Educating for Democracy in the 21st Century: Civic Learning and Project PEACE in Interesting Times

By David Keller Trevaskis

“There is a Chinese curse which says, ‘May he live in interesting times.’ Like it or not, we live in interesting times…”
Robert F. Kennedy

We still live in interesting times. The litany of events that make these times so interesting underscore why the ancient Chinese would make such a curse, but rather than rail against the curse, the job of educators today is to teach our children how to handle all of the conflicts that arise in creative and constructive ways. Too many forces in our culture reinforce the opposite message, that conflict is somehow bad and something that we must avoid. It is not that we, as Americans, dislike conflict. Indeed, every fall weekend, from “Friday Night Lights” to “Any Given Sunday”, millions across the United States revel in the violent conflict of our version of football. Yet, many of these same people fail to vote, try to get out of serving on juries and avoid getting involved in local civic activities, often citing distaste for conflict as their reason for such inaction. Although we should recognize that mere participation in the democratic process

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2 Kennedy used this line in a speech in Cape Town, South Africa, on June 6, 1966.

3 Kennedy made a broad statement attributing the curse to China. It probably is derived from a Chinese proverb: “It is better to be a dog in a peaceful time than a man in a chaotic period.”

4 As a Philadelphia sports fan, the author rails against enough curses already.

5 The title of Buzz Bissinger’s treatment of Texas high school football.

6 The catch phrase of NFL films and the title of a poor Al Pacino movie.

7 Diana Hess, a Professor of Education at the University of Wisconsin and Vice president of the Spencer Foundation, is a leader in the field of civic learning and a friend of the author. She made this very point at the 2004 Youth for
without the development of effective democratic skills may actually make people less inclined to have future involvement, educators must consider ways to teach children to handle conflict more effectively than just avoiding it if we wish to have our young people grow up to be involved participants in our representative democracy. Civic learning in schools is the most effective way to prepare America’s young people for informed and active participation in a healthy democracy. The nexus between conflict resolution education and the civic mission of our schools will be discussed below, with an emphasis on how one program—Project PEACE—offers a chance for our young people to find their voice in their schools, communities and nation. Our system of public education was created to prepare young people with the knowledge and skills to be an informed, engaged citizen.

In *The Civic Mission of Schools* (CMS), the report of a campaign to expand and improve civic learning in our schools, the consensus goal of civic education was identified as helping students gain and apply citizenship skills, knowledge and attitudes. CMS recognized the need to provide resources and encouragement to ensure that all students may become the kind of competent and responsible citizens who are:

Informed and thoughtful;

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Justice conference. Hess discussed the premise of this article with the author and her early suggestions of connected research and writings were a great help to the author in preparing this article.

8 Indeed, this is a concern raised by John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse in their 2002 book, *Stealth Democracy*.

9 See [http://www.pabar.org/public/education/projectpeace/projectpeacehome.asp](http://www.pabar.org/public/education/projectpeace/projectpeacehome.asp) for background on project PEACE.

10 VOICE is the name of a fine elementary civics program from the Constitutional Rights Foundation in Chicago. The reference to young people finding their voice echoes a frequent refrain of Anne Spector, a noted educator retired from the Cheltenham School District but still very active in civic learning in Pennsylvania through the Rendell Center for Civics and Civic Engagement at the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

11 CMS was sponsored by CIRCLE (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) and the Carnegie Corporation of New York in cooperation with the Corporation for National and Community Service. See [www.civicmissionofschoools.org](http://www.civicmissionofschoools.org) for the complete findings of CMS. The CMS report was the creation of a diverse and talented group of civic scholars and practitioners; it was accepted by the Bush Administration as an important document that demands careful review. The 2010 death of West Virginia Senator Robert Byrd hurt federal funding of civics initiatives, yet the American Bar Association and other groups still promote law-related and civic education. See [http://www.pabar.org/public/lre/LREEducators.asp](http://www.pabar.org/public/lre/LREEducators.asp) for some Pennsylvania efforts.
Involved in their communities;
Active politically; and
Concerned for the rights and welfare of others.\(^{12}\)

CMS offered six promising approaches for civic education. Although conflict resolution education was not a specific prescription of the CMS report, the approaches of the report outlined below provide a strong framework on which the connection between conflict resolution education and civic learning may rest:

