

CRAVATH, SWAINE & MOORE LLP

*Back to School*  
*The American Lawyer*  
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*Cravath adopts  
a New York  
high school — and  
finds a new passion.*

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## *Back to School*

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*By Lisa Lerer*

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Head of the class:  
Cravath partner  
Jeffrey Smith at  
the School for  
Law and Justice.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN ABBOTT



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*One partner calls Cravath's commitment to the Brooklyn high school "the best precedent that could ever be set in the most intense case one could ever imagine."*

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**STRIDING QUICKLY** down the hallway of the Urban Assembly School for Law and Justice, a high school near the decaying Brooklyn Navy Yards, Cravath, Swaine & Moore partner Jeffrey

Smith dwarfs everything around him. It's not just because he's tall, although at 6 feet 4 inches he is, or that the low ceilings and institutional architecture make the elementary school building feel particularly small. It's that the 52-year-old Smith is a tornado of enthusiasm, energizing the entire school from the moment he enters the building. Joe Pinto, the school's program coordinator, meets him with a warm handshake, updating him on the status of the schoolwide summer internship fair. When he enters the ninth-grade classrooms, he greets each student by name, introducing himself to the new kids. Teachers come by, excited to show Smith A+ tests and particularly insightful lines from student essays.

Smith and Cravath are as crucial to this Brooklyn high school as paper, pencils, and chalkboards. SLJ's 107 ninth graders spend their school days with their teachers, their principal—and a whole team of Cravath lawyers. Last summer, Cravath partners and associates helped design SLJ's law-themed curriculum, from suggesting a forensics class instead of the standard ninth-grade science course to creating dummy legal documents for student mock trials. And they've stayed involved through the school year with lunchtime lectures and special appearances. After SLJ's English classes read *A Civil Action*, for instance, Smith helped organize a mock town hall meeting to discuss toxic exposure in

Woburn, Massachusetts, the setting of the book. A Cravath in-house graphic designer even created the school's omnipresent blue and white logo, plastered everywhere from the front doors to the students' backpacks. "We don't tend to do anything casually here at Cravath," says Smith. "One way or another we throw ourselves into it." The firm's contributions total over \$20,000 and 2,000 lawyer and staff hours, as well as in-kind contributions such as computers, meals, furniture, and books.

It's fairly common for lawyers to volunteer in schools, mentoring students, coaching mock trial teams, and making financial donations. City bar associations organize legal school-to-work programs that provide public school students with legal internships. Some lawyers even design and teach legal classes to high school students. But over the past three years, a handful of firms have deepened the scope of their education work, making open-ended commitments to individual schools in their communities. In addition to Cravath, Heller Ehrman White & McAuliffe recently adopted a small law-themed public school in New York City; and in Chicago, Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal recently won approval to start a new elementary charter school. Lawyers at these firms say they're making a bigger difference with their community service work in schools than they ever could through traditional legal advocacy. "You can litigate a hell of a lot of cases with the Department of Education and not accomplish what you can accomplish in our school," says Cravath's Smith.

**THE SCHOOL FOR LAW AND JUSTICE** has made Cravath into an educational trendsetter. Over the past decade, the small schools movement, which aims to break down enormous, undifferentiated public schools, became very fashionable in the education reform



With Cravath's help, SLJ teachers transformed ninth-grade science into an exploration of forensics.

will oversee the project. "It will only get bigger over time."

In Chicago, meanwhile, lawyers at Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal will soon become the guardian angels of an elementary school. As part of Mayor Richard Daley's goal of creating 100 new schools by 2010—and to coincide with the firm's one-hundredth anniversary—Sonnenschein decided to start The Legacy Charter School, an elementary school located in low-income North Lawndale. Partner Errol Stone, 65, has worked full-time on the project since June, an example not only of the time and money

community. Nonprofit groups dedicated to creating smaller urban schools—such as SLJ's parent organization, the Urban Assembly—sprang up in cities across the country. After the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation donated \$57.7 million to start 77 small schools in New York City in September 2003, New York mayor Michael Bloomberg created 60 small middle and high schools. The mayor also pledged to start 140 more schools by September 2007 through partnerships with corporations, nonprofits, and community organizations.

