

ROOM TO LEARN

BY GREG MICHIE

"Okay, who can tell me what a bill is?"

According to the clock above the door, sixth period had already been under way for five minutes, but my class of eighth-graders was still milling about, looking for materials, finishing up hallway conversations. I stood between them and a chalkboard on which I had written, "How a bill becomes a law."

"Ervin, how about it? What's a bill?"

Ervin turned around in his chair. "A what?"

"A bill."

"A bill?"

"Yeah, a bill."

"Like a phone bill?" Ervin offered jokingly.

"Not exactly," I said, willing to play along. "A different kind of bill."

"A cable bill?" asked LaRhonda with a knowing smile.

"Come on, you know what I mean. Another whole use of the word *bill*."

"It's a name," said Tasha. "A white name. You know how white boys have them real short names? Bill, Frank, Tom—"

"Jim," Raynard called out.

"Jack," said someone else.

"Bob!"

"George Bush!"

"Yeah!" Tasha said. "They got them boring names!"

*Greg Michie teaches seventh and eighth-graders at Seaward Elementary School in Chicago. This article is drawn from his forthcoming book, *Holler If You Hear Me: The Education of a Teacher and His Students*, copyright 1999 by Teachers College Press, and is reprinted with the publisher's permission. Some of the names in the article have been changed.*

"Okay, okay. I get the point," I said. "I have one myself. But what I want to know is how the word *bill* relates to how laws are made. Remember what we started talking about yesterday?"

"Oooh, Mr. Michie! Mr. Michie!" Tobias' hand shot up like a flare. An excitable kid who was at times hot-tempered, Tobias loved to distract me from my planned activities. He'd wait just long enough for me to pick up steam on a topic and then quickly figure out how he could best derail the train.

"Tobias?"

"You know what Ms. Tucker did today?" Tobias asked me.

"Oooh, yeah," Tasha hissed. "That lady make me sick."

"She bugged out," added Raynard.

"Wait," I said. "Does this have anything to do with what we're talking about?"

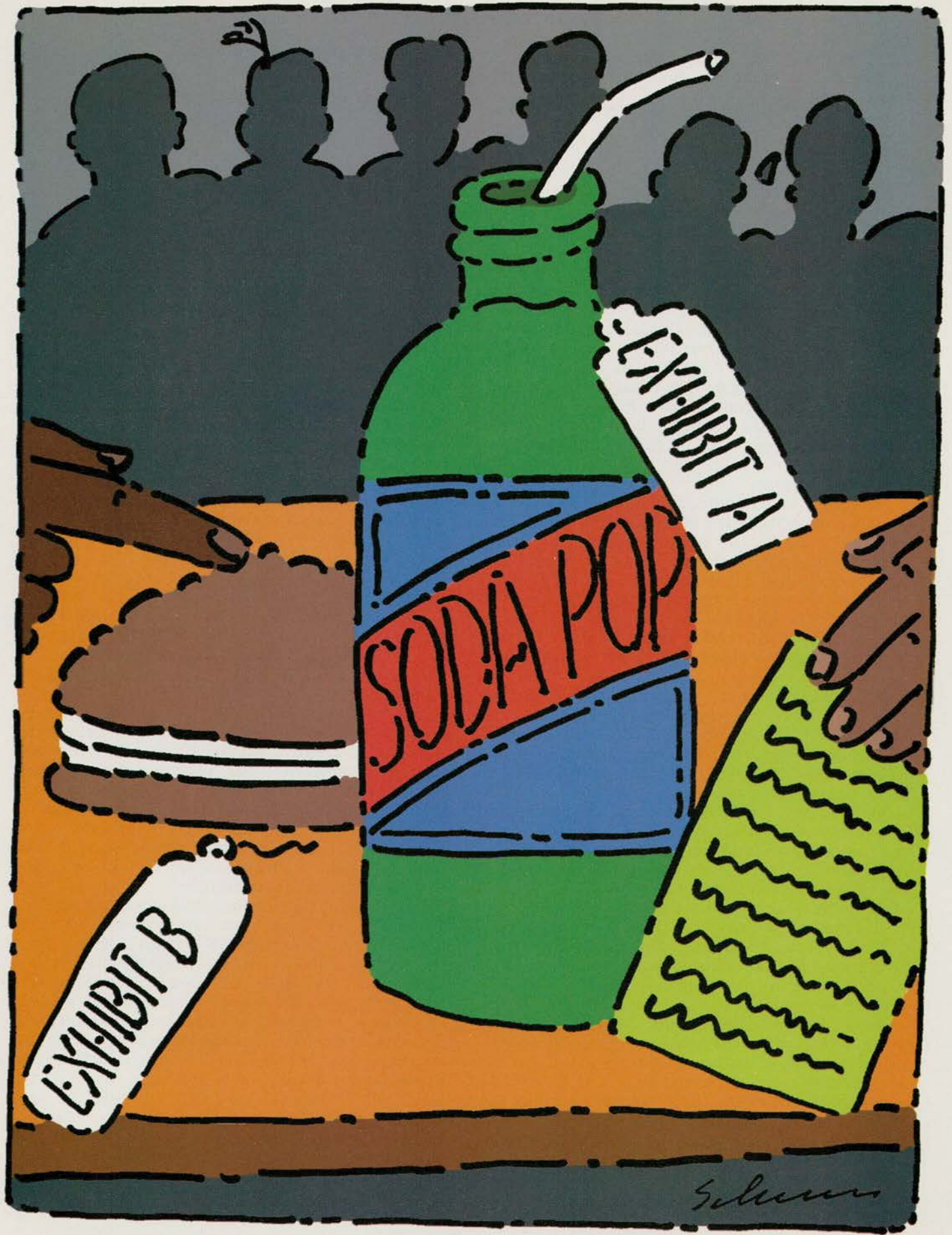
"Yeah, she got a husband named Bill," a voice from the back of the class piped in.

