

Youth Court at Stetser Elementary School
Chester Upland School District

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Four years ago Gregg Voltz approached me to explore the idea of introducing Youth court to younger children. I had heard about its success at Chester High School and was excited about the opportunity to offer this experience to our children. We started with a fourth grade class and a teacher who was enthusiastic and understood the potential of putting power in the hands of her students. Gregg was uncertain about the ability of our children to grasp the background information and the procedural knowledge needed to understand the intricacies of being able to conduct a hearing. They quickly surpassed his expectations and began to own the process in ways that were exciting to witness. This group of students went on to participate in Youth Court during their fifth and sixth grade years. They were able to hold hearings, respond thoughtfully to their roles and responsibilities, and started to understand the power of restorative justice. This group has moved on to middle school but we now have both our 4th and 5th grades involved in Youth Court moving toward becoming an important part of our school culture.

My purpose is to describe the impact and potential Youth Court has both in the present and for the future of our students. Very few children clearly understand the function of our judicial system and how it is intended to work. Many of our children have had negative experiences with the front lines of our criminal justice system as victims of torn relationships due to circumstances and decisions made by the adults in their lives. Some have spent time in court as bystanders while a parent or close relative is being adjudicated – almost always with a negative outcome. The message is clear – the system has left their families powerless and is not to be trusted. Judges and lawyers who have the desire to teach, to prevent, to break the cycle, are bound by the tyranny of a system that is overburdened beyond comprehension. Youth Court has opened the doors of understanding and the potential to develop relationships that may change their misconceptions about the power children can have over their destiny.

Restorative justice is a complicated concept but powerful in its potential to change how we view the world and our ability to learn to restore relationships. We have a responsibility at our school to teach the social skills and the decision making processes that will lead to success. Discipline means “to teach” and Youth Court mirrors the process we use but at a much more sophisticated level. It gives our students the ability to direct the components of a restorative system which leads to a much higher level of understanding and greater likelihood for transfer into real-life situations. We strive to

have our children explain what they did, identify the choices that were not the best, determine how they will “fix” things, and focus on what they learned for the future. Youth Court puts students as drivers of this process. They are charged with the roles of describing an infraction with clarity, identifying the core issues, and developing a plan of action that will restore order and relationships for a positive outcome.

We believe at Stetser that putting power into the hands of our children will lead to positive outcomes. It is important that we treat each other with kindness and respect. Youth Court exemplifies putting these goals into action. Once you work hard and experience success, no one can take that away. Youth Court is an important tool for us to grow leaders who can be thoughtful and learn to make wise decisions for themselves and others. We look forward to continuing to offer this invaluable learning experience for our students and we are thankful for the hard work and vision that has gone into creating Youth Court - a powerful vehicle for changing the future for our children.