Bar Association's Division for Public Education, Hawke helps educators strengthen their understanding of the Supreme Court, constitutional law and the rule of law. She develops professional-development programs and public resources designed to make the law more accessible—not only to teachers, but also to the young people they teach.



Catherine Hawke, front row, watches a panel discussion during the Summer Institute.

By welcoming 37 middle and high school educators to the Ceremonial Courtroom in the Dirksen Federal Building for the sixth annual Judge John F. Grady Summer Institute for Teachers, the NDIL, the ABA, and the former Judge Grady law clerks sought to carry the mission forward.

The daylong program welcomed social studies, civics, government and U.S. history teachers from communities stretching from Champaign to Rockford. The group included educators from Chicago Public Schools, suburban districts, public, private and religious schools and teacher-training programs.

They came to learn about the federal courts, the rule of law and this year's central theme: the separation of powers. But Hawke wanted them to receive more than

information. She wanted them to experience the Court as a living institution and to leave prepared to bring that experience into their classrooms.

“We help further the teachers’ knowledge and understanding of the courts,” Hawke said. “We help them work with other teachers to learn best practices on how to teach about the courts and the judiciary, and we hopefully empower them to go back to their students with firsthand experience.”

Learning About the Constitution Where Law Happens

The institute began with a curriculum session on *stare decisis*, led by Hawke and developed by Mary Ellen Daneels, chief learning and innovation officer for the Civic Mission Schools Network and director of the Illinois Civics Hub and Illinois Democracy Schools Network.

Georgetown Law professor Stephen Vladeck then led a wide-ranging presentation on the separation of powers—historically, in contemporary government and in the years ahead.

A nationally recognized expert on the Supreme Court and the federal courts, Vladeck discussed constitutional principles in the context of present-day institutions and events. He is also the author of *The Shadow Docket* and writes *One First*, a weekly newsletter that aims to make the Supreme Court’s rulings, procedures and history more accessible. *First One* is its weekly audio companion.



Georgetown Law professor Stephen I. Vladeck discusses the separation of powers.

The “Three Branches at Work” panel featured former U.S. Attorney John Lausch, government and public-policy adviser Heather Wier Vaught and U.S. District Judge Manish Shah.



Former U.S. Attorney John Lausch, Heather Wier Vaught and U.S. District Judge Manish Shah discuss how the three branches of government work.



U.S. Magistrate Judge Gabriel Fuentes, U.S. District Judge Sara Ellis and U.S. Magistrate Judge Albert Berry III discuss the separation of powers.

The day concluded with judicial perspectives from U.S. District Judge Sara Ellis and U.S. Magistrate Judges Albert Berry III and Gabriel Fuentes. Judge Fuentes served as a law clerk to Judge Grady.

“When I once asked him what he thought were the qualities of a good judge, he summed it up in one word: Courage,” said Judge Fuentes.

“Judge Grady was unafraid of reaching what he saw as the legally or factually correct result, no matter what anyone thought of it, including reviewing courts. He was fond of saying that when trial and appellate judges disagreed about some issue in their written orders, ‘there’s a reason why they call them opinions.’ Judge Grady’s courage and confidence made him a great judge, and naturally, working for him as a law clerk had a big impact on my later career path as a judge,” Fuentes added.

A Day in the Courthouse

“A day in the courthouse can become a year of lessons in the classroom,” said Chief Judge Virginia Kendall.

“Judge Grady was not only an exceptional trial judge; he was an innovator and a teacher,” remarked Chief Judge Kendall. “I can think of no better way to honor him than by helping educators teach the next generation about fairness, judicial independence and the rule of law. The lessons learned here will reach far beyond this courtroom and into classrooms throughout Illinois.”

For Andrew Conneen, who teaches seniors at Adali E. Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, that connection to the classroom was one of the institute’s greatest strengths.

“This program is a wonderful way to link the relevance of the courts to our classrooms,” Conneen said.

He said Vladeck’s presentation offered educators a particularly useful framework for connecting constitutional history with the issues unfolding around their students.

“I think any civics class has to be able to link the history of institutions and separation of powers to the reality of what’s going on,” Conneen said.

Asked what it is like to teach civics in the current era, Conneen called it “the best class you could take.”

“We try to teach our students that civics should be more than a course—that it should be a civic lifestyle,” he said. “A day like today is that civic lifestyle. This is for teachers, but we want to bring that same enthusiasm back to our classrooms for our students in August and September.”

Spending the day alongside other engaged educators also gave participants an opportunity to recharge before the start of the school year.

“It’s a great professional-development day to bring energy to our training in the summer so that we can replicate that energy for our students in the fall,” Conneen said.



Andrew Conneen, a teacher at Stevenson High School, listens during the Summer Institute.

