



# CITY OF PHILADELPHIA

OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

**TESTIMONY OF  
OTIS HACKNEY, CHIEF EDUCATION OFFICER  
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR  
BEFORE THE SENATE DEMOCRATIC POLICY COMMITTEE  
May 24, 2016**

Thank you, Senator Farnese and members of the Senate Democratic Policy Committee for allowing me to submit testimony to you about Youth Courts in Philadelphia schools. I would like to take this opportunity to emphasize the importance of Youth Courts as a key part of juvenile discipline in neighborhood schools and how they helped to create a climate of respect and support during my tenure as Principal at South Philadelphia High School (Southern).

The Youth Court system at Southern was developed to allow students to examine and adjudicate discipline of their classmates who committed “non-violent, Level 1 offenses” according to the School District’s Student Code of Conduct. These disruptive behaviors were limited in scope to minor infractions, such as excessive tardiness, inappropriate use of technology during class time, and failing to carry a hall pass. Under normal circumstances, students who violated these Level 1 offenses would be subject to correctional actions as determined by the Dean of Students and teachers, without giving students a voice in the discipline process; however, Youth Courts give the young men and women of Southern the opportunity to appeal their case before a cohort of their peers who serve as judge, jury, and attorneys.

Seniors at Southern are able to participate in Youth Court by signing up for this class as an elective credit. In class, seniors partner with Law Students from Villanova and a dedicated teacher to learn the ins-and-outs of basic legal proceedings. This class takes a unique approach to education. Outside of traditional instruction, students are able to practice serving as judges, members of a jury, or an attorney and given the opportunity to hear from a variety of guest speakers who work in law. Students use this knowledge to defend, prosecute, and determine correctional action for students who were referred to the Youth Court by the Dean of Students.



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The educational environment created in this course allows students to explore elements of law beyond basic knowledge of trials, court proceedings and the roles of various personnel in a courtroom. Through the guidance of their law mentors, students are able to hone new skills and discover talents in areas of law that they may have not realized without the opportunity to serve on the Youth Court. I have long believed that students are most likely to succeed when they are afforded varied academic and extracurricular opportunities to develop into well-rounded adults. Watching students in the Youth Court program at Southern grow as they were given numerous opportunities to explore their potential strengths only reinforced that belief.

The Youth Court at Southern not only benefits the students enrolled in the class but also benefits the overall student community. There was a clear and noticeable improvement in the way low-level discipline was handled among students that had to appear before the Court. It created a heightened sense of respect among the class because students were held accountable to one another for their behavior.

By creating a process for students to defend and explain their actions, school administrators and staff were able to create an atmosphere of respect, fairness, and equity at Southern. Students who are referred to the Youth Court are able to plead their cases and have their voices heard. The Court also allows these students to work with their peers who serve as Defense Attorneys to help structure their defense and work to ensure that the disciplinary action was proportional to the misconduct. This inclusive disciplinary model creates more respect for the correctional actions and rulings that are decided in the Youth Court. Further, this process increases support for the Dean of Students. Rather than pursuing unilateral punishment, referring students to the Youth Court system demonstrates that Southern's school community values the voice of each individual student. The simple act of giving young adults an avenue to share their side of a case contributes to a major shift in culture within a school building.

The success of the Youth Court program at South Philadelphia High School is due to a cooperative effort from staff, teachers, and students. The school community pulled together to adopt an innovative model for addressing issues with student behavior, and did so in a manner that was respectful to students while adhering to the School District's Code of Conduct. Youth Courts, when implemented with care, offer a collaborative approach to addressing misconduct.