

# Federal Justice in Focus: Wooddale High Students Visit the U.S. District Court

## EXPLORING THE PEOPLE & PROCESSES BEHIND EVERY CASE

*Together, Their Roles Show How the System Fits Together*

Criminal justice students from Wooddale High School visited the U.S. District Court on January 16, 2026, beginning their day with an inside look at the people who shape the federal justice system. The experience provided students with a broad introduction to the structure and purpose of federal judicial work.



U.S. Attorney D. Michael Dunavant, Assistant Federal Public Defender Presita West, and U.S. Probation Officer Dawn Gardner guided students through a fast-paced overview of the roles their offices play and the federal process, illustrating how each office becomes part of the story as a case moves through the system.

## WHERE QUESTIONS MEET REAL-WORLD PRACTICE

*A Moment that Connected the Classroom with the Courtroom*



With that foundation set, the group shifted into a quick Q&A that allowed students to connect what they had just learned to applied practice. The conversation also highlighted the broad range of career paths and the varied journeys that lead professionals into roles across the federal criminal justice system.

Before departing, students received a brief overview of the sentencing hearing they would observe next, offering them context for the proceeding and a sense of what to watch for as they entered the courtroom—from the participants involved to the considerations that shape a judge's decision and how those elements come together in real time during a sentencing.



## WITNESSING JUSTICE IN REAL TIME

*An Experience That Made the Stakes Visible*

The group observed a sentencing hearing before Chief U.S. District Judge Sheryl H. Lipman, giving them a firsthand look at how a pattern of minor offenses can gradually escalate into something far more serious, and how those accumulated choices carry weight for the individual, the court, and the community.

The experience underscored how the decisions made at each stage of a person's history shape the considerations a judge must weigh at sentencing.

## INSIDE THE WORK OF THE U.S. MARSHALS

*A Brief Window into Daily Operations*

As part of their time at the courthouse, students met with Deputy U.S. Marshals Jess Ivie and Joe Beidl for an engaging discussion on the mission and responsibilities of the U.S. Marshals Service.

A guided tour of the Marshals' facilities followed, giving students a close look at daily operations and introducing them to another essential component of federal law enforcement.

## LUNCH & LEARN WITH THE BENCH

*A Final Exchange to Tie the Day Together*

The visit concluded with lunch and conversation with Chief U.S. District Judge Sheryl H. Lipman, Chief U.S. Magistrate Judge Tu M. Pham, U.S. Magistrate Judge Annie T. Christoff, and U.S. Circuit Judge Andre B. Mathis.

The final Q&A offered students an opportunity to reflect on the sentencing hearing and deepen their understanding of the judicial system through the Judges' insights and experiences.



*Circuit Judge Mathis (far left), Assistant Federal Defender West (left), & Chief Magistrate Judge Pham (right) join students for a group photo as the visit to the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Tennessee comes to a close.*