1. **Provide instruction in government, history, law and democracy.** Formal instruction in U.S. government, history, and democracy increases civic knowledge. This is a valuable goal in itself and may also contribute to young people’s tendency to engage in civic and political activities over the long term. However, schools should avoid teaching only rote facts about dry procedures, which is unlikely to benefit students and may actually alienate them from politics. History is full of conflict and the many ways conflict is dealt with in history — from war to peace\(^{13}\) — provides ample opportunity to teach about handling conflict in such instruction.\(^{14}\)

2. **Incorporate discussion of current local, national, and international issues and events into the classroom, particularly those that young people view as important to their lives.** When young people have opportunities to discuss current issues in a classroom setting, they tend to have greater interest in politics, improved critical thinking and communications skills, more civic knowledge, and more interest in discussing public affairs out of school. Conversations, however, should be carefully moderated so that students feel welcome to speak from a variety of perspectives. Both students and teachers need support in broaching controversial issues in classrooms since they may risk criticism or sanctions if they do so.\(^{15}\) Here is an obvious place for conflict resolution education.

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\(^{12}\) See [http://www.civicmissionofschools.org/the-campaign/educating-for-democracy](http://www.civicmissionofschools.org/the-campaign/educating-for-democracy)

\(^{13}\) Jimmy Carter talks about the need to “wage peace” as strongly as we have waged war.

\(^{14}\) The New Jersey Center for Law-Related Education has curriculum that combines history and conflict resolution explicitly. *Conflict Resolution and United States History* (see [http://civiced.rutgers.edu/conflictresolutionushistory.html](http://civiced.rutgers.edu/conflictresolutionushistory.html)) provides a curriculum guide with 20 case studies from the colonial period through the 1990s for teachers to use to combine the study of history the study of conflict resolution.

\(^{15}\) In the March 2004 *Social Education*, Diana Hess outlines the efforts needed to hold positive classroom discussions and explains how rare such discussions are in our schools in an article entitled, “Discussion in the Social Studies: Is it Worth the Trouble?” Classroom researcher Hess has written and lectured extensively on this topic and her answer to the question raised in this article’s title is a resounding “yes”.
3. **Design and implement programs that provide students with the opportunity to apply what they learn through performing community service that is linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction.** Service programs are now common in K–12 schools. The ones that best develop engaged citizens are linked to the curriculum; consciously pursue civic outcomes, rather than seek only to improve academic performance or to promote higher self-esteem; allow students to engage in meaningful work on serious public issues; give students a role in choosing and designing their projects; provide students with opportunities to reflect on the service work; allow students – especially older ones – to pursue political responses to problems consistent with laws that require public schools to be nonpartisan; and see service-learning as part of a broader philosophy toward education, not just a program that is adopted for a finite period in a particular course. Some school service programs involve the creation of mediation programs for the school or for the larger community; other programs involve cross-age teaching of conflict resolution skills. Whatever the service program, working in the community requires an ability to handle conflict and thus reinforces the need for and the value of such education.

4. **Offer extracurricular activities that provide opportunities for young people to get involved in their schools or communities.** Long term studies of Americans show that those who participate in extracurricular activities in high school remain more civically engaged than their contemporaries even decades later. Thus, everyone should have opportunities to join high school groups, and such participation should be valued. Group participation means interaction with peers and others as part of that participation, thus providing real-life conflict resolution exercise.

5. **Encourage student participation in school governance.** A long tradition of research suggests that giving students more opportunities to participate in the management of their own classrooms and schools builds their civic skills and attitudes. Thus, giving students a voice in school governance is a promising way to encourage all young people to engage civically. The conflicts associated with school governance often mirror the conflicts found in political life in the larger society and the need for skill development here is vital if the experience for the students is to be positive.

6. **Encourage students’ participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures.** Recent evidence indicates that simulations of voting, trials, legislative deliberation, and diplomacy in schools can lead to heightened political knowledge and interest. The data is not conclusive, but these approaches show promise and should be considered when developing programs and curriculum. Mediation Showcases are just

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16 Over the years, the Project PEACE mediation program in the Abington School District outside Philadelphia has involved such cross-age teaching, with both older students teaching skills to their younger peers and with younger students “bubbling up” the education by showcasing mediation techniques to students in the grades above.

17 The Americorps program has always included conflict resolution education into the training for its service programs.

18 Constitution High School in Philadelphia has student involvement in the school’s governance built into its “constitution” that governs how it operates. Students vote on programs that impact them.

