

Pennsylvania Democratic Policy Committee

Harrisburg, PA

May 23, 2016

RE: Public Hearing of May 24, 2016/ Youth Courts

Dear Committee Members:

I am a young civil defense attorney at the law firm of White and Williams LLP. I have been practicing for over eight years and am a lifelong resident of Philadelphia. This year, I started an ad hoc committee for Youth Courts through my position on the Executive Committee of the Young Lawyers Division of the Philadelphia Bar Association. My goal for the committee is to raise awareness regarding Youth Courts and to assist in the implementation of more Youth Courts in Philadelphia.

As a young adult, I became aware of the many problems facing Philadelphia and learned firsthand about several programs established to address those problems. Many of these programs were created to address economic disparity and a lack of full time employment, especially among the impoverished community. I worked two summers at one of these programs, a Pennsylvania CareerLink location in South Philadelphia. During my time there, I worked with many people, young and old, looking for work. Many of their stories were similar. They got into trouble in school, dropped out, became involved with the criminal justice system at an early age, and have since been trying to get back on their feet. After meeting Gregg Volz for the first time to discuss Youth Courts, I immediately thought back to my time at the CareerLink. I wondered if just one of the jobseekers I worked with would have had a different life if his or her school had a Youth Court in place. After learning more about the program, I realize there is a very good chance the answer to that question is yes.

Myself and a few members of my Youth Courts committee recently visited Strawberry Mansion High School to watch its Youth Court in action. My experience there confirmed my belief in Youth Courts. I witnessed a hearing for a student who was charged with cursing loudly and disrupting the classroom. Normally, without a Youth Court, the student would have been suspended for about a week. The student would thus be home for one week, likely without supervision. The student also would not be permitted to make-up any of the work he missed and would be given a grade of zero for any tests or quizzes administered during that time. The student thus returns to class well behind in the curriculum and with a reputation as a bad actor. This situation is a catalyst for further bad behavior and involvement with the juvenile justice system.

With a Youth Court, both the process and outcome differ greatly compared to suspension. The student was able to explain his side of the story and why he became aggravated. He was forced to answer questions regarding how he thinks his actions affected his teachers and his peers. While the student was initially guarded, he opened up and explained what happened after the jury panel asked

many direct and empathetic questions. This was able to occur because the student jury panel could relate to the student, and vice versa. The jury panel deliberated for some time and discussed not only what the student did, but also why and how it affected those around him. They discussed, with differing views among the jurors, a restorative punishment that would not only get the student's attention and prevent further bad behavior, but would also provide the teachers and students affected during the incident with closure. It was amazing to watch the student jurors argue about proposed punishments in a civil manner as opposed to simply yelling at each. They listened to each other and ordered a restorative, and in my view, fitting and productive punishment.

The benefits of Youth Courts are evident. The student was not summarily suspended, and thus would continue with his class work. The student also was able to voice his side of the story and ultimately accepted his restorative punishment. The members of the court, from the judge, to the youth advocates (attorneys), to the jury panel, displayed an understanding of basic legal principles, general restorative justice, and the responsibility they held in deciding the fate of a fellow student. Youth Courts allow students to learn about the judicial system in a non-threatening and empowering environment, while at the same time providing students with restorative justice from their peers as opposed to punishment from the juvenile justice system. The students take it very seriously, as should we.

The law is meant to find truth and deliver justice. That is exactly what the students in Youth Courts are doing on a daily basis. There are little to no additional costs to the schools, as the key resource is the students themselves. There are young attorneys such as myself ready to get involved and assist in the development of this wonderful program throughout Philadelphia and Pennsylvania. I therefore respectfully request that your Policy Committee support the Youth Courts program in Pennsylvania.

Sincerely,

Jason W. Poore