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Future-Proofing the Legal Workforce

Why Law Firms Should Start in High School

By Petronilla Sylvester

In today's rapidly changing legal landscape, law firms are investing heavily in professional development, recruitment, and retention. Still, the most effective long-term strategy may begin much earlier than the first day of law school. As recruitment methods shift, firms are realizing that building the legal workforce of the future requires looking beyond conventional talent pipelines and recognizing

that the earliest spark of professional identity often begins in high school.

Law firms have long understood the importance of expanding access to the profession and have deepened their professional development efforts to foster engagement and belonging across their workforce. Yet, for many students, particularly those from communities

with limited access to legal pathways or those from first-generation backgrounds, the path to a legal career begins without guidance or exposure. By the time these students reach college, their academic choices may already have narrowed their access to the field. High school engagement offers a strategic solution: it broadens the pool of future applicants while strengthening a firm's culture of mentorship and service.

"Our attorneys came away from the experience with a renewed sense of purpose," said one firm partner who volunteered in a high school law program. "It reminded us why we entered the profession and how much potential exists in classrooms we might never have visited otherwise."

The Case for Early Engagement

Early exposure to law builds both confidence and curiosity. Research in workforce development and experiential learning consistently shows that adolescents who interact with professionals develop stronger career aspirations and a belief in their own efficacy.¹ Psychologist Albert Bandura's work on self-efficacy — the belief in one's ability to succeed — demonstrates that expanding

educational access for students whose schools or communities lack meaningful connections to the profession can be transformative. Such programs help students develop confidence through authentic experiences of success. In turn, these experiences broaden occupational aspirations and inform long-term life plans.

Similarly, when high school students have authentic opportunities to engage with legal professionals, they encounter concrete experiences that reinforce their belief in their own potential. These efficacy beliefs, Bandura observed, play a greater role in shaping students' academic progress and commitment to a field than their measured ability or initial vocational interests. In the context of law, this translates into students who not only begin to picture themselves in the profession but also start to understand how to chart a path toward it.

For law firms, participation in legal career pipeline programs is strategic. According to NALP reports from 2024 and early 2025, firms are increasingly focusing on early pipeline development, which is becoming critical to sustaining a diverse and capable workforce. This approach responds to accelerated recruiting timelines and a "fragile" pipeline of diverse talent in the legal field.² High school programs

¹ Albert Bandura, *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control* (New York: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1997).

² NALP, "2024 Report on Diversity in U.S. Law Firms," (January 2025).



provide a unique entry point, offering firms an opportunity to connect pro bono work, and community engagement, to long-term recruitment goals.

Hands-on Learning, Shared Impact

Programs connecting legal professionals to classrooms provide a dual benefit: they develop students and re-energize lawyers. Lawyers who teach or mentor young people often describe rediscovering their enthusiasm for the law through the lens of inquiry and simplicity. It's one thing to discuss complex cases with colleagues, but entirely another to explain why fairness matters to a group of high school students exploring justice for the first time.

The idea that lawyers (and law students) learn as much from teaching as the students they teach is not new. It's central to the Street Law model, which began at Georgetown Law in the early 1970s. Over time, it evolved into an approach adopted by hundreds of law schools and programs worldwide. The model has long been credited with equipping professionals to translate abstract legal concepts into relatable, real-world lessons, helping students see law as a living system they can navigate — one they can belong to.

Impact That Extends Beyond the Classroom

The return on this investment is measurable. Program evaluations by organizations like Street Law, Inc., NALP, and the Association of American Law Schools,³ as well as research on Street Law-style legal career pipeline programs, consistently show that hands-on public legal education increases students' knowledge of and interest in legal careers and clarifies pathways to law school.

For organizations, investing in programs with proven outcomes is an evidence-informed strategy. Initiatives that demonstrate measurable gains — whether in student engagement, academic persistence, or skills development — offer a higher return on investment than untested approaches. By leveraging models with documented effectiveness, firms can more reliably align their community engagement efforts with broader workforce development goals, ensuring that resources advance both organizational priorities and public impact.

