

Widener University Delaware Law School

Francis J. Catania, Jr.
Director of Experiential Education

TO: Senate Democratic Policy Committee Members
FROM: Widener University/Delaware Law School
DATE: May 20, 2016
Re: Youth Courts

This letter supports the development of high quality and sustainable student-based youth courts in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Widener University and its Delaware Law School have been analyzing youth courts and how they fit within our mission for over five years. Our law school has taken the lead regionally in encouraging students to volunteer in youth courts and we believe youth court service provides our students with an opportunity to acquire skills and develop values that go beyond those normally learned in more traditional doctrinal curricula.

Widener is a national leader among institutions of higher education making a difference in the communities in which we live, learn, and work. Widener stresses experiential learning and civic engagement by its students and is a case study on the positive impact colleges and universities can have in improving the nation's struggling communities. Widener was selected as a Presidential Award finalist for the 2013 President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll. It was one of the first universities to be classified as a "community engagement institution" by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Author Terrence MacTaggart has observed: "Today, Widener is prospering. Rather than ignoring the problems of its hometown, [Widener] has found a way to become a positive part of its community...."

In 2012 three law students and a law professor observed a high school youth court in Widener's home town of Chester, Pennsylvania, and decided to volunteer to support its further development. The following year a consortium of organizations under the leadership of the law school met to develop a plan to create youth courts in Wilmington, Delaware and continue to support and develop them in Chester. Over the past four academic years more than 40 Delaware Law School students have volunteered to support youth courts in Chester and Wilmington. Several faculty members in the law school have also participated in training law students to administer youth courts.

Two years ago Gregg Volz, Youth Court Support Center Director, and I addressed a meeting of the Senior Leadership Team (members of the executive team as well as the deans of each school and college and all the administrators across the university) describing the Chester and Wilmington Youth Court programs and the law school's role in those programs. In response to that presentation a University Youth Courts Committee was formed. In the past year, that committee has worked to develop a multi-disciplinary approach, with participation by faculty and students in Social Work, Criminal Justice, Psychology, and Education. Efforts in Chester were focused on the Widener Partnership Charter School, a school founded in 2006 as a partnership between community leaders and residents of the City of Chester and Widener University. Located adjacent to the Widener University

campus, the school is a K-8 elementary school serving the families of the Chester-Upland School District.

A key to the sustainability of the Delaware Law School Youth Courts program is its concept of cascading mentoring. Law School faculty oversee the training of law student volunteers to be mentors to middle school students. The law students then meet regularly with the middle school students to guide them through a course adapted from a manual that Gregg Volz developed. Faculty from the law school and from the education, social work, psychology and criminal justice departments worked to adapt the original manual to make it more appropriate for middle schoolers. The program starts with 6th grade students. The next year, when those students are in 7th grade, they mentor a new class of 6th graders, under the guidance of the law students. As things progress, the law students will also work with graduate students from other disciplines, who will mentor undergraduate students across the disciplines, and all will work in various capacities with the middle schoolers. Eventually, the expectation is that a culture of Youth Court participation will take root in the school.

Youth court is an innovative program which simultaneously helps resource-poor schools and provides a unique opportunity for students in law schools and universities to engage in service learning. Youth Courts interrupt the school-to-prison pipeline and reduce suspensions for students who break school rules. They also allow Widener graduate and undergraduate students who participate in the cascading mentoring to acquire skills that broaden their own learning. Properly designed and implemented youth courts are a cost-effective program providing multiple benefits to disadvantaged communities.

We believe that higher education institutions have the potential to provide a significant percentage of the human resources needed to train adolescents to run youth courts. At Widener we continue to pilot new efforts to engage both students and faculty in youth court development. We would be pleased to provide further information about our Youth Court support if the Senate Policy Committee has further questions.

Sincerely,

Francis J. Catania, Jr.
Associate Professor of Law
Director of Experiential Education
Widener University Delaware Law School