Florida's Lewis & Pitts named recipients of Sandra Day O'Connor Award for Advancement of Civics Education

Williamsburg, VA (January 9, 2014) – Florida Supreme Court Justice Fred Lewis, and Annette Boyd-Pitts, Executive Director of the Florida Law Related Education Association are the recipients of NCSC’s 2014 Sandra Day O’Connor Award for the Advancement of Civics Education. The award honors an organization, court, or individual who has promoted, inspired, improved, or led an innovation or accomplishment in the field of civics education related to the justice system. Details of the awards presentation have not been finalized.

Justice Lewis and Pitts are being recognized for their joint work on Florida's Justice Teaching program and several other civics education initiatives in which they have been involved in Florida. Justice Lewis created the Justice Teaching program and Pitts developed the teaching materials. Since the program’s inception in 2006, Justice Lewis and Pitts have trained more than 4,000 lawyers and judges to teach civics in all public and private middle and high school in Florida.

“Florida has accomplished outstanding progress in civics education because of the unwavering support of the Florida Supreme Court and the collective work of Justice Lewis and Annette Boyd Pitts,” NCSC President Mary McQueen said. “The dual award showcases Justice Lewis’ visionary leadership and Pitts’ extraordinary implementation of a successful civics education initiative. The joint award brings to light how exemplary efforts and results can be achieved through collaboration.”

Florida Chief Justice Ricky Polston said Justice Lewis and Pitts have made outstanding progress in bringing civics education into the classroom and is proud of their accomplishments: “Justice Lewis has earned a national reputation for his extraordinary dedication to civic education. His excellent work with Justice Teaching has been tireless since he first came to the Court in the late 1990s, and Florida’s third branch has been well served by this effort. He and Annette Pitts truly deserve the honor of an O’Connor Award.”
Justice Teaching Initiative promotes an understanding of the justice system by developing critical-thinking activities and problem-solving skills, and demonstrates the effective interaction of the courts. Justice Teaching pairs a judge, lawyer, or other law-related professional with an elementary, middle or high school. The legal volunteers are provided structured training and materials to ensure they are fully prepared to provide a meaningful educational experience for the students. When Justice Lewis initiated the program, he assembled a statewide leadership group of judges and Bar leaders that represented each of Florida's 20 circuit courts. This group recruits and coordinates volunteers who then work with the schools. The group also works with court managers, school superintendents, teachers and administrators. Pitts developed lesson plans and was integral in training thousands of lawyers and judges, which has paved the way for every public school in the state now participating in the program.

This is the fourth year the O'Connor Award has been presented. The award is named for retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor in honor of her commitment to improving civics education. Since retiring from the bench in 2006, Justice O'Connor has become a tireless advocate of civics education, working to increase awareness and understanding of how our government works. She also established iCivics, a program that uses Web-based educational tools to teach civics education and to inspire students to be active participants in society.

The National Center for State Courts, headquartered in Williamsburg, Va., is a nonprofit court reform organization dedicated to improving the administration of justice by providing leadership and service to the state courts. Founded in 1971 by the Conference of Chief Justices and Chief Justice of the United States Warren E. Burger, NCSC provides education, training, technology, management, and research services to the nation’s state courts.