THE YOUTH COURT INITIATIVE
Of
WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA

Overview

Mission Statement

YCI programs will encompass grades K-12, and include age appropriate lessons incorporating self-regulation and social leadership skills. Sustainable programming for middle school and high school aged students will provide a framework for restorative justice based activities and/or youth court implementation. YCI training will encourage students to become responsible citizens both in their schools and in the community at-large.

Importance of the Youth Court Initiative Model in Public Education

While the tide now seems to be slowly turning, for the last decade, zero-tolerance policies have funneled children, particularly poor and minority children through the school-to-prison pipeline. Defined by the ACLU as the set of “the policies and practices that push our nation’s schoolchildren, especially our most at-risk children, out of classrooms and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems.” (See [Appendix A] : ACLU School-to-Prison Pipeline Fact Sheet). Low school attendance is correlated with poor academic achievement and engagement, and suspensions are unequally applied between minority and white students within the same school community. (See [Appendix B] Chute, Eleanor: Schools finding suspension ineffective for changing student behavior, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Sept. 3, 2013)

Youth Court programs, whether instituted in schools, in communities, or through the juvenile justice system are based on the principle that restorative justice yields better outcomes for respondents, participants, and the community as a whole, than do traditional punitive justice practices such as suspension and expulsion.

Development of the Youth Court Initiative Model

The Youth Court Initiative of Western Pennsylvania is developing an in-school youth court model to demonstrate effective restorative justice principles at the high school and middle school levels. This work reflects learnings from student experiences at the Chester High School Youth Court, Chester, Pa., from 2007 to 2011 (See [Appendix C] and [Appendix D]).

At the Chester High School, students who “went through the court process” as respondents were required to go through the youth court training program and serve on the youth court jury. Through the rigor of completing the disposition process and demonstrating their understanding of restorative justice principles through jury service, these students learned how to assume personal responsibility for their own behavior by working cooperatively with others in order to take ownership of and to “run” the court.

Since September 2011, Dr. Darla Gerlach at the Shaler Area Middle School, has piloted
youth-court-related activities that will prepare seventh and eighth grade students for responsible roles as citizens in society. This work, coupled with training materials from Appendix E: Youth Court Coordinator's Manual, Second Edition (Volz, Saiyed, Laubach and Williams, August, 2013), will provide the basis for training middle and high school students in this area to be responsible for youth court management.

Three Critical Elements

The blueprint guiding the development of the youth court in this area focuses on three critical elements needed to assure success for youth court participants:

1) a youth court process that a) provides comprehensive court proceedings and disposition completion procedures and b) stresses the importance of the respondent’s developing self-regulation skills as a foundational element of the disposition process;

2) an in-school support system that takes into account: a) the school’s existing code of conduct and discipline plan, b) the range of student support services and c) a consistent vision/message conveyed to students by all school staff that holds high expectations for student academic and social behavior as well as strong support for student self-regulation capacity;

3) an out-of-school support system that can include volunteers from the legal, juvenile justice, faith-based and local communities. Various groups have expressed their support for Youth Court programs including the Pennsylvania Bar Association, which passed a resolution in 2011 encouraging youth-court expansion. In addition, the U.S. Attorney’s Office has expressed support for existing Youth Court programs in Philadelphia and supports expanded Youth Court programs throughout the state.

To achieve the maximum benefits from an in-school youth court, the court must be placed securely within the context and climate of the school. To paste a youth court onto an existing educational system without paying careful attention to the many interlocking connections that will assure respect for the rule of law and the decorum of the court will result in only a minimum level of success for the court and for the students.

The attitudes of students – both those who serve as the court from judge to jury as well as those who come before the court as respondents - must be respectful, demonstrating that the youth court represents a justice system that extends far beyond the boundaries of the school.

Behavior Change and Brain-based Learning

To address the need for respondent behavior change, the proposed Youth Court Initiative draws on current fMRI brain research on adolescents. fMRI data indicates that the capacity to set goals, make plans and monitor one’s own behavior (Executive Function processes found in the prefrontal cortex of the brain) develop during adolescence. (McCloskey, 2009)

Life Skills and Leadership Skill Development

Behavior change will be addressed on two levels in the Youth Court Initiative schools. First, for respondents, activities that foster goal setting, planning, etc., are embedded in the disposition procedures. In the context of fulfilling the disposition requirements (e.g.: write a
letter of apology, complete a service learning project) respondents will be coached in 1) the processes that are at work in their own maturational development and 2) how developing these life skills will assist them in reaching their own life goals.

Second, is the opportunity for leadership-development for students who make up the court. Research indicates that academic achievement is closely linked to specific goal-oriented behaviors. As students learn to monitor their own behavior, supported by youth court staff and volunteer teacher and community mentors, the students will be able to take increasing pride in work accomplished and be willing to risk in learning more.

By recognizing their own maturational process development and applying that knowledge to areas of their school lives, both respondents and members of the court will be better prepared to enter the worlds of higher education, work or the military as competent, confident young adults. For an expanded description of the self-regulation instructional program, see THE SPRINGBOARD [Appendix F] attached to this document.

Research Focus

One specific research element that has been identified for study is student capacity for self-regulation. A protocol for investigating this important component of the maturational process of students is underway based on the work of Dr. Darla Gerlach. (Gerlach, 2008)

At both the middle and high school levels, students will be encouraged to strengthen their self-regulation skills by setting goals and planning their use of time and resources as they complete their disposition work.

Conclusion

The Youth Court Initiative is putting in place youth courts at the middle and high school levels that address both student and societal needs. By demonstrating that students can change their behavior, under appropriate conditions, we will encourage other educators to examine the process and consider initiating youth courts in their schools as well.

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