

## STEPHEN LAWRENCE DAY ESSAY COMPETITION 2024

### *“Should law be a mandatory subject in schools?”*

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In the past, I have often questioned why mathematics is a compulsory subject. Of course, there are plenty of uses for maths, and basic skills such as mental arithmetic prove useful in a professional environment. However, is it necessary for all children to be able to understand concepts such as Pythagorean theorem, or algebraic equations? In reality, those who do not pursue careers in STEM or similar fields have little use for this knowledge after their secondary education. Yet, regardless of occupation, it is likely that at some point in their lives many people may find themselves in the position of being a claimant, beneficiary, trustee, member of a jury, or even a defendant. In this essay, I will provide a comprehensive overview of the reasons why law should be made a mandatory subject in schools.

One benefit of having every student study law would be widespread legal literacy. The law has a multitude of practical applications in everyday life, as individuals enter into contracts daily, sometimes unknowingly, through simple actions such as purchasing goods or agreeing to terms and conditions. In addition, many people do not realise that some contracts can be entered into orally and informally, so there is a clear information gap regarding consumer rights. This is one reason why a basic knowledge of legal principles would be beneficial, as simple disputes or misunderstandings could be avoided, and there would be better recognition of the responsibilities that one party to a contract has to another, which would reflect better awareness of the rights and responsibilities that we all have within society. It needs to be understood that just by being a consumer or a citizen of a country, everyone is automatically tied to the law, whether this is stated explicitly or not.

A survey conducted by the Legal Services Board in 2020 found that 64% of adults in the UK experienced a legal problem in the previous four years, with 53% of those problems being continuous. In addition to this, 85% of households with an income below the legal aid means test threshold were not aware that they were eligible for legal aid. It is proven that those with lower legal confidence and less understanding of what they are entitled to as consumers find it harder to deal with their legal issues,

and as a result are less likely to think that they had a fair outcome. However, the overarching concern is that people do not always realise that their issues are legal in nature – for example, not everyone makes an immediate connection between banking and law, as it is seen to be more related to economics. This is why students being educated on the law would lead to more accessibility of adequate legal assistance, as they would be more likely to identify whether their issues relate to the law.

Linking to the topic of education, law is an invaluable subject to study, not only because it encompasses many aspects of everyday life, but also because it teaches many skills such as critical thinking and problem solving. In terms of integrating law into the current curriculum, I think it would be important to place an emphasis on the topic from a young age, as children are able to start gaining a sense of morality during their formative years. However, the subject could be broached informally, so as to encourage more discussion, reasoning and debate, which would have the potential to shape how students construct arguments, as well as to enhance their abilities to negotiate and resolve conflicts. Whether students choose to study law to a higher degree or dedicate themselves to another field entirely, they will be left with a plethora of transferrable skills and advantageous knowledge that is broadly relevant to many aspects of life.

Some may argue that there are already many essential subjects packed into the current curriculum, so we cannot rationalise sacrificing time spent on other subjects to provide a legal education – after all, law is a nuanced topic that may be difficult for students to understand. However, if we can justify placing importance on educating pupils about significant historic events to prevent their reoccurrence, we should consider that a legal education could have the potential to lower crime rates if people are able to further understand the repercussions of their actions. Furthermore, if ignorance is not a defence in a court of law, then how can we allow ourselves to stay misinformed about it? We cannot expect children to grow up to be law-abiding citizens if the law is never expressly communicated to them.

It should be noted that law does not necessarily need to be taught as an additional subject, as schools are already required to teach some subtopics of the law through PSHE (for example, protected characteristics relating to the Equality Act 2010 and substance abuse linked to the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971). The number of offences involving a knife or sharp instrument has increased by 7% over the last year, and the most likely group to carry a knife are young men aged 12-25. Teaching children about the possible consequences of violent crimes and gang-related exploitation could not only act as a deterrent, but also save the NHS and emergency services millions of pounds. Therefore, reforming the way we teach PSHE in schools by making more explicit references to the law, as well as shedding light on cases that have altered the way that the law affects us, would ultimately be worthwhile for this generation.

Finally, by providing a foundation of legal facts, we can have more confidence in democracy and a fairer society. For example, in jury duty, we are putting trust in twelve individuals to decide the outcome of a trial without knowing with certainty that they are capable of comprehending the legal implications of another person's actions without the use of bias. Clarifying legal policies would reinforce fundamental democratic principles and ensure that fairer decisions are made within society, as citizens would be better equipped to participate in civic life. In addition to this, understanding the basics of law can help in simple scenarios such as trying to claim compensation for a delayed flight. This shows that having a grasp on the law has the potential to empower people as they have a clearer understanding of their rights and responsibilities, as well as giving people more authority if they can ascertain when they are potentially being taken advantage of by another party. It is important for consumers to be conscious of a business' possible negligence so that there is not a lack of accountability.

In conclusion, I strongly believe that making preliminary legal studies compulsory is the cornerstone of building a better future, as students would benefit from strengthening their critical reasoning and having legal literacy. The law should not only be recognised when things 'go wrong'. Though it may seem invisible at times, the law constantly exists around us, and has the potential to drastically impact our lives, which is why it is necessary to have a working understanding of it. Despite the fact that we cannot dictate the actions of others, having a population that is well versed in the law could potentially lead to more compliance with it.