

Prepared Testimony of Teacher Carl Murset
In support of Teen Courts
Hearing before the Senate Democratic Policy Committee
May 24, 2016

Introduction

I have been a Social Studies teacher at South Philadelphia High School for the past 20 years. I previously served as the Law and Justice Small Learning Community Coordinator and have been teaching Teen Court for the past 10 years. Our Teen Court program has partnered with Communities in Schools, Temple University and Drexel University and currently works with the Pro Bono Society at Villanova Law School. The Teen Court program has been a part of our school improvement plan and has been an integral part of our school culture for over a decade.

I truly believe in the merit and have seen the positive impact of Teen Courts and support any and all legislation to expand their influence in our schools.

Purpose of Teen Court

The Teen Court program puts legal knowledge to work by instituting a system of peer review and adjudication. Staffed and operated by students, the Court hears disciplinary cases referred to it by teachers, the dean of discipline and our assistant principal. The purpose of Teen Court is to assist the student defendant in getting back on track after completion of his/her sentence. Many students that have been defendants in the lower grades request Teen Court in their senior year.

Logistics for Implementation

Our school has a dedicated classroom built as a courtroom which includes a judge's bench, witness stand and jury box. We also have a dedicated jury room for deliberations. The clerks have a computer and printer as well as file cabinets and shelves for the various papers needed for cases. The Teen Court is a rostered class for seniors and counts as an elective credit. Although a court room isn't necessary, it does lend to the credibility and significance of the program.

Statistics

Over the past eight years our Teen Court has heard 788 cases. The Court hears cases involving level one pink slip offenses as identified by the Code of Conduct for the School District of Philadelphia. These offenses include but are not limited to disruption of class and school, cutting, excessive lateness to class or school, dress code violations, inappropriate language and profane or obscene language. The following statistics are based on each year's cases; not over the eight year span. 695 cases heard were for first time offenders, 75 cases were for 2nd offenses and 14 cases heard were for 3rd time offenders. These statistics demonstrate the effectiveness of the Court.

Influence of Teen Court

In 2010 I had a senior student named Evan Riddick assigned to my Teen Court. Evan was an exceptional student and young man. After the classroom instructional phase of the class was over and we entered the Court to begin hands on training, it was clear that Evan was going to be an attorney. Evan had the compassion to be a defense attorney

and the presence to be the judge. Evan finished that year serving as the bailiff, member of the jury, defense attorney, prosecuting attorney and judge. Since graduating in 2010, Evan went to college and was just accepted into law school for the fall. Evan is currently overseeing the implementation of three Teen Court programs in Philadelphia.

Conclusion

With cuts to school operating budgets and the push for restorative practices in the classroom, the need for programs like Teen Courts is greater than ever. Teen Court is another intervention implemented prior to a student's potential suspension from school. By giving a student the opportunity for self reflection and following through with their sentence, students have a chance to turn their misguided behavior around in and out of the classroom.