19 The term “Mediation Showcase” was created by Judy Zimmer of Street Law in Washington, DC in materials she developed to create a mock mediation experience for students not already trained as mediators or in a program.
one way dispute resolution education can be brought into the schools. For many years, the Pennsylvania Statewide Mock Trial Competition also featured a Philadelphia-area dispute resolution exercise.

Project PEACE (Peaceful Endings through Authorities, Children and Educators)\(^2^0\) is a peer mediation, anti-bullying and youth court training program implemented in Pennsylvania by the Pennsylvania Bar Association (PBA) and the Pennsylvania Attorney General’s Office that follows the approaches outlined in the CMS report to provide, first at the elementary school level, an education in the skills of conflict resolution that are necessary for civic participation. Bullying prevention education is also provided to staff, parents, students and the community through the Olweus Bullying Prevention program.\(^2^1\) Around fifth grade, youth courts\(^2^2\) are introduced.

This public-private partnership introduces dispute resolution techniques to elementary school students throughout the Commonwealth. Originally brought to Pennsylvania by then Attorney General Mike Fisher in 1999 after the tragedy at Columbine High School, the program has continued to flourish under Attorney Generals Jerry Pappert, Thomas Corbett, Linda Kelly and Kathleen Kane. Sixteen presidents of the PBA have endorsed the program and over the past fifteen years Project PEACE has brought conflict resolution training and antiviolence programming, directly and indirectly, to nearly 200 Pennsylvania schools. All schools, regardless of socioeconomic status, diversity and location, have been forced by outbreaks of violence, large and small, to confront the issue of conflict among school students, and to help students address and resolve such conflict before it escalates into violence. Project PEACE’s initial efforts at

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\(^{20}\) See https://www.pabar.org/public/education/projectpeace/projectpeacehome.asp for information on Project PEACE.

\(^{21}\) See http://www.clemson.edu/olweus/

\(^{22}\) See http://www.youthcourt.net/
tackling the problem of violence has led to a broader look at building involved communities, first at the school level, and then beyond. In this era of high stakes testing, when double periods of math and reading are taking the place traditionally reserved for social studies in the early grades\textsuperscript{23}, Project PEACE also provides a valuable means of providing civic learning in the schools.

Project PEACE works to reduce conflict and violence in Pennsylvania’s schools by teaching students how to discuss and mediate disagreements peacefully. It empowers children, who are still in their formative years when Project PEACE is introduced at the elementary level, with the important life-skills that promote constructive communication, problem-solving, critical-thinking and self-esteem. Children become active participants in governing behavior in their classrooms by taking on the role of mediator and using the mediation process; they also impact their class and school climate by using the skills of conflict resolution that they learn to work out disputes on their own. With the help of neutral peer mediators, or through the exercise of learned skills by individual students, conflicts can be settled in a positive manner, benefiting the school climate as a whole.

Project PEACE further works to limit violence in Pennsylvania’s schools by teaching young people about bullying. By learning to distinguish bullying behavior from the kind of relational disputes that can be resolved through conflict resolution techniques, students are taught that bullying is an unacceptable form of peer abuse. Students learn to seek adult help when bullying situations become apparent and to look out for their peers who might be bullied.

\textsuperscript{23} See the report of Ira Hiberman and Kay Atman for the Pennsylvania Council of Social Studies at www.pcssonline.org.
Students thus become the “upstanders” \(^{24}\) that can positively impact the school community. Adults are also trained to recognize the signs of bullying and to intervene to stop bullying at its roots.

As students move towards fifth grade, Project PEACE expands its positive school climate and antiviolence efforts by educating students about youth courts. Youth court, teen court, and peer court are interchangeable terms for an alternative disciplinary system for youth, either in school or community settings, who have committed an act that violates the norms of a school or the community. Youth courts train young people to serve as jurors, judges and attorneys, handling real-life cases involving their peers. The goal of youth court is to use positive peer pressure to ensure that young people who have committed minor offenses pay back the school or larger community and receive the help they need to avoid further involvement in the school discipline or juvenile justice system. Youth courts hear a range of low-level offenses; many handle cases that would otherwise result in school suspensions or even wind up in Family Court.\(^{25}\) Under Project PEACE, the Youth Court is a sentencing court only. The student involved must admit to the behavior alleged.

