

## Volunteers will be rewarded

BY RAFAEL SUAREZ-RIVAS - WWW.MIAMIGOV.COM/CITYATTORNEY

09/26/2014 7:41 PM | Updated: 09/26/2014 7:41 PM

As a volunteer speaker for the past two Ethical Governance Day events – last year at Miami Beach Senior High and at Mater Academy Charter High School in 2012 – I have come away surprised and pleased at how engaged the students are. They are genuinely interested in the discussions and appear to want to develop a “consciousness” of good civics and good governance.

For example, while discussing the First Amendment, I heard probing and thoughtful questions relating to the students own experiences on legal issues surrounding school prayers, an invocation at a public meeting or a moment of silence, as they relate to the U.S. Constitution s clause regarding freedom of religion, and church and state separation.

They also commented on press freedom and how that constitutional doctrine relates to the Internet and the school paper. There were other inquiries dealing with freedom of speech in public gatherings.

The Sunshine Law was another popular topic and students discussed how it applies to state and local governments, that is, what meetings must be held in public and what are the requirements of the law. The teenagers asked about whether it applies to school staff (it does not) and other officials.

In reviewing public records laws with the young participants, after the basic rule that most government records in this state are public and open to inspection, copying and review, I was amazed at how many thoughtful inquiries were posed about whether this law covers student, juvenile, medical and business records.

The discussion of Ethics Codes and Ethics Laws always has brought a colorful debate involving whether officials can vote on matters involving land that they or relatives and friends own, projects they are have a business interest in and the hiring of relatives.

Each speaker takes a unique approach. By using the Ethics Commission's materials as a template or playbook, the presentation and ensuing discussion can go in many interesting directions. Some speakers are collaborative and will partner with another. Others, like me, are most accustomed to an individual presentation. Some use visual aids such as PowerPoint, although not all classrooms are equipped for that.

The content and manner of each speaker's participation can be individually set and you need only follow the general scope of the topics. You will be enriched by putting your own experiences, thoughts, concepts and opinions to work as you engage in a discourse with these students.

You will be stimulated and challenged by making this presentation to high school students. You will be surprised at how engaged, interested and thoughtful their comments and discussion will be. As a speaker, you will have done a good deed by explaining, and maybe even introducing, these topics to the students. They will learn the fundamentals of our laws and procedures for a democratic, accountable, transparent and ethical government. They will also be all the better as citizens and voters.

Participate in Ethical Governance Day. You will be rewarded.

*RAFAEL SUAREZ-RIVAS IS A MIAMI ASSISTANT CITY ATTORNEY.*



SUAREZ-RIVAS