



Youth Courts and their Educational Value: An Examination of Youth Courts in Chester, Pennsylvania

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Youth courts are becoming increasingly common across the country. Whether run by the legal community, community agencies, or within school settings, all youth courts share two common features: 1) youth who commit minor offenses appear before their peers and receive sentences from other youth; and, 2) youth design sentences with the goal of repairing the harm done to individual victims and the broader community

From 2009 through 2012, the Stoneleigh Foundation supported the creation and sustainability of youth courts in Chester Upland School District (CUSD) through the work of Stoneleigh Fellow Gregg Volz. In 2011, the Foundation commissioned Research for Action (RFA) to conduct a study of CUSD youth courts during the 2011-12 school year. This executive summary presents a brief review of the context surrounding youth courts in Chester; general findings related to students' participation in youth courts; and a set of lessons learned for youth court implementation and future research.

The Context for CUSD Youth Courts

CUSD youth courts were developed in Chester, Pennsylvania, a city which has persistently ranked among the state's most socio-economically distressed for many years. The CUSD has spent the past decade in a constant state of crisis, with student proficiency in math and English far below the state average, and graduation rates far below that of most districts across the state. In 2011-12, state education budget cuts resulted in teacher layoffs and personnel transfers across the district, which destabilized school supports for youth courts. Despite these adverse conditions, the youth courts continued with the support of dedicated students, teachers, and administrators in the CUSD, along with substantial support and advocacy from the Stoneleigh Foundation and other legal, higher education, and community partners.

Youth Court Participants' Long Term Outcomes

While the study was initially intended to assess the effect that youth court participation had on participants, three key challenges restricted RFA's ability to conduct these analyses: selection bias, inconsistent participation records, and limited interviews with participants. However, this study reveals that the long-term academic performance of youth court volunteers, students who serve on the courts