All of the elements of Project PEACE — conflict resolution education, anti-bullying instruction and youth court training—provide alternatives to the ineffective zero tolerance disciplinary policies\(^{26}\) that are still found in too many of our schools. Project PEACE does more than provide an alternative discipline procedure. Project PEACE provides an extension and application of learning for the students involved in the day-to-day programming. Students learn

\(^{24}\) A play on the word “bystander”, one of the positions that students assume in bullying situations as Olweus describes in his bullying circle model. Olweus encourages students to not just watch but, however it can be safely done, to defend the student who is bullied.

\(^{25}\) See https://www.pabar.org/public/committees/childavo/basedyouthcourt.asp for more on youth courts.

\(^{26}\) *Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in the Schools? An Evidentiary Review and Recommendations*, 63.9 AM. PSYCHOLOGIST 852, 852 (2008) (defining “zero tolerance” as “a philosophy or policy that mandates the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive in nature, that are intended to be applied regardless of the gravity of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context.”).
conflict resolution skills that will help them in situations both inside and outside of school. The anti-bullying instruction underscores a national commitment to civil rights and dignity for all. Youth courts appeal to students because they process real student disciplinary cases which allow them to participate and contribute to an improved school climate. All of the Project PEACE elements have enormous potential to educate young people about the justice system and develop academic, citizenship and socialization tools.

During Project PEACE training, school teams (composed of administrators, educators, parents, selected students and outside “authority” partners such as attorneys) are introduced to each of the elements of the program. Although it is a chicken and egg kind of question as to which element should be brought into a school first, generally the peer mediation and conflict resolution education process is introduced first through hands-on learning activities at the elementary school level. The school team receives instruction in such areas as adjudication vs. mediation, diffusing conflict situations and the skills of conflict resolution before being taught the peer mediation process through a step by step script. At the end of the peer mediation training, the school teams create their own conflict resolution education and mediation plans, which are introduced to their larger school community. The schools continue to train their student mediators and teach the skills of conflict resolution to all of the school community. The schools also decide where and when to allow mediations to occur. The trained student mediators then help fellow students resolve disputes peacefully within the context of the school plan. The schools with the most effective Project PEACE programs recognize that they must do more than train a corps of mediators and send the mediators out into the community to help promote a peaceful school. Effective Project PEACE programs reach out to teach all members of the

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27 Many schools embracing Project PEACE already have elements of the program in place, especially anti-bullying education given the infusion of resources from Highmark in recent years (see http://www.bullyingpreventioninstitute.org/About.aspx)
community the skills of conflict resolution that are so necessary to have a democratic society. The goal should be to have everyone learn enough conflict resolution skills to put the mediators out of business.

In their refreshing look at democracy, *The Quickening of America* 28, Francis Moore Lappe and Paul Martin DuBois attack the myths that they say keep people from becoming more involved in creatively solving the problems of our day. Myth Three is that “public life means ugly conflict” but the “empowering insight” of the authors is:

In public life we encounter differences, even more than in private life. But conflict doesn’t have to be nasty or destructive. It can be healthy and informative, bringing insights about ourselves and new perspectives for solving problems.29

That insight comes straight from an elementary mediation lesson about conflict being neither good nor bad, that what matters is what each of us does with the conflict to make it positive or negative. When children are asked to report on conflicts found in the daily newspaper, they almost always pick out the articles and pictures that show conflict being dealt with in a negative manner. Stories about war, crime and other violence illustrate the definition most children seem to have for conflict. Indeed, war and hate are often suggested as synonyms for the word “conflict”. That many children do not understand initially the meaning of conflict does not mean that they cannot learn to see conflict as the opportunity for each child to use the skills of conflict resolution to produce positive results from conflict situations. Indeed, the misunderstood definition of conflict provides the teachable moment for just such a lesson. Once the nature of conflict is explained and the meaning of the term is explored with students, young people give synonyms for conflict such as peace and love.