Cravath's involvement with SLJ takes Bloomberg's idea to a new level, improving upon a standard already set by Kaye Scholer, a partner with the first Urban Assembly law-themed school. The Bronx School for Law, Government and Justice, founded in 1997, works with 14 different corporate, nonprofit, and government partners; Kaye Scholer lawyers coach the school's mock trial and moot court teams. The Urban Assembly's newest law-themed school, The Academy for Government and Law, scheduled to open this fall, will employ the Cravath/SLJ model. Heller Ehrman White & McAuliffe has signed on as the school's corporate partner. "We've made a nonstop commitment," says Heller Ehrman partner Steven Koppel, who

Sonnenschein has committed, but also of the difficulty of getting a new school off the ground. "There are all the issues of starting a business from scratch—and [this is] a highly regulated one that's very complicated," Stone says. Sonnenschein created both a planning committee and a 13-member standing board composed of firm partners, civic and community leaders, and educators. To handle the school's finances—Sonnenschein plans to donate at least \$1 million over the next five years—the firm set up a separate nonprofit foundation. The students won't arrive until August, but Stone says interest is so high at Sonnenschein that once the school year starts, he expects the firm will need a part-time volunteer coordinator to organize lawyers' visits to the school. As for his own involvement: "I expect it will be one of the most rewarding experiences of my career," he says.

**BUT CRAVATH REMAINS THE ONLY FIRM** already to have established a fully integrated relationship with a school. In fact, it's been almost two years since Urban Assembly founder Richard Kahan first contacted Cravath managing partner Robert Joffe to talk about a big idea for his newest small school. Kahan



had worked with Joffe in his past career as a prominent real estate developer. Now that he was an education philanthropist, Kahan wanted Cravath to partner with the new law-themed high school he was planning. Kahan approached Cravath because he respected the work of the firm's lawyers, he says, and also because he knew the power of the firm's name in the legal world. "I felt that given the prestige of the firm, it would make it easier for us in the future to enlist the help of other law firms," he explains.

Cravath's 439 lawyers, Kahan told Joffe, would serve as mentors, funders, and friends for the school's 400 pupils. Joffe sent out an e-mail to gauge the firm's support and immediately received replies from two former teachers, corporate partner Smith and litigation partner Katherine Forrest, who later recruited 25 associates to form a core of volunteers. From the time Cravath signed on to the project, says Urban Assembly executive director Saskia Levy, the firm made it clear that it wanted to touch every area of school operation. Over the past year the depth of the Cravath lawyers' commitment has far exceeded the Urban Assembly's initial expectations. "It's a much stronger relationship than I ever thought we could have with an outside partner," says Kahan. "Their performance is really the model for all our partners."

Smith and Forrest's immersion in the SLJ world began long before September. Before the Urban Assembly found SLJ's current home—it occupies several floors of PS 287 in Brooklyn—

the school's administrative staff spent the summer working at Cravath. The firm even hosted teacher interviews. Partners Forrest and Smith also advised administrators on the law component of the curriculum, which is SLJ's academic foundation. "We served as a sounding board," says Forrest.

As the school year has progressed, Cravath lawyers have only gotten more involved in SLJ. "We don't do an event without Cravath's input and support," says principal Elana Karopkin. "They are truly instrumental to everything we do at this school." The firm is SLJ's financial fairy godmother, donating everything from computers to thousands of books. This summer Cravath plans to hire 12 students as summer interns, offering them not only a Cravath salary but also professional development seminars such as resume workshops. About 25 lawyers, billing "at least a couple thousand hours," work at the school, says Forrest, mentoring students, running special programs, and helping teachers with legal concepts.

