Youth Court Support Center: Youth as Resources to block the school-to-prison pipeline.

Suspension from school is linked to increased academic failure, truancy, and disengagement from and dropping out of school. And truancy is often a path into the juvenile justice system. EducationWorks’ (EW) Youth Court Support Center (YCSC) offers schools an alternative to out-of-school suspensions and reducing truancy while remaining focused on keeping youth in school, on track to graduate, and helping them accept responsibility for their behavior.

What is the Youth Court Support Center?

Created in September of 2012 the YCSC is a training, coordination and policy support system committed to working with schools to develop, manage and maintain high quality and sustainable youth courts. EW helps schools with the start-up and maintenance of Youth Courts by assisting with: training/recruiting of partners and volunteers, providing materials, curriculum, court forms, scripts, and data collection and analysis.

What is a Youth Court

A Youth Court is a student-run disciplinary system (with adult support) for students who have minor school infractions such as skipping class, truancy, fighting, cheating, and disrespecting teachers. Using corrective dispositions rather than punishment, offending students have a chance to understand the consequences of their actions, learn from their mistakes and how to make better decisions in the future.

Youth Court student volunteers are trained by volunteer legal professionals, law students, and teachers, to hold hearings, to ask probing questions, to deliberate carefully by reviewing and analyzing facts, and to form an appropriate disposition. The offending student or respondent appears before a group of their peers who serve as judge, bailiff, advocate, and jury. The jury listens to the facts and circumstances, asks questions of the respondent about the circumstances of the infraction and ways to make-up for his or her actions and how he or she could change his or her behavior in the future. After the hearing, the jury deliberates and provides a ‘sentence’ which encourages respondents to make amends such as writing letters of apology, helping teachers afterschool, performing community service, and participating in school programs such as mentoring. By keeping the offending students in school, it allows them to continue their education while accepting responsibility for their behavior.

Youth Court’s lessons reach further than simply helping the student offender. The court empowers students to become leaders. They help their peers find ways to decrease violence and create a positive school climate. The student court participants support their classmates by contributing solutions and forming a respectful community for one another as well as leading by example in their school. Students Helping Students Make Better Decisions was the motto selected by Chester youth court members.

The student court volunteers also cultivate the following skills:

- public speaking
- working as a member of a team
- problem solving and analyzing situations
- focusing and listening closely
Measureable results

An examination of the youth courts in Chester, Pennsylvania conducted by Research for Action revealed that the long-term academic performance of youth court student volunteers and respondents was significantly stronger than that of their peers in the following ways:

- Significantly more volunteers graduated than non-volunteers (79% vs. 47%);
- Significantly fewer volunteers dropped out of school than non-volunteers (6% vs. 21%);
- Significantly more respondents than non-respondents graduate (71% v. 49%); and,
- Significantly fewer respondents dropped out of school than non-respondents (10% v. 21%)

This study also identified that youth court participation reinforced for student volunteers three key non-cognitive factors that are critical to academic success:

1. **Academic behaviors**: attendance, participation, and organization.

2. **Academic mindset**: a sense of belonging to an academic community, perceived growth in academic capacity through effort, perceived possibility of success, and students’ recognition of the value of hard work.

3. **Social skills**: interpersonal skills, cooperation, empathy, and responsibility.

SCOPE OF WORK

The YCSC currently runs 4 youth courts in Chester, 6 in Philadelphia and has helped Widener Law School faculty and students start 1 in Wilmington, Delaware.

"How I act today is a result of how the youth court pushed me to better myself. I'm absolutely positive if the youth got the opportunity I had, the youth court can be a major component in the fight against violence." ~ Chester High School graduate Brian Foster. ([Officials brainstorm how to create citywide youth courts](http://example.com))

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