Seeing the People Behind the Robes

For Hawke, one of the most important parts of the institute is helping teachers move beyond the formality that often surrounds the federal judiciary.

“Federal court judges, I think, are viewed as being these mysterious black robes behind the bench,” she said. “What we hope to do today is really demystify that for the teachers and let them see the judiciary and judges for the people they are.”

That change in perspective often becomes visible as the day progresses. Teachers begin the program in the ceremonial setting of a federal courtroom. By the end, they have heard judges answer questions, explain difficult decisions and discuss the human responsibilities that accompany judicial service.

“One of the things I hear often after this program is that they see the humanity of judges,” Hawke said. “They see that judges are real people, which seems really silly to say, but they are.”

By placing teachers in direct conversation with judges, lawyers, policymakers and scholars, the institute turns institutions that can appear distant or abstract into something more immediate and concrete.

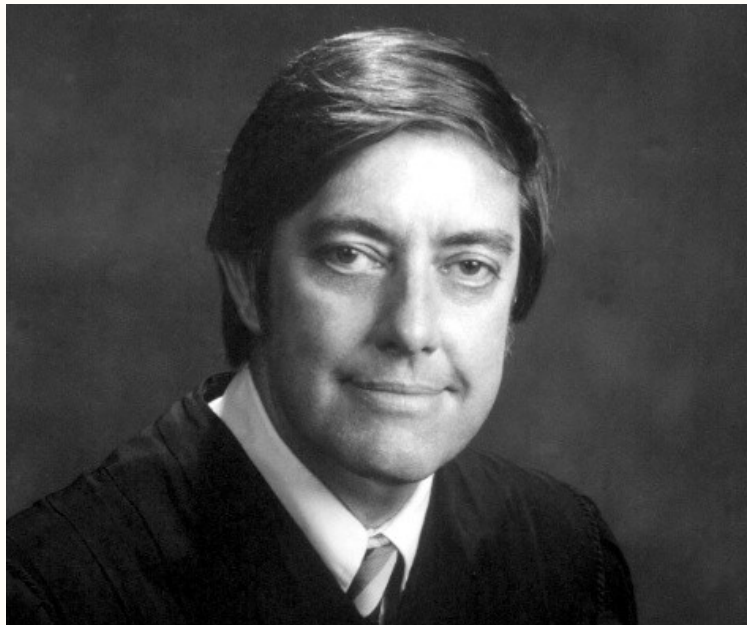
By the end of the day, Hawke said, teachers see “judges and the Court as real people doing real work, answering tough questions and doing the best they can.”

Carrying Forward Judge Grady's Legacy

The institute's namesake, John F. Grady, served for 39 years as a U.S. District Judge for the Northern District of Illinois and as chief judge from 1986 to 1990.

Appointed to the federal bench by President Gerald Ford in 1975, Grady earned a reputation as a respected and pioneering trial judge. He presided over some of the most significant cases to come before the Court during the latter half of the 20th century and was among the first federal trial judges to allow jurors to take notes and submit questions to witnesses in civil trials.

Lawyers who appeared before him and former clerks often described him as a man ahead of his time.



Judge John F. Grady served for 39 years on the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois.

Following his death in 2019, former law clerks created the Judge John F. Grady Endowment to honor his service and extend his commitment to the rule of law to future generations.

Maintained through a partnership between the Northern District of Illinois and the American Bar Association, the endowment supports the annual Summer Institute and student courthouse visits. Those visits allow young people to enter a federal courthouse, meet judges and probation officers, learn how juries work and see the justice system firsthand. The endowment also supports field-trip scholarships that help schools offset the transportation costs that can otherwise prevent students from visiting the Court.

Hawke estimated that 15 to 20 classrooms have visited the courthouse with the endowment's support during the past six years.

Beyond the Courtroom

The institute's influence extends even further. At least 150 educators have participated in its first six years. Even using a conservative estimate of 50 students per teacher, those educators have collectively reached at least 7,500 young people, with many teachers instructing 100 or more students each year.

For Hawke, the program's growing attendance demonstrates both an interest in the federal courts and a need for programs that open courthouse doors to the community.

"Teachers want this, and they need that support," she said. "They don't have to be here. They can be home with their kids or resting, and they really value this sort of experience."

Readers who would like to help extend that experience to more educators and students can learn about attending future programs through the [Judge John F. Grady Endowment](#) and by contacting the court's Public Services Administrator, Lauren Thiel at Lauren_Thiel@ilnd.uscourts.gov for questions and to book a student visit to the courthouse.

The Judge John F. Grady Summer Institute for Teachers is expected to return in 2027 with another opportunity to help the Constitution, the courts and the rule of law come alive for the next generation.