Youth Court Takes Shape at Bartram High

Among the work projects at Bartram High on MLK Day of Service was the conversion of one of the classrooms into an authentic looking court room which will soon be the site of a Youth Court at the school.

The appearance of the finished youth courtroom will be as close as possible to those in the judicial system, complete with jury stalls, and tables for prosecuting and defense teams, attorneys and court officials.

The concept of a student driven Youth Court at Bartram is an alternative to the more punishment oriented, “zero-tolerance” school directed discipline. Student jurors will hear and decide cases of inappropriate behavior and conflict within the school and where appropriate will impose penalties which demonstrate that there are consequences when students break the rules.

The construction of the court furnishings was undertaken over the past several months by Hammers with Hearts, a volunteer men’s group from Wayne Presbyterian Church, the suburban partner of CityLights Network in Southwest.

School authorities want to break the tendency known as the “school to prison pipeline.” Commenting at a 2010 state legislature hearing, Greg Votz of Stoneleigh Foundation asserted that where students take owner -

ship of the discipline process, there is a positive impact on may school problems. Both the student offenders and court volunteers feel they have a voice in ordering their lives. The motto for the successful youth court in Chester, for instance, is “Students Helping Students Make Better Decisions.”

As to the kinds of discipline problems addressed by the youth court process, Votz mentioned hall-walking, profanity, class disruption, dress code and cell phone violations. The peer justice discipline system is based on the expectation that many young people value the opinion of their fellow students more than that of adults. Just as negative peer pressure encourages bad behavior, positive peer pressure through the youth court system encourages good behavior, suggested Votz.

Youth court volunteers at Bartram are presently in the process of taking 16 hours of training in legal process and youth court procedure given by law students, private lawyers, professors and law enforcement officers.

Students not only develop self-confidence, public speaking skills and teamwork, but also learn to respect the rule of law, consequences of breaking rules, and taking responsibility for one’s actions. Votz concluded.