

Mock Trial: Designed for Classical Christian Education

by Jeanette Faulkner, Ad Fontes Academy

In an era when words mean whatever they have to mean as long as the hearer believes or does what you want, an extracurricular called Mock Trial crushes that rebellious paradigm. That is only one reason mock trial provides critical training for classically and Christianly educated teens.

In mock trial, students assume the role of a prosecution or defense team as they enter a simulated court trial against another school. Student attorneys are required to learn a portion of the actual Federal Rules of Evidence and courtroom protocol in order to argue their case before real attorneys and judges. If the students object to evidence as “improper character evidence” when they should be objecting to “hearsay,” it doesn’t matter how they interpret the rule. The judge will overrule them, no dialoguing, and no corroborating, no postmodern feel-good moments. Precise words carry precise meaning.

Parents love mock trial for many reasons. Kids voluntarily cut their hair, wear a suit, and become adept at conversing with adults. Harvard offers a four-year, full-ride scholarship to any student on the national championship team. ACCS schools have found mock trial is a natural venue for students trained in logic and rhetoric; thus ACCS schools do well in this academic sport.

Usually, the State Bar Association sponsors the program. To find out how to register, google *high school mock trial* in your state.

Each fall, all teams receive the same case which is often based on a real-life trial. The case consists of six witness statements, pictures of exhibits, some supporting legal instructions and rules. The case

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writers are evil geniuses who hide clues in the documents that could make the case winnable for either the prosecution or the defense. Finding the clues is what high school sharpies like to do best.

The next step is to find a legal coach. Your best bet is a parent in your school or church who is a litigator. They will be investing hours with the team, so this is a labor of love.

With your attorney coach, hold tryouts to choose three attorneys for each side and three witnesses for each side. The attorneys need to write a direct examination for their witness and a cross examination for a witness from the opponent’s school. Each side will choose a student to present their opening statement to the jury and another to deliver the closing statement. The witnesses need to know all the facts in their statement and take on the persona of their witness.

The beauty of this program is that mock trial is attainable for academic gee-whiz kids who can

argue a mustache off their father’s face, and for those who may not be academically gifted, but have a flair for the dramatic. A few of my best witnesses carried a C+ average.

Your students will surprise you because Jesus helps teenagers do things adults could only dream of making them do. Consider Eddie who came to Providence Classical School in Spring, Texas, as a sophomore. Eddie embodied the inner-city stereotype. He didn’t walk, he shuffled; he made

no eye contact, but only mumbled to his chest. Yet, Mom wanted him to be on the mock trial team.

I called my mentors, the coaches at Logos School in Idaho, Chris Schlect, Greg Dickison, and Jim Nance. They said to have Eddie read Dr. Seuss to me. *Rocks in My Socks* it was. They had me put him at one end of the parking lot and project his lines to me at the other end. Eddie wanted to learn and I learned what a hard worker Eddie was. We made Eddie a witness, the president of a software gaming company no less.

After our dress rehearsal, I heard his mother exclaim, “He talks! I didn’t know he could talk!” The next year Eddie was an attorney. Today he is on the Howard University Mock Trial Team, has successfully competed against Ivy League schools, and next year will enter law school.

In case you’re thinking this is impossible for you, consider my humble beginnings. Though I started mock trial programs at Regents School of Austin, Providence Classical School in Spring, Texas, and Ad Fontes Academy in Virginia, I’m really

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not in high demand; my husband's career required job transfers. I wish I could tell you I had the command of classical orators that the Logos coaches do, but I was just a homeschool mom from Spokane, Washington, who discovered classical education in my kids' middle school years. I attended every conference and training opportunity Logos offered until my husband's job took us to Texas where I joined the Regent's faculty. When I petitioned for a mock trial program, the headmaster said, "Yes, and I'd like you to do it."

I knew nothing except what I observed at Logos. At teacher

training that summer, I literally took dictation as I peppered the Logos coaches with questions. With those notes in my clenched hand, we did exactly what they said. By our third year, we took fifth place out of 26 teams in Texas. Jim Nance gave me some of the best advice, "Read every word of your packet." Do it, every word from cover to cover.

Last year at the national competition, something wonderful happened. AFA was matched against Logos. I couldn't believe my team was behind the bar competing against the mother ship! Logos cleaned our clocks, of

course, but we emerged a stronger team for it. They modeled for my team how to be competent, but not pretentious; confident, but not arrogant; in short, how to do mock trial Christianly.

Now, many of my former students are in law school and have worked for congressmen or the Bush administration. Society needs young people who value precise communication, like Eddie who helped this grateful lady coach her team to back-to-back victories in Virginia. As the cliché goes, if I can do it, you can too. We'll be looking for your school at Nationals in the years to come.



2010 Chrysostom Oratory Competition



Champion
Anna Kitchen
Rockbridge Academy



Runner-Up
Krista Wilford
The Ambrose School

Congratulations, Anna and Krista!