Solemn and determined, Judge Jamal Fairy brought his gavel down forcibly on the bench before him, and announced that the new court in Southwest was now in session. At Baliff Tyquil Norris’ cry of “All rise, please,” jurors, the respondent and other court officials, took their seats with quiet expectation. Clothed in his traditional long black robe, Judge Jamal started proceedings in the youth court recently started at Bartram High School.

Under the close and skillful supervision of Bartam staff member Jason Lafferty, a team of a dozen interested sophomores and juniors began early this year taking courses in courtroom procedure, key legal concepts, the basics of conflict management and other related subjects. The core team has also met with judges, police officers, and lawyers to provide insights into the judicial process.

With the guidance of advisor Sofia Saiyed from Chester, they also commenced “mock trial” court hearings to put into practice the concepts they had been learning.

Six weeks ago, the youth began conducting actual hearings on such disciplinary infractions as lateness, play-fighting, disruption and leaving school early – all level one offenses at Bartram.

The idea of youth courts to provide peer-based remediation of misbehavior has been tried in many secondary schools throughout the country in the past. The approach instituted at Bartram this year is one which has been immensely successful at the school system in the City of Chester for a number of years.

Bartram was particularly blessed by

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Several dozen clergy representing 40 congregations and 25,000 members associated with POWER! conducted a prayer rally last Thursday, March 29 support minority employment in connection with the proposed $6 billion expansion of Philadelphia International Airport.

More than 200 members of POWER!’s Leadership Assembly recently ratified a new “Airport Jobs-Policy Agreement” that maps out a hiring strategy to assure long-term unemployed and under-employed local residents get training and hiring preference for a potential total of 45,000 new jobs created by the expansion.

“These people are looking for a ‘hand-UP,’ not a ‘hand-OUT.’ They need opportunities for getting the job skills and work training that will enable them to obtain living wages to support their families and move ahead for the future,” said Bishop Dwayne Royster, Pastor of Living Water United Church of Christ in Kensington and POWER!’s Executive Director. “In addition to easing airport delays for people traveling through Philadelphia, this economic development project should be used to address long-standing poverty and joblessness in our hardest hit neighborhoods.”

“As wonderful as that airport expansion would be, without a commitment to train and provide skills to the Southwest population, these jobs will be filled by already qualified commuters and many of the residents of this area will not be able to secure jobs in their own community,” stated Alizul Rosado, job counselor at Southwest Community Development. “We certainly welcome the POWER! initiative and its objectives of obtaining employment and stimulating jobs – right here where the airport is actually located.”

“Getting the kind of experience that the airport expansion project will help develop skills in people that can be used for

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the willingness of key advisors from Chester’s program to come to Southwest and guide the local team in faithfully bringing their proven system into being.

Says lawyer Gregg Volz, the key legal professional involved in both the Chester and Bartram programs, “Youth courts are a platform for youth development. They not only make respondents reflect on their misbehavior, but they also educate youth court members about the advantages of restorative justice, and give youth a feeling of empowerment and control over their environment. They promote development of confidence, and self-esteem.

“The courts help young people learn to concentrate on complex fact patterns, deliberate in a body which requires considerable listening and teambuilding skills, and then fit the facts into an appropriate restorative justice disposition,” said Volz. “They avoid harmful suspensions. They teach important public speaking skills. All of these skills the students will use the rest of their lives. Youth courts provide a wide range of academic, socialization and civic engagement skills,” he attested.

Is it working at Bartram? The core team thinks so.

“This is real and it works,” said Taquil Norris, who indicated he had served in every court role already.

“I think the proof of its value is that no one who we have dealt with has been back in front of us again,” observed Rahnesia Harrold-Ellis, who acted as the youth advocate (defense attorney) for a respondent student.

The process has also been favorably received in the school’s student council.

“We discussed it at length – since most students are well aware of it,” said a council senior. “The council wants to see it succeed since we’re both working for the same thing, a healthy, positive learning environment here at Bartram High. It’s certainly an opportunity for peer discipline that you won’t find in many other schools.”

With the students handling most of the paperwork and with 100% positive disposition of the cases it has received, to quote Volz, again, “It is hard to imagine any other educational program that provides so many benefits, at such an affordable price.”

Lafferty concurs with that. He says however, that he wishes the teachers and administrators would make fewer verbal referrals and adhere to the procedure of written complaints.