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28 Published in 1994 by Jossey-Bass, this work by the author of *Diet for a Small Planet* is a wonderfully subversive call to civic engagement.
29 Lappe and DuBois, *The Quickening of America*, p. 29.
Peer mediation training and conflict resolution education is just one part of Project PEACE. Bullying prevention education is a needed second piece to making democratic participation a reality in our schools and beyond. Bullying is defined as “unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time.”\(^{30}\) Such behavior robs the targeted students of their voice but can also sour the overall climate of a school, making the bystanders eventually start to believe that perhaps the targeted students deserve the poor treatment. Such behavior must be stopped to keep democratic values alive. Mediation is not an effective tool with bullying because there is no relationship to restore and the parties are not on equal footing. Bullying is not conflict; it is not neutral from the start but rather a form of peer abuse. The student who is being bullied needs to be protected from such victimization and those doing the bullying need to be stopped from harming others. Hazelden, a major publisher of bullying prevention materials, states that mediation should not be used in bullying situations for the following reasons:\(^{31}\)

- Peer mediation/conflict resolution programs assume there is a bit of both right and wrong on both sides. Such programs may place some blame on the student who is being bullied and free the student or students who are bullying from some responsibility. These programs work toward a compromise that, in the case of bullying, could mean further victimization of the student who has been bullied.

- Another common assumption in such programs is that both parties have about the same negotiating power. This is usually not the case in bullying situations where there is an imbalance in power in favor of the student or students who bully. Chances are the bullied student will be the loser in such negotiations.

\(^{30}\) See [http://www.stopbullying.gov/what-is-bullying/definition/index.html](http://www.stopbullying.gov/what-is-bullying/definition/index.html)

In peer mediation/conflict resolution programs, the mediator is told not to take a moral stand on the issue at hand. In the case of bullying, it is very important that the adults take a moral stand and clearly communicate that bullying is not acceptable.

Conflict resolution/peer mediation programs leave most of the responsibility for solving bullying problems to the students. However, bullying problems are often complex and difficult to handle, even for trained school staff. To defer these problems to the students is giving them too much responsibility. By using peer mediators, staff may also think that bullying is not their problem to solve.

Project PEACE utilizes the Olweus (pronounced Ol-VAY-us) Bullying Prevention Program in its anti-bullying education effort as part of the Pennsylvania Bullying Prevention Network (PA BP Network). The PA BP Network is a statewide professional learning community for bullying prevention consultants. The network was established in 2001 by the Center for Safe Schools (CSS), through funding provided by the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency and the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The PA BP Network seeks to promote research-based practices in bullying prevention and the integration of those practices with other research-based models for improving youth outcomes. All members of the PA BP Network are Certified Trainers for the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP); however, members’ areas of expertise extend beyond OBPP.

The Olweus Program is a comprehensive approach that includes schoolwide, classroom, individual, and community components. The program is focused on long-term change that creates a safe and positive school climate. It is designed and evaluated for use in elementary, middle, junior high and high schools (K-12). The program’s goals are to reduce and prevent bullying problems among schoolchildren and to improve peer relations at school. The program has been found to reduce bullying among students, improve the social climate of classrooms, and

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32 See http://www.safeschools.info/bullying-prevention/pennsylvania-bullying-prevention-network
33 See http://www.safeschools.info/bullying-prevention/about-bullying-prevention
reduce related antisocial behaviors, such as vandalism and truancy. 34 Pennsylvania leads the nation in the implementation of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, thanks in large measure to support from the Highmark Foundation. 35

As noted above, there is a chicken and the egg element36 to the first two parts of Project PEACE. Schools can start with anti-bullying education and then include mediation and conflict resolution37 or start with mediation and then bring in the Olweus Program38. Bullying prevention can start with the beginning of kindergarten. Even though peer mediation generally begins with students in third grade or higher, conflict resolution programs such as “I Can Problem Solve”39, teach the skills of problem solving to children even before they reach school age.

The third element of Project PEACE, youth court40, usually is the last element of the program introduced in schools since late elementary school seems the earliest and most effective time to begin such programming.41 Youth courts can operate in schools or within the juvenile justice system. Within the school setting, the normal location for Project PEACE, youth courts can

