

Pennsylvania Democratic Policy Committee
Harrisburg, PA

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RE: Public Hearing of May 24, 2016/ Youth Courts

Dear Committee Members:

I am a former practicing attorney in Pennsylvania, now semi-retired and operating a Bed and Breakfast in the Finger Lakes Region of New York. While I was practicing, I had the good fortune to be actively involved with the Youth Court Program that was started in the Chester-Upland School District. The years I spent working with the teachers and students were among the most enjoyable and rewarding of my 40+ year legal career. Indeed, from my days as a criminal defense attorney, or in civil litigation and on to my years representing suburban municipalities and school districts or as a court appointed mediator, I believe that I accomplished more and had greater impact on lives being involved with the Youth Court Program than in any other law related field.

Initially, those of us assisting with the program had a fear that the students would resist participation and that the program would not succeed despite our best efforts; the students proved us wrong. As I recall, within a few short months of training the participating students, they had more cases than they could handle. It was readily apparent that the students whose activities were being scrutinized, were more trusting of their peers than of the teaching and administrative staff. Interestingly, because the students knew each other outside of school, were aware of family issues and past behavior, those serving on the Youth Court were sometimes sensitive and more often, critical of those appearing before them; yet, they handled the dispositions with great empathy. This then resulted in the Youth Court gaining acceptance and respect.

For many of the active participants, the Youth Court program was both developmental and educational. The students learned how to gain respect and to respect others, that they could disagree without being disrespectful, that they could listen to someone explain why some action took place and creatively determine a fair resolution. Many learned the joy and benefits of real learning, to ask questions and to simply question why, to create a dialogue and to seek answers on their own. The end result was that several students decided to pursue a post high school degree, something that had been unthinkable prior to their Youth Court experience. Several of those that did attend college returned voluntarily to assist with training of other students for the continuation of the Youth Court in the Chester-Upland School District.

I worked with the high school students and then the middle school students and in my final year I also worked with the kindergarten students and even at that young level, growth and understanding was remarkable. In close cooperation with the teachers, we led discussions on anti-bullying, good snitch/bad snitch and using hands for good activities and not for hitting or punching as we also discussed conflict resolution. The students "got it" very quickly and shared stories and preemptively sought assistance for a problem before it became a larger one.

I believe that the Youth Court experience is very worthwhile, its can reach out at so many levels and affect so many people at ages where positive behavior can be developed and appreciated, where the reasons for laws can be understood, where the means of changing laws explained and where your neighbor is accorded respect. I witnessed the changes in the minds and behavior of the students in Chester and in the process saw changes in myself as well. As a middle class white suburban raised man, I was initially somewhat unnerved by the prospect of instructing a group of growing teens in a primarily African American and Hispanic population; but those nerves were quickly set aside by mutually earned respect. ...one of the very attributes we were seeking to teach. As a society, we need to see and hear from one another and to really listen as opposed to being ready with a reply and I and the students were on that same page in rapid fashion and we continued to learn from each other.

In short, I ask that your Policy Committee support the ongoing development of a Youth Court within the Pennsylvania public school system. Interestingly, I have moved to a small rural community outside of Ithaca, NY, a city that was one of the first in an east coast state to have an active Youth Court program within the school system. Small world.

Sincerely,

David G. Blake