Youth Court Training Teams: New Support for Resource-Poor Schools

Youth courts are student-directed disciplinary systems. They operate in both schools and juvenile justice systems as a restorative and trauma-informed program to keep youth with behavioral problems in school and out of the school-to-prison pipeline. In 2007, when I first trained students to operate youth courts, I did it alone. The students either chose youth court or were selected by principals/teachers to participate.

Today many schools have classes which overflow with students. Large numbers of students, some with behavioral challenges, impose additional challenges in developing youth courts. Disruptive classrooms are all too common in resource-poor schools. Some students fall asleep, “act out” and fail to focus on the instruction. Student conflict is common and classroom management becomes a key need to successfully develop a youth court. Many students are beset with the residuals of physical, emotional and sexual trauma. This exacerbates their capacity to concentrate and learn. A chaotic negative student culture pervades many schools, stunning observers unfamiliar with the realities of urban education.

Seeking a more efficient way to train, I took note of what Swarthmore College students achieved in 2010-2011 when they volunteered to help deliver lesson plans. Their instruction was tailored to the specific student needs they identified in the classroom. They crafted lesson plans as a direct response to the behavioral challenges the students presented. They promoted hands-on learning with activities as a method to gain and maintain the attention of the students. Later a very young AmeriCorps member worked for me and her youth seemed to be an asset helping her connect with the students. Trainers must connect with students to create a successful youth court. Younger trainers seemed to have a natural advantage with youth court students. This caused me to revise my teaching method further.

We learned that dividing the youth court class into smaller groups whenever possible was an effective training strategy, but was only possible with multiple trainers. Sometimes, we broke the class into 3 or more groups, so students would not be intimidated by more boisterous classmates. We learned that some students who had been silent for months were still soaking up the course content. Smaller training groups allowed us to connect with these students, who opened up and participated in smaller groups. Often previously disruptive students became focused and better behaved in smaller groups. Multiple trainers helped us reach students traditional teaching methods did not.

A retired social worker who had 15 years of experience working in a public school volunteered and provided insights into specific student behavior that I would never have noticed working alone. For the past 3 years several Assistant U.S. Attorneys volunteered and “adopted” a youth court in Chester. Private lawyers have aided me and their observations provided insights for better training methods. Each member of the training team contributed their life experiences and knowledge to the complex task of training students to run youth courts. The training model evolved as I realized that multiple trainers could break through barriers to youth court implementation that solitary trainers could not.

In 2012, the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Philadelphia hosted a youth court training seminar for 30 law students from 5 law schools. Law students from 3 of those schools subsequently volunteered to train
youth court students in area high schools. None received academic credit or pay. The high school students liked being trained by law students who used their recently acquired legal knowledge to train the students. The law students enjoyed interacting with the youth court students. It was a win-win scenario.

In 2013 the Youth Court Support Center at EducationWorks received a grant to create an additional 15 youth courts in the Philadelphia region over the next 2 years. This can only be done by recruiting and training more youth court trainers. Law school students volunteering as pro bono service, taking law school clinics, practicums and externships, etc. are foundational human resources as youth court trainers. Temple Law School created a for credit practicum in 2013 for ten students who helped me develop four youth courts in Philadelphia schools. Widener Law School has over 25 students supporting youth courts in Chester, PA and Wilmington, Delaware. They work in teams. Widener Law is developing a student youth court organization and exploring how to best integrate youth court practice into law school curriculum.

Similarly, undergraduate and graduate students have much they can contribute. U. Penn undergraduate students have been assisting Penn law students in a Philadelphia youth court, Temple law students are working with undergraduates in two Philadelphia youth courts, and Swarthmore College students have been supporting Chester youth courts for 7 years. In Wilmington an undergraduate student from the University of Delaware has been volunteering to train 6th and 7th graders to run a youth court with me.

Utilizing Youth Court Training Teams (YCTT) requires coordination and sharing of information among the multiple trainers. A sense of camaraderie and common purpose builds among the trainers. This regular contact among team members allows them to respond to emerging opportunities to build relationships and skills with the youth court students. It allows them to identify specific student needs and provide positive feedback. YCTT are a new, effective disciplinary and youth development tool for under-resourced schools.

YCTT require further analysis and experimentation. However, their potential to help disconnected youth reconnect and contribute to school and community is promising. They blend the enthusiasm and skills of undergraduate and law students with the legal expertise of lawyers, the experience of classroom teachers, and skills of social workers. They provide a youth court experience for more public school students, and are a vast untapped resource for our schools, neighborhoods, and society.

Gregg Volz, Esquire
Director-Youth Court Support Center
April 2014