High school students who participate in law-related education programs also demonstrate stronger civic engagement and a clearer sense of professional purpose.

³ Association of American Law Schools and Gallup Inc., "Before the J.D.: Undergraduate Views on Law School," (August 2018).

"That experience gave me language for something I already cared about — justice," said one high school participant who is now a law student. "It made the idea of working in law feel attainable. It wasn't just something for other people."

For law firms, these initiatives strengthen community ties and enhance employee engagement. Volunteerism, particularly in education, has been shown to increase

retention and satisfaction among professionals.⁴ Aligning pro bono values, mentorship, and workforce development creates a virtuous cycle: firms invest in their people by allowing them to invest in others.

In addition, Gallup's 2024 research on employee engagement shows that deeper engagement correlates with lower turnover and

⁴ Chief Executives for Corporate Purpose (CECP), "Giving in Numbers Report," (2023).



stronger retention.⁵ Their Q¹² analysis indicates that teams in the top quartile of engagement experience significantly less turnover than less engaged peers. Volunteer programs, particularly those that are skills-based and aligned with professional purpose, can help create that engagement. When legal professionals dedicate time to structured community education initiatives, they often report a stronger connection to their work, renewed professional motivation, and a heightened sense of impact. Over time, these experiences contribute not only to individual satisfaction and development, but also to organizational stability and the cultivation of a sustainable talent pipeline.

Practical Ways Firms Can Lead

For firms interested in beginning or expanding this work, a few strategies can help ensure meaningful and sustainable impact:

1. **Start local and leverage existing partnerships:** Developing a new program can feel daunting, especially when navigating school systems, calendars, and approval processes. Firms can make meaningful progress by partnering with community organizations that already have deep relationships in education and a proven record of

delivering structured student programming. Building on established models allows firms to focus on substantive engagement rather than logistics, while ensuring initiatives are both effective and sustainable.

2. **Empower staff at all levels:** Teaching, mentoring, and supporting student-facing activities offer valuable professional development opportunities for a wide range of employees. Junior lawyers, senior associates, partners, and legal support staff can strengthen their communication, leadership, and collaboration skills through purposeful engagement with students. Encouraging broad participation brings varied professional insights to the work and enhances the experience for both volunteers and students.
3. **Integrate community engagement with professional development goals:** One of the most impactful ways firms can lead is by aligning their high school engagement work with established professional development priorities. When teaching and mentoring are woven into the firm's broader learning and leadership framework, they become part of employees' growth rather than an add-on or extra-curricular obligation. Structured models, such as those used

in legal career pathway programs, show how experiential teaching and mentoring can reinforce key competencies firms already prioritize. These include collaboration, communication, and problem-solving skills.

4. **Collect stories, not just data:** While participation metrics and volunteer hours have value, they often miss the deeper impact of this work. Reflections from students and volunteers about newfound confidence, clarity of purpose, or renewed motivation can illuminate outcomes that numbers cannot capture. Gathering these narratives helps firms articulate the significance of their efforts to internal stakeholders and strengthen the link between community engagement and long-term talent development goals.
5. **Foster skills-based volunteering:** Framing high school outreach as skills-based volunteering underscores its professional rigor and relevance. Teaching legal concepts, mentoring students, and guiding hands-on activities draw directly on the expertise of legal professionals and support staff. This approach not only benefits students but also reinforces employees' sense of purpose and strengthens the early legal talent pipeline.

The Long View

The legal profession's greatest resource is its people. Cultivating that resource requires imagination, patience, and a commitment to community engagement that extends beyond recruitment cycles. When law firms open their doors, and their time, to students who have yet to step foot in a law school, they are not just inspiring future legal professionals; they are shaping the next generation of leaders who will define the field.

The most forward-thinking firms understand this simple truth: the future of law begins long before law school.✚



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⁵ Gallup Inc., "Q¹² Employee Engagement Survey," (2024)