"Nah, it don't really have nothin' to do wit' it," admitted Tobias, "but look at what she done—"

"You know how we can't eat or drink or chew gum or nothin' in class, right?" Tasha inserted.

"Well, today she was eating a big cream doughnut right in front of us," said Tobias, continuing the story. "And drinking a 16-ounce pop—a diet Dr. Pepper—right there in the class! Now, that ain't right, Mr. Michie. You know that ain't right."

Yeah, I knew it. It wasn't right. But it was beside the point, at least at the moment. "Look," I said. "I'm trying to help you guys get ready to take this Constitution test. And I don't think there're gonna be any questions on there about Ms. Tucker, diet Dr. Pepper, or cream doughnuts."



Schumer

"But y'all ain't fair," added LaRhonda. "Y'all can drink whenever y'all want to and we gotta be up in here all sweatin' and hot."

"Y'all?" I shot back. "What do you mean, 'y'all'?"

"I mean y'all," LaRhonda said. "Y'all teachers. You know—you all?"

"And how many times have you seen me drinking anything in class?" I asked, trying to separate myself from the ranks of the enemy.

"But you eat them teacher lunches, don't you?"

Busted. I looked over to my right. Vincent's pudgy body was hanging halfway out the window. "Vincent!" I yelled out. He pulled his shoulders and head back in and looked at me as if he had no idea why I'd called his name. "What are you doing?" I asked.

"Nah, I thought I heard somebody outside sayin' my name," Vincent answered.

"It was probably Bill," said another voice.

"Could you sit back down, please?" I asked. Vincent hesitated. "Vincent, sit down! C'mon, I'm not playing! Let's go!" I was raising my voice again. Which meant I feared I was losing control again. It was nothing new. Sometimes it seemed like that's all my first year in the classroom had been—one long fight for control.

I grew up in a middle-class family in Charlotte, North Carolina, the oldest of three children. As a kid, I collected baseball cards and memorized lyrics to Partridge Family records. At school I was fascinated with dinosaurs and was co-captain of the crossing guards. I spent summer nights in the backyard playing neighborhood games of Kick-the-Can, and, when I was lucky, got to stay up late to watch Johnny Carson. My childhood, in many ways, was typical, white-bread Americana.

But there were differences. Charlotte in the early '70s was a place of court-ordered desegregation but also a place of tentative reconciliation between blacks and whites. I spent my elementary school years in a neighborhood that, due to a sudden outbreak of white flight, became integrated almost overnight. I walked to school and played ball with as many blacks as whites, had plenty of friends of both races, and sang gospel music in a biracial Presbyterian church from the age of five. Because of these early experiences, I considered myself somewhat well-informed on issues of race and class—more so at least than the average white person. Then I came to Chicago.