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34 See http://www.clemson.edu/olweus/
35 The Highmark Healthy High 5 Bullying Prevention Institute was founded by, and is supported by, the Highmark Foundation. The Bullying Prevention Institute was created to afford professional development and educational opportunities to school personnel and other professionals as part of the wide-scale implementation of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program in Pennsylvania. See http://www.bullyingpreventioninstitute.org/
36 Which comes first?
37 A Project PEACE initiative run by the Black Law Student Association of the University of Pennsylvania Law School began with anti-bullying education and moved in the spring of 2015 to include mediation.
38 Manchester Academic Charter School in Pittsburgh started with mediation and plans to next move into the Olweus Program.
39 See http://www.icanproblemsolve.info/
41 Gregg Volz, the director of the Youth Court Support Center, runs a number of such courts in Chester, Pennsylvania; Keith Bailey of Philadelphia Physicians for Social Responsibility also runs such elementary courts in Philadelphia. Both Volz and Bailey started with high school youth courts but have gradually brought the courts to younger students. The Western Pennsylvania Youth Court Initiative, centered in Allegheny County, is working primarily with middle school courts.
operate as an after-school program or within the school curriculum. Ideally, a small group of students (18-20) are trained on court processes and roles by a team of professionals including teachers, lawyers, and law students. Experience has shown that students can learn to operate a youth court relatively quickly. A series of fifteen forty-five minute lesson plans is sufficient for most students to learn court roles, processes, and administrative functions. In the Project PEACE model youth court, the primary roles are youth judge, bailiff, juror, jury foreman, youth advocate, and clerk. All of these roles are held by students. Youth court training includes mock hearings in which students practice skills in preparation for real-life hearings involving fellow students who have violated school policy.

The actual youth court hearing closely follows formal court proceedings in Pennsylvania but without complex legal procedures. The court begins with all participants pledging to keep knowledge of the court proceedings confidential. The student judge then announces the rules of the court to begin the proceeding. Following an opening statement by the youth advocate, the jury questions the respondent (student offender). This phase of the youth court hearing usually does not last more than ten minutes. After the jury completes the questioning, the youth advocate makes a closing argument. The student respondent is asked to leave the hearing room while the jury deliberates to impose fair and appropriate sanctions, which may include a letter of apology, a written essay, community service, and mandatory jury duty. The decision is announced to the

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42 In Pennsylvania, youth courts comply with state curriculum standards and currently operate in both social studies and English courses.
44 How to Run a Youth Court, at http://educationworks.org/resources.asp (showing training videos of mock hearings).
45 Students working with Volz initially used prosecutor and defense attorney roles but felt they got too caught up in “winning” the case and were not focused enough on the student offender, so they combined the roles into one youth advocate.
respondent when he or she returns to the hearing room. The time given to the respondent to complete the disposition is usually short—between one and two weeks.

Youth courts provide students with an opportunity to express their voice, to become empowered by participating in the design and administration of justice and to gain self-respect, confidence, judgment, and critical thinking skills. Because the youth court process actively engages students, many report a more positive and favorable outlook on school after going through the youth court process. Since a reason some youth give for dropping out of school is boredom, this engagement is potentially profound.\textsuperscript{46} One particularly powerful example of this youth engagement comes from Chester High School where all of the youth court students who became regular members of the original youth court there graduated from high school. In a high school that struggles to graduate fifty percent of its students in four years, this achievement alone is extraordinary.

There are numerous positive outcomes of youth court participation. Some youth court members have advanced their literacy scores on standardized tests. Youth courts positively impact student opinions about the criminal justice system. Youth court teaches students about the law and legal processes. Research suggests that youth court has “long-term potential to minimize the negative impact of the School-to-Prison Pipeline and to serve as a mechanism for increasing trust in the justice system among students.”\textsuperscript{47}

Socialization skills are developed by youth court members. Because the jury process requires an orderly sequence of questioning, jurors must learn patience. They learn to listen to

\textsuperscript{46} See e.g., \textit{Pushed Out: Youth Voices on the Dropout Crisis in Philadelphia}, supra note 8.
other points of view, and work as a team in order to successfully run a youth court. All these skills will be used by students for the rest of their lives.

Student offenders are eligible to join youth court after satisfactorily completing their disposition. Nationally, youth court advocates estimate that up to one-fourth of respondents become youth court volunteers after they complete their disposition. Although our experience in Pennsylvania youth courts has not been that high, some of our most gifted youth court members initially came to youth court as respondents and not as volunteers. Offenders who volunteer to work in youth courts after completing their disposition are providing a high form of praise.

