

Law School's Missed Lessons: Educating Your Community

By **Roger Handberg** (October 29, 2025)

While law school teaches everything from civil procedure to stare decisis, there are some aspects of practicing law that aren't covered during the three years that lead up to the bar exam. In this Expert Analysis series, attorneys offer advice on navigating real-world aspects of legal practice that are often overlooked in law school. If there is a professional skill you would like to write about, email expertanalysis@law360.com.

After nearly two decades as a federal prosecutor and as the U.S. attorney for one of the country's busiest and largest federal districts, I learned that justice isn't just won in the courtroom — it's built in communities. While law school teaches litigation strategy, case law and procedure, it overlooks a critical role that lawyers — particularly public servants — must embrace: that of educator.

Early in my career, I believed justice was won in the courtroom. But in prosecuting cases like elder fraud, I learned that verdicts alone rarely shielded the most vulnerable. Many older adults remained at risk because they didn't recognize scams or understand their rights. Educating the public — through workshops, media engagement and partnerships with community organizations — proved just as critical as writing any legal brief.



Roger Handberg

Law school did not prepare me for that role, but it became central to my work — and as I transition into private practice, I'm continuing that mission.

The Role Law School Skips Over

Law school prepares you to argue persuasively, analyze complex statutes and navigate courtroom procedure. But it largely ignores one role: explaining the law to the people who live with its consequences.

Lawyers often think of themselves primarily as advocates, negotiators or advisers. While those roles are undeniably important, they are only part of the picture, especially for attorneys who handle sensitive issues — elder abuse, consumer fraud, housing or immigration.

In my years prosecuting elder fraud, I saw how essential the educator role was to the communities we served. We could convict a scammer, but the losses — financial and emotional — were already done, and they were devastating. Even as one case wrapped up, a new scheme would surface, targeting the same vulnerable population.

The law can punish wrongdoers, but education can prevent the wrongdoing in the first place. The best defense was prevention, and prevention required education. That meant speaking at senior centers, partnering with local TV reporters and meeting people where they were. It meant explaining not just what the law says, but how people could use it in their daily lives to protect themselves before becoming the next victim.

Why Education Is a Lawyer's Hidden Superpower

Whether you practice criminal law, employment law, corporate compliance or housing law, you carry knowledge that most people don't.

When you share that knowledge in plain language, three things happen:

- You prevent harm before it starts. An informed client or community member can spot warning signs early.
- You build trust. People remember the lawyer who took the time to help them understand their rights.
- You strengthen the system. When more people understand the law, compliance improves, and disputes can sometimes be avoided altogether.

And here's the truth: You don't have to be a public official to bridge the gap between legal training and real-world communication. Any attorney — at a big firm, small practice, nonprofit organization or government office — can embrace the educator role and start making a difference in their community.

How to Make Legal Education Part of Your Practice

Law schools often present pro bono or community work as optional. In practice, it is essential. Lawyers have a unique skill set: an ability to interpret the law, anticipate risks and explain rights and responsibilities. Leveraging that skill in public education protects the public while reinforcing the lawyer's credibility and impact.

Public education doesn't require a formal campaign or special title. It starts with being intentional about sharing your knowledge and expertise.

Some practical ways lawyers can engage include the following.

Hosting Informational Sessions

Partner with libraries, senior centers, Rotary Clubs or local nonprofits to present on legal topics relevant to the audience. Simple, clear explanations often resonate more than complex legalese.

Creating Written Guides or Blogs

Draft practical tips, checklists or FAQs to distribute online or in print. Written resources can extend your reach far beyond face-to-face interactions.

Engaging With the Media

Local newspapers, radio shows and online outlets often welcome expert commentary on legal matters. These appearances allow lawyers to reach audiences who might otherwise never interact with the legal system.

Working With Pro Bono Clinics

Serving in community clinics allows lawyers to provide individualized guidance and

simultaneously collect insights into the recurring issues that vulnerable populations face.

Community engagement isn't a side task — it's integral to the broader mission of legal service. Lawyers who recognize this role cultivate trust, reduce harm and sometimes even prevent cases before they reach the courtroom.

Building Public Trust Through Education

Lawyers have the authority to influence outcomes through litigation or advisory work. But authority alone does not guarantee public trust. Education bridges that gap. When communities understand their rights, risks and responsibilities, lawyers are not only seen as experts but also as partners invested in the public good.

This dynamic is particularly important in underserved or vulnerable populations. Older adults targeted by scams, tenants facing housing disputes or employees navigating workplace rights all benefit from clear guidance. Lawyers who step into the educator role can reduce exploitation, increase compliance and strengthen community resilience.

Law schools emphasize analytical reasoning and doctrine but rarely teach lawyers how to translate that knowledge for the public. Bridging this gap is critical.

To effectively communicate, try to:

- Distill complex concepts into essential principles;
- Use analogies and stories to make the law relatable;
- Listen actively to identify misunderstandings and adjust messaging; and
- Follow up with resources so participants can revisit key information later.

In my transition to private practice, I am committed to continuing this approach: blending legal expertise with practical guidance and community outreach. The goal is simple yet powerful — protect people, prevent harm and empower individuals with knowledge.

Lessons From the Field: When Courtroom Victories Aren't Enough

Prosecuting high-profile cases is often seen as the pinnacle of legal achievement. Yet, in many instances, a victory in court does not fully address the underlying problem.

In one memorable case, we prosecuted a man who stole hundreds of thousands of dollars from older adults through a sweepstakes scam. We secured a conviction and a long sentence — but the case stayed with me, not just because of the damage done, but because I kept thinking about all the people we hadn't reached in time.

That experience revealed a critical truth: Courtroom victories alone are insufficient. Education becomes enforcement. Hosting workshops, issuing press releases, recording public service announcements, speaking at senior centers and Rotary Clubs — all of these efforts reinforced the legal victory with practical prevention measures.

And those efforts, combined with the efforts of so many others, have made a difference. Over the years, I have heard from people who recognized the scam and avoided it. That was when I truly felt the full measure of justice.

From my perspective, a lawyer's influence extends beyond statutes and rulings. Protecting

communities involves building awareness, encouraging vigilance and empowering individuals to take action. To do this effectively, lawyers must view themselves not only as legal professionals but also as educators.

Bridging the Gap Between the Courtroom and the Community

Law school prepares lawyers to think critically, argue persuasively and navigate the law's complexities. What it often does not teach is that being an effective lawyer often means being an effective teacher. Legal knowledge without public understanding is like a locked toolbox — it holds potential, but it's useless to those who cannot open it.

When we step into the role of educator, we unlock that toolbox. We empower people to protect themselves, comply with the law and use the system as it was meant to be used. Whether through public seminars, written guidance, pro bono work or community engagement, lawyers can extend their impact far beyond the courtroom — showing up in community centers, school auditoriums, Rotary Clubs, senior centers and local newspapers — not just as lawyers, but as teachers.

Adopting this mindset can set the tone for an entire career for young lawyers. For seasoned attorneys, it can renew a sense of purpose. And for the profession as a whole, it is a reminder that our influence reaches far beyond a judge's gavel.

By bridging the gap between legal authority and public understanding, lawyers fulfill a dual mandate: advocating for justice while fostering knowledge, trust and resilience in the communities they serve. Legal victories matter, but education empowers — and in many ways, empowering others may be the most enduring legacy a lawyer can leave.

Roger Handberg is a shareholder at GrayRobinson PA. He previously served as the U.S. attorney for the Middle District of Florida.

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