



South Carolina Bar

Senior Lawyers Division

The Honorable J. Mark Hayes, II
Statewide Law Day Essay Contest
2026 Awards Packet



The Rule of Law and the American Dream

*Open to all South Carolina Public, Private, and Homeschooled
High School Students*

THE AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION’S LAW DAY 2026 THEME

The 2026 Law Day theme is “The Rule of Law and the American Dream.” Most Americans have their own ideas about the American Dream, but whether their focus is on aspirations such as political liberty, social equality, personal security, or economic opportunity, they all rely on the rule of law. The rule of law—the idea that no person is above the law—is what ensures the rights of the people to live their lives as freely as possible and to pursue their dreams.

The rule of law ensures that people will not be imprisoned or punished without due process, will be free to pursue their economic interests, and will be secure in their homes and property. In short, the rule of law is essential to the freedom and prosperity that Americans have aspired to throughout the nation’s history. The ABA encourages all Americans to recognize Law Day on May 1, 2026, and to reflect on how the rule of law ensures all Americans have the ability to fulfill their dreams.

WHAT IS LAW DAY?

Law Day, held annually on May 1, is a national day set aside to celebrate the rule of law. Law Day provides an opportunity to understand how law and the legal process protect our liberty, strive to achieve justice, and contribute to the freedoms that all Americans share. Law Day celebrates the American heritage of liberty, justice and equality under the law. In 1961, Congress issued a joint resolution designating May 1 as the official date for celebrating Law Day. Every year, Law Day provides legal professionals and others with opportunities to help students and the public understand how the law protects our freedoms.

2026 LAW DAY ESSAY TOPIC INTRODUCTION

ABA President Michelle Behnke announced the 2026 Law Day theme, “The Rule of Law and the American Dream.” In her Law Day address, President Behnke states “President Dwight Eisenhower established the first Law Day in 1958 as a national observation to promote representative government and the rule of law. The American Bar Association has been a leading promoter of Law Day since its creation advocating for the rule of law and its role in securing liberty, justice and prosperity for all Americans. The theme for Law Day 2026 is “The Rule of Law and the American Dream.” Most Americans have their own version of the American dream. But whether the focus is on aspirations such as political liberty, social equality, personal security or economic opportunity, it is all based on the rule of law. The rule of law, the idea that no person is above the law, is what ensures the rights of people to live their lives as freely as possible and pursue their dreams. The rule of law ensures that we will not be imprisoned or punished without due process. We will be free to pursue our economic interests and achieve financial independence, and we will secure our homes and property safe from both criminals and tyrannical government. We can rely on our courts to enforce agreements and contracts in the marketplace for our jobs, living expenses and other necessities. In short, the rule of law is essential to the freedom and prosperity that Americans have aspired to throughout our nation’s history. As a national organization of lawyers committed to defending liberty and pursuing justice, the ABA encourages all Americans to recognize Law Day on May 1, 2026, and to reflect on how the rule of law ensures all Americans have the ability to fulfill their dreams. To learn more about Law Day and to join with the ABA in their efforts, please visit www.lawday.org.”

2026 LAW DAY ESSAY TOPIC

STATEMENT ON THE RULE OF LAW

The Rule of Law is seen as a foundational principle that has made the American Dream possible. The Rule of Law can ensure a stable, fair, and predictable society where citizens can pursue their individual goals. While the American Dream and the idea of success through hard work are historically woven together, the Rule of Law has provided a legal and institutional framework for citizens to act on the aspiration of achieving the American Dream.

Each student participant must write an essay of 1,000 words or less on this topic:

Discuss whether you agree or disagree with the above STATEMENT ON THE RULE OF LAW.

Suggested approaches (these are only suggestions; the student is encouraged to be creative to develop their own approach to the topic).

- Discuss historical events that may support your position that the Rule of Law was necessary for advancing or achieving the American Dream.
- Discuss how the Rule of Law has advanced the aspirational ideas of equality, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness stated in the Declaration of Independence.
- Discuss your family's personal history and how the Rule of Law has advanced, or frustrated, your family's achievement of the American Dream.

ESSAY INSTRUCTIONS

Each essay writer is required to adhere to the following:

- 1) Submit a typewritten essay in a 12-point font and include all attached documents:
 - The student's name, home address, home phone number, and grade level.
 - Essay title.
 - School name, address, phone number, and educator's name (if applicable).
 - Documentation of all research on a Works Cited page or an attached sheet (if applicable).
- 2) Forward all to an English, Language Arts (ELA) or Social Studies (SS) teacher to submit the given essays and application forms.
- 3) **DO NOT PUT THE STUDENT'S NAME ON THE ESSAY ITSELF.**

SELECTION CRITERIA

Each English, Language Arts and/or Social Studies teacher may submit two (2) essays per grade level from his or her respective school for consideration for the pre-selection judging. However, more than (2) essays may be submitted if it is the teacher's opinion that additional essays are worthy of consideration. The essays will be read and assessed by Judge Hayes and members of the South Carolina Circuit Court Judges Association. The overall winner, their family, and teacher will be invited to the South Carolina Bar Annual Convention where the student will be recognized.

All public school, private school and home-schooled participants' essays must be submitted to Judge Mark Hayes by **noon on Friday, May 29, 2026**. All essays along with the appropriate cover sheets are to be submitted to the following address:

Judge J. Mark Hayes, II
Spartanburg County Courthouse
180 Magnolia Street
Spartanburg, SC 29306
Office: (864) 562-4144 Fax: (864) 562-4142

AWARDS

9 th Grade	\$500
10 th Grade	\$500
11 th Grade	\$500
12 th Grade	\$500
Overall Winner	\$1,000

Cash awards, medals and certificates will be presented to the recipients. Winning essays may be published and released to the general public. By entering the essay contest, your consent is assumed for publication of your winning essay, your name, teacher, and school. If you do not wish for your winning essay and name to be published, please "X" the box on the Cover Sheet. The annual statewide Law Day Essay Contest is sponsored by the South Carolina Bar Senior Lawyers Division.

ESSAYS FROM PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS

Students from participating schools will submit essays to a school official (teacher, administrator, etc.) for pre-selection.

School submissions should include:

- 1) Essays and corresponding entry forms, including any source citations and parental release forms (if applicable);
- 2) A list of all other students who prepared essays for this contest. (Judge Hayes would like to recognize the efforts of all participants).

ESSAYS FROM STUDENTS WHOSE SCHOOLS ARE NOT PARTICIPATING OR WHO ARE HOMESCHOOLED

Students whose schools are not participating or who are not affiliated with a school may send entries directly to Judge Hayes for consideration.

- 1) Essays and corresponding entry forms, including any source citations and parental release forms (if applicable);
- 2) A student who is affiliated with a non-participating school or class must provide the school's name, address, telephone number, and indicate on the form that the school or class is not participating.

Essay Title: _____

Entry #: _____

2026 Law Day Essay Contest Judging Criteria

ESSAY THEME: The Rule of Law and the American Dream

Assign a point value (1 – 10) to each of the following questions. One point indicates the lowest mark and 10, the highest.

Structure/Content

_____ Does the essay contain an introduction, a descriptive body and a conclusion?

_____ Is the data correct and in a clear and logical and/or sequential order?

_____ Does the essay exhibit good language skills: proper spelling, syntax and grammar?

_____ Are the references to sources (Constitution, Bill of Rights, cases, etc.) correct?

Creativity/Originality

_____ Does the essay have some sense of originality and creativity?

_____ Are the ideas good and well-developed?

_____ Does the essay creatively develop the theme and does not deviate?

_____ Does the essay contain the writer's personal views and comments?

General Appearance

_____ Is the format neat/typed or written legibly?

_____ Is the cover sheet attached and correct?

_____ **Total Points (100 points maximum)**