In the Project PEACE youth court model, student respondents are required to admit they committed the offenses of which they are accused. Therefore, the youth courts are actually “sentencing courts” that focus on accountability for one’s actions and a willingness to take responsibility to make the situation right, learn from it, and move forward in a positive direction that benefits the student as well as the school community. The power of youth court lies in peer pressure. Most parents recognize that during adolescence many youth are far more concerned with what their peers think of them than what adults think. The power of positive peer pressure should not be underestimated—it is the distinguishing feature that separates youth court from other disciplinary programs. This peer pressure, coupled with the fact that student offenders are compelled to reflect about their own behavior, largely accounts for the power of youth court.

Progressive youth courts employ restorative justice and focus on repairing harm that the offender created, rather than focusing on punishment. The objective of Pennsylvania’s juvenile justice code is restorative justice, but overcrowded juvenile justice dockets are not always

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48 Email to Gregg Volz from Jack Levine of the National Youth Court Center
conducive to the full application of those principles.\textsuperscript{49} Neuroscience now reveals that adolescent decision-making capacity is less developed than in adults; youth are less able to resist coercive influences, and their character is not fully formed.\textsuperscript{50} This causes youth to make errors in judgment that adults would not make.\textsuperscript{51} Hence, both law and science provide a foundation for the argument that punishment should not be the primary objective of youth discipline. Rather, repairing the harm and helping the offender develop skills to avoid future bad behavior should be the primary goals.

Putting even one element of Project PEACE in place in a school takes time and energy and most schools struggle to maintain such programs. The benefits of Project PEACE suggest that such efforts are worth the struggle. Consider this list of virtues fifth graders at an urban elementary school told their lawyer partner they had actually learned from their participation in Project PEACE:

- Patience.
- Commitment.
- Trust.
- Setting a good example.
- Reflecting.
- Communicating.

\textsuperscript{49} 42 PA. CONS. STAT. § 6301 (2008) (guiding Pennsylvania’s juvenile justice system by a balanced and restorative justice philosophy, “the protection of the public interest, to provide for children committing delinquent acts programs of supervision, care, and rehabilitation that provide balanced attention to the protection of the community, the imposition of accountability for offenses committed, and the development of competencies to enable children to become responsible and productive members of the community.”).


\textsuperscript{51} Id. at 1014.
Helping others.

Understanding

So why are children who are not in trouble with the law talking to lawyers? Lawyers and other authorities — schools have used ministers\textsuperscript{52}, police officers\textsuperscript{53}, even factory workers\textsuperscript{54} — work with schools through Project PEACE to bring conflict resolution training and peer mediation, anti-bullying education, and youth court training to the young people of the Commonwealth. Many Project PEACE authority partners spend considerable time in schools working with and listening to young people as they help schools implement the program. The key is to have a partner outside the school community since that partner is able to bring other resources to the school program.

When teachers, administrators, and parents first observe the results of this program, they are amazed at the ease with which students, who are often just reaching double-digit ages, diffuse and resolve conflicts. But conflict management skills are not all they learn. Students in Project PEACE also gain a profound understanding of life—they discover truths that many adults have forgotten. One of the primary benefits of Project PEACE is that it teaches students that conflict is an inevitable part of life that they should not fear. Through their experience, students see how conflict can create opportunities for growth and development. As a fifth grader told his school’s Project PEACE attorney partner, “It’s good to be in conflict because it helps you learn to solve problems.”

\textsuperscript{52} Bristol Borough School District used local ministers as partners in the 1990s before Project PEACE was formally embraced in Pennsylvania. The program actually began in the state of Indiana in 1993 building on work the author was starting to do in Philadelphia regional schools in the late 1980s.

\textsuperscript{53} School resource officers in Abington School District helped train students for Project PEACE through the 1990s and 2000s.

\textsuperscript{54} Hazelton Area School District had a partnership with the paperboard factory in town for a short period of time.
Teachers will tell you that in the field of education, trends come and go every four or five years. Someone is always promoting the latest and greatest innovation. Measured by that yardstick, Project PEACE, at sixteen years of age in Pennsylvania, has survived a few lifetimes. Why? Perhaps it is the program’s emphasis on self-determination in resolving conflict which resonates with youth who clamor for greater independence. Students learn that with greater independence comes greater commitment and responsibility. Whether serving as peer mediators, upstanders or youth court jurors, young people realize that the school is theirs to make it the best place it can be. Taking that lesson outside of school, students learn that participation in our democracy is a matter of learning to handle conflicts, work out problems, look out for those who need help and work for justice. Students learn that no matter how interesting the times we live in, they can work out solutions to their problems and truly make the world a better place!