

Pennsylvania Democratic Policy Committee

Harrisburg, PA

Dear Committee Members:

My name is Dylan Matusek. I am humbling serving a Second Term as a City Year AmeriCorps Members. If I have learned anything from my two years of working in some of the highest need public schools in Philadelphia, it is that students seldom respond to “hard” discipline. Suspensions, detentions, and most other forms of punishments often have shown themselves to me as 1) ineffective tools of learning and 2) barriers to the students’ learning. I had often questioned if there was a better way.

My questions were answered last year when I sat in on my first Youth Court hearing at Dimmer Beeber Middle School. I was amazed, shocked even! I had never seen anything like it before. Students (some of them students I was tutoring) spoke to each other with a level of respect that I only sometimes saw prior. They addressed one another by name and waited for their turn before speaking. They also thought critically, asking great questions of their respondents and working together to solve cases fairly. At the end of the hearing, the jury decided on community service and a written apology as due justice for the respondent’s misconduct. I was so happy that it was normal procedure for both a reflective *and* restorative treatment to behavioral issues.

Afterwards I spoke with Gregg Volz to learn more about the Youth Court system. It didn’t take much to convince me to help and in the next few weeks Gregg, the students, and I worked to further develop the courts at Beeber. Gregg liked the courts for their opportunity to give students to build leadership skills and improve upon their *own* behavior. I liked the courts for their ability to offer an alternative to a strictly disciplinary system. In reflection I really like both aspects.

Everyone whom I have met who has sat in on a Youth Court hearing always walks out of the room with great things to say and they all left vouching support. For anyone who is unable to sit in on a hearing themselves, I feel compelled to speak now as an advocate for Youth Court. They are one of the most positive, enriching, and perhaps even amongst the most just endeavors our students can engage in. Everyone in the community (faculty, staff, students) benefits from Youth Court. I urge your Policy Committee continue its support of Youth Courts within the Pennsylvania public school system.

Yours in service

Dylan Matusek

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