

To: Pennsylvania Senate Democratic Policy Committee May 24, 2016

From: Carole Haas Gravagno

I appreciate the opportunity to submit written testimony to the PA Senate Democratic Policy Committee. I first witnessed a youth court hearing at a Chester High School in 2012 and was pleased at the seriousness and mutual respect that was evident between the student offender and the students operating the court. I have seen other youth court hearings since then and am always impressed with the professionalism demonstrated by the students. Youth courts use positive peer pressure to conform errant behavior. They also are a platform for youth development.

As the Chair of the Stoneleigh Foundation, which awards Fellowships to individuals performing innovative work helping youth achieve better outcomes in the delinquency and dependency systems, I applaud the work of all of our Fellows. For the past decade we have supported new practices, policies and research in these fields. As a former classroom teacher of elementary, middle, and high school students I took particular notice of Gregg Volz's Fellowship which from 2009-2012 developed a best practices model of student driven youth courts in Chester.. Youth courts are possibly the most promising strategy to block the school-to-prison pipeline in resource-poor school districts.

Over the past 4 years EducationWorks took up this work and has expanded youth courts into Philadelphia, Norristown, Camden, and Wilmington Delaware. Research suggests that youth courts are both a better disciplinary system and empower youth to practice the democratic values that we cherish- respect for each other and the rule of law, responsible conduct, and justice. The students who operate the court learn academic, socialization and civic engagement skills they will use the rest of their lives.

The Chester-Upland School District has been the most challenged school district in Pennsylvania for a quarter of a century. Yet in the past school year youth courts were developed in all 6 of its schools, at the specific request of School District Superintendent, Greg Shannon. If youth courts are valued by the most challenged school district in Pennsylvania, it behooves us to explore their value to other school districts in our state. The school-to-prison pipeline can best be blocked when we give teachers, students, and administrators a means to deal with inadequate financial support, overflowing classrooms, and frustrated students lacking conflict resolution skills. Youth courts do that.

Four years ago the Philadelphia City Council held a public hearing on youth courts. I testified at that time that I would ensure that philanthropy would do its part to support youth courts. Over the past four years I have both supported youth courts myself, and successfully encouraged other private funders to support youth courts. The impressive performance of the EducationWorks Youth Court Support Center - training over 500 students who have conducted more than 200 disciplinary hearings, and reducing the suspension rate by almost 50% in one school- has been almost totally funded by private sources. The private sector has made good on our commitment. To further expand youth courts we need public sector help, as well as strong support from the judicial and legal community. I intend to continue to support youth courts. I hope others will also support them, so that together we can promote positive peer pressure, improve school climate, and transform at-risk youth into "youth as resources".