What I found, at least on first impression, was more separation and racial mistrust than I remembered ever experiencing in the "backward" South. Although Chicago was certainly one of the nation's most diverse cities, it was also arguably the most segregated. In many sections of the city, ethnic and color lines clearly marked one neighborhood from the next. Poverty seemed both more severe and more widespread than anything I'd seen before. So it was not surprising that many of the city's public grammar schools were essentially single-race institutions, with almost all of their students coming from poor or working-class families.

I began subbing in the fall of 1990 at Ralph Ellison Educational and Vocational Guidance Center—a euphemistic mouthful that really meant *School for Sev-*

enth and Eighth-Graders Who'd Been Booted Out Someplace Else. My first day there I was assigned to a rowdy but jovial group of eighth-graders who, for the first hour or so, didn't even seem to notice there was an adult in the room. They calmed down only when I offhandedly mentioned that I'd gone to college with Michael Jordan. It didn't matter to them that I hadn't actually known him. They wanted to know the details of every occasion we had even crossed paths. After class, I heard some of them in the hall telling friends, "Hey, that man know Michael Jordan." In subsequent years I would use the MJ connection often as a last-ditch means of regaining control of a classroom. It never failed and even took on a life of its own. Once a kid at the park tapped me on the shoulder and asked, "Hey, did you really used to play on the same team with Michael Jordan?"

I didn't think I had turned in a particularly Jordan-like performance that first day at Ellison, but apparently getting subs to come there wasn't easy. When the principal saw that I wasn't making a mad dash for the exit at the end of the day, she asked if I'd like to return to sub again the following morning. I said I would. The same thing happened the next day and the next, until soon I became a familiar face at the school.

In early November, Ellison's reading lab teacher abruptly resigned. A matronly, kind-hearted Polish woman of about fifty, she had taught for years at a local Catholic school before deciding the previous summer that she needed a fresh challenge. The challenge she chose was the Chicago Public Schools, and she regretted it almost immediately. The kids at Ellison ran her over like a steamroller on wet asphalt. It was the first time I'd seen someone's will totally broken by experiences with children. It wouldn't be the last.

That afternoon, the principal asked if I'd be interested in taking over the reading lab. She felt I'd begun to develop a rapport with the kids and that my stepping in would be an easier transition than bringing in someone unfamiliar. I wondered aloud if there was a set curriculum for the class—all I'd seen the kids bringing out of there were spelling lists. She explained that the intent of the course was to provide extra practice in reading and to build comprehension skills. Since many of Ellison's students were below grade-level in reading—whatever that meant—the lab was intended to serve as a place for remediation.

I didn't know the first thing about teaching reading. Thinking back on my own early experiences with books, I couldn't even begin to piece together how the process worked. I remembered my parents and grandmother reading to me, I remembered loving certain books, and then—poof!—I remembered reading on my own. It seemed more like magic than anything else. Yet as I mulled over the thought of having my own classroom, I knew I didn't have any tricks up my sleeve. Because I had done no education coursework, I would still be paid as a day-to-day substitute. I'd have all the responsibilities of a fully certified teacher for \$54 a day. But there were also obvious advantages—I'd have steady work, I'd have my own space, and I'd get more of a feel for what it was really like to be a teacher. The thought of it was scary, but I'd been saying I wanted to teach, and here was a chance to do it

staring me right in the face. I decided to give it a shot.

The principal allowed me one day to prepare. I arrived early that Monday to rummage through the lab's available resources. Opening the doors of a large metal supply cabinet, I peered inside, hoping, I suppose, to stumble upon some kind of lesson-plan jackpot. Instead, it looked and smelled more like a musty attic, stuffed with outdated equipment, aging materials, and other assorted junk. One shelf was full of the clunky tape recorders and headache-inducing plastic headphones I remembered from the language labs of my youth. On a higher shelf were—literally—hundreds of purple ditto masters and worksheets. The copyright date at the bottom of the pages I examined read "1972." Above those was a boxed set of the Mastery Learning series, a reading program I'd heard rode a brief wave of popularity in the mid-seventies before dying out just as quickly. Other odds and ends lay about randomly: an old sweater, a broken trophy, a whistle, a rolled-up American flag. Disappointed, I closed the cabinet's doors and decided to go to Plan B: I would plunge in and rely on instinct, trusting it to carry me through until I came up with something better.

The next day I had the students in my lab classes complete a questionnaire that covered a wide range of home, community, and school-related topics. Many wrote that they disliked, even hated, to read. To the question, "What kinds of things do you most enjoy reading?" many replied: "Nothing." I decided that my initial goal would be to try to spark the kids' interest in reading. I knew this would be nearly impossible to accomplish with moldy dittos or workbook pages, so I brought in as many outside sources as I could. We read excerpts from Malcolm X's autobiography and Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land*. We read up on African Americans of note, from Marcus Garvey to Mary McLeod Bethune to Charles Drew. We explicated poems of Gwendolyn Brooks and Langston Hughes alongside rap songs by Boogie Down Productions and A Tribe Called Quest. We studied the censorship controversy then surrounding the rap group 2 Live Crew and used that as a starting point for examining the Bill of Rights and how it affected the kids' lives. Of course, those were the good days. Good days occurred maybe once a week.

The rest of the time, I was fighting for survival. Of the five classes that came to me each day, none was easy, but one eighth-grade group had become a particular problem. I found the students to be bright and energetic; they seemed to genuinely like me. But I often found it impossible to maintain control of the classroom. While most of their other teachers ran extremely tight ships, I wanted my classes to be relaxed, open forums. But it usually only took about ten minutes for relaxed and open to turn into wild and loose. The sudden freedom I dumped at the kids' feet proved too much to handle. They didn't know what to do with it, and I failed to give them much guidance. On several occasions, things had gone so completely awry that I just sat down at my desk, frustrated and angry, and waited for the storm to pass. Sometimes it did.

I never broke down and cried in front of those students, though there was a time or two when I came



close. I fought back the tears because I knew crying would only make my job harder—it would make me appear weaker in their eyes, and that was the last thing I needed. Some of the kids already considered me a poor excuse for a man. One day I had come to school with a bandage on my hand. When I began writing on the board, a student noticed.

"What happened to your hand, Mr. Mitchell?" Several of the kids had settled on the more familiar "Mitchell" as the preferred pronunciation of my name.

I stopped writing and showed the bandage to the group. "Oh, I broke a glass last night washing dishes. Just cut it a little bit."

"Washing dishes?" one of the male students asked incredulously. "Why you washing dishes? Ain't you got a woman to do that?" This led to a period-long discussion of gender roles and relationships, but despite my attempts at feminist rhetoric, few of the guys budged in their positions. As they were leaving, one kid just looked at me and shook his head. "Washing dishes," he kept repeating with disgust. "Washing dishes."

The class wanted me to take a stronger hold, to become more authoritarian. That was the style of discipline many of them were used to, and they respected it. It felt safe. Raynard, a tall and witty kid who was one of the group's natural leaders, often lingered after class to serve as my mentor. He could tell I was floundering and had a sincere desire to help. "You gotta be meaner, Mr. Michie," he would say. Then, as if he was no longer one of them, he would add, "That's what

these kids understand." I knew what Raynard meant, and sometimes I'd act on his advice. I'd get so fed up with the class' behavior that I'd blow up on them and then make them do busywork for a couple of days. They'd sit silently, mindlessly copying down words from the dictionary, and I'd play overseer at my desk, my power restored. But inside I was hating it, and I knew there had to be some middle ground, a better way.

So there I stood, trying to get through my introductory remarks on "How a bill becomes a law." It was the third week of May. An oscillating fan buzzed beside me, ineffective in the stifling air. As Vincent finally made his way from the window back to his seat, Tammy stood up and turned to face Carlton, who was sitting behind her. "Boy, you better give me back my pen!" Tammy said with a snake-like roll of her neck.

"Tammy—"

"I want my pen back!"

"Carlton, could you give her the pen back?"

"I ain't take no pen! She musta lost it."

"All right," I said. "Tammy, how about if you sit down, and we'll figure out what happened to your pen after class?"

Amazingly, Tammy obeyed. "But I better have my pen back 'fore we leave up outta here or I'mo pop that boy in his lip!" Tammy had once threatened to pop me in the lip also, so I knew how Carlton was feeling.

"Okay—" I was momentarily at a complete loss as to what I'd been talking about. "Where were we?"

Tobias again raised his hand.

"Does this have to do with how a bill becomes a law?"

