

TO: Pennsylvania Senate Democratic Policy Committee

FROM: Gregg Volz, Director of the Youth Court Support Center at EducationWorks

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Youth courts are student run alternatives to juvenile justice and school disciplinary systems. Students are trained by lawyers, law students, college students, teachers and others to perform all court functions (judge, bailiff, jurors, etc.). Jurors ask probing questions to find the facts, determine the harm, and impose a restorative disposition to fix the problem. Positive peer pressure helps offenders reflect on their behavior, and accept responsibility for their actions. Youth courts can operate after-school or be integrated within Social Studies and Language Arts classes. In most states the majority of youth courts operate as a juvenile justice diversion.

Neuroscience informs us that the stress and trauma disadvantaged youth experience impairs their decision making and impulse control. Absent nurturing relationships with stable adults, these youth fail to acquire the executive function skills needed to cope with their environment. Teachers confirm such youth have problems following instructions and socializing. Without effective intervention they fall behind becoming a danger to themselves and the community.

Youth court participation in under-resourced schools improves life outcomes for these youth. Youth court participants report its transformative impact as they learn coping skills they otherwise fail to acquire, and will use the rest of their lives. Using restorative justice as a participatory tool, youth court students contribute to the well-being of their school and community. The most empowering courts limit the role of adults to trainer and mentor, trusting youth to control the entire process. Youth court participants practice real civic engagement.

Youth Court benefits for respondents (student offenders)

- 1) Offenders describe the facts of the offense to a jury of **trained peers**.
- 2) Offenders receive **restorative** justice, instead of being suspended they stay in school.
- 3) Offenders **value** peer justice more than adult discipline.
- 4) Offenders have lower recidivism rates, and the **school-to-prison pipeline** is blocked.

Youth Court benefits for student participants (some are former offenders)

- 1) Participants acquire **legal knowledge** and a **positive attitude** towards the legal system.
- 2) Participants **contribute** to their community through experiential and service learning.
- 3) Participants acquire **academic skills**: concentration, public speaking, communication.
- 4) Students work together and collaborate to form a **restorative** disposition.
- 5) Students are **engaged/empowered** to be good citizens.
- 6) Youth court is a **drop-out prevention program**; most members graduate.

Youth Court benefits for schools and neighborhoods

- 1) **Communication** between juvenile and educational systems is improved.
- 2) School **safety/climate** improves, especially when used with other restorative practices.
- 3) **Costs** of school discipline are dramatically reduced.
- 4) Disciplinary systems gain "**youth as resources**" and adult volunteers as mentors.
- 5) A culture of youth justice is created and **negative peer pressure** is combatted.
- 6) **Curriculum** is enhanced by hands-on application of civic education.
- 7) Youth courts, when properly designed and implemented, are **sustainable**.