*Cravath lawyers invested  
thousands of hours with  
students and teachers.*



Cravath lawyers have lunch with groups of students twice a month, during which they discuss legal topics. Because the firm filed an amicus brief in *Hamdi v. Rumsfeld*, a U.S. Supreme Court case examining whether the government could indefinitely detain an American citizen who allegedly fought for the Taliban, a recent lunch focused on civil liberties and homeland security. A few weeks later, Smith taught a short civil liberties class at Cravath to a small group of SLJ students. Afterward he took the group to the ABA moot court competition, where law students argued a homeland security case.

The firm's administrative staff has also made important contributions. "Cravath has this tremendous infrastructure in place to support their everyday work that can be mobilized easily to support other goals or ends," says the Urban Assembly's Levy. The firm's graphic department, for instance, prints up glossy brochures for parents; and the IT department troubleshoots SLJ's computers. "Our approach has not been to write a check," says Forrest. "Our approach has really been day-by-day, minute-by-minute, whatever you need. We're in it together."

Cravath's New York offices serve as a satellite campus for the school, says principal Karopkin, giving students a valuable glimpse into the professional world. Over the summer, the firm hosted a reception for students, families, and faculty, complete with all the corporate trimmings, from coat-check to petits fours. During the school year, the students have visited the firm for classes with lawyers. They've also used Cravath's moot courtroom for student presentations. "Going to Cravath was odd for me," says one SLJ student, "because it was so shiny and full of busy-looking people running around." This kind of exposure is perhaps the most important part of the partnership, say SLJ teachers, who explain that spending time at Cravath makes students more comfortable in the adult world. "Our ninth graders are slowly becoming young adults who can talk to adults," says SLJ program coordinator Joe Pinto. Visits to Cravath also provide academic motivation. Over the past year, one of the students mentored by Smith started signing his e-mails "Future Cravath Partner."

But the partnership isn't all quips and cake. For Cravath, it means letting go of some control, which is sometimes difficult. "Lawyers are great at taking things over," says Smith, "but this is not our school. It's their school." In the end, SLJ makes the final decisions, he says. Cravath lawyers, for instance, designed fact patterns and dummy legal documents for the students' three-day orientation program, which culminated in a mock trial in

Cravath's moot courtroom. But then the lawyers had to step back and let teachers prepare the students for their presentations. "We had no role in helping them shape what they were going to say as part of their panel," says Smith. "They did that out of their own gut and with their teachers—not with us trying to manufacture some robotic quasi-lawyer phenomenon."

Both Smith and Forrest say that working with SLJ has been great for Cravath. Having one firmwide project involving the entire staff builds office morale. At least one critic, however, questions whether adopting schools is really the best way for lawyers to impact the lives of poor students. "The affluent lawyers live in exurbia, they commute into work with poor kids, they feel better, and then they go home," says Amy Stuart Wells, a professor at Columbia University Teachers College. Law firms could effect more change, she says, through litigation attacking problems like housing discrimination and environmental pollution. "For a big affluent law firm to partner with one high school is not really a systemic answer to the problem," says Wells.

Cravath partner Smith counters that Cravath already does a significant amount of issue-oriented pro bono litigation. But if SLJ is successful, he says, it "will be like the best precedent that could ever be set in the most intense case one could ever imagine." Smith, who taught school for a couple of years right after college, says that Cravath's work at SLJ will spark other law firms' competitive instincts, inspiring them to get involved with local schools. "That to me sounds like a pretty damn good recipe for social change," he says.

As Smith careers down the halls of SLJ, the administrators, teachers, and students seem only to have the highest praise for their patron. Cravath's education work might not be radically changing economic inequalities, but the firm is certainly changing lives. Cravath's financial generosity and personal involvement impacts SLJ's students every day, says Karopkin, making them believe for the first time in their lives that they can achieve. "On their third day of high school, they traveled to the forty-ninth floor of Cravath and got feedback on presentations from real lawyers," she remembers. "At that moment they knew they were going to college."

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