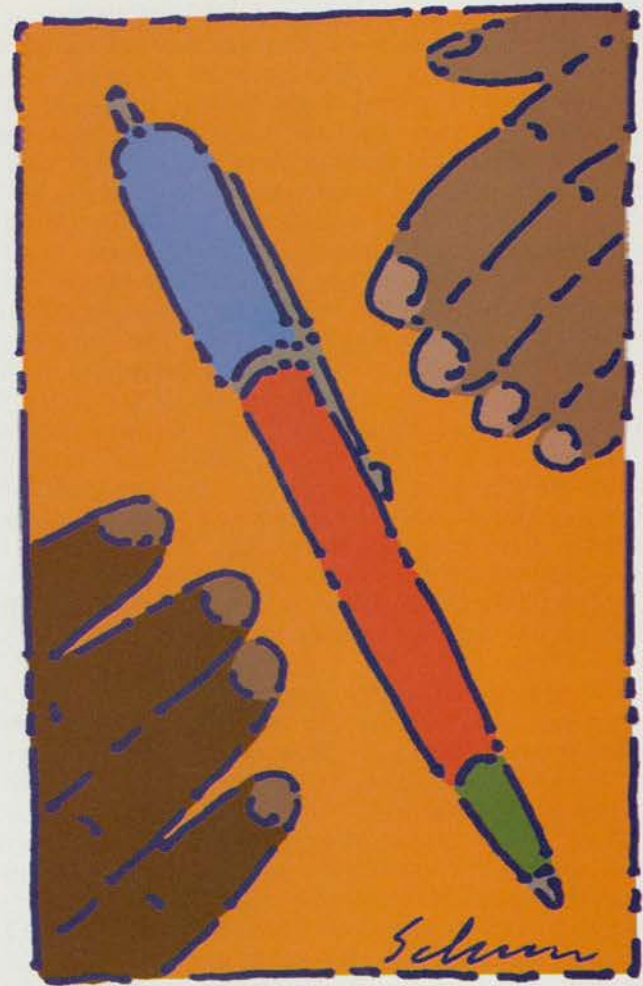
"Kinda," Tobias answered.

"What do you mean, 'kinda'?" I was irritated; we were getting off track. I could tell I was about to lose the kids, if I hadn't already.

"Look, Mr. Michie, I think this is what we oughta do," Tobias explained. "The teachers around here, they not being fair, right? They telling us we can't bring food in the school, but yet and still they eating and drinking in class, right? Well, this is what I think we oughta do. We oughta put this school on trial. The students versus Ellison. We oughta hold a trial right here and charge them with unfair rules."

It was as if the idea had an electric current running through it. The entire room was spontaneously energized. Students who seconds earlier were lifelessly slumped over their desks were now out of their seats and animated. Within minutes the class had agreed on the proposal, decided on a case to try, and begun to assign roles. I folded up my notes and marveled as they excitedly worked out the details. The plan was to put the school administration and teachers on trial for what the students considered unfair double standards: Despite a school rule forbidding food or drinks in class, several teachers apparently thought they were above the law. In addition, the kids noted that teachers were served different, higher-quality lunches than the students. They wanted the rules changed to allow students to bring food, candy, and pop into the building.

I loved the idea. Throughout the year I'd talked with



the kids about the importance of speaking up intelligently about matters that concerned them. Of course, I'd had in mind some of the larger problems that affected them—discrimination, police brutality, erratic city services. Equal access to pop and cream doughnuts didn't seem quite as noble a cause, but to the kids, the bottom-line issue was essentially the same: unfair treatment.

After spending a few days discussing courtroom roles and procedure, preparing arguments, and arranging testimony, we were ready for our day in court. Seven judges—all students—and a small gallery looked on somberly as Marvin, the first witness, was sworn in by placing his right hand on a dictionary. Nathan, a playful and gangly teen who was to serve as the students' lawyer, got the proceedings started.

NATHAN: I heard that some teachers be eating and drinking in the classroom. Is that true?

MARVIN: Yep.

NATHAN: Well what do you feel about that?

MARVIN: I think they should let the kids bring it, too.

NATHAN: Thank you, sir.

It was a brief interrogation, but then again we were just getting started. It took most kids a few minutes to warm up. But it didn't take Tobias any time. Though he had originally wanted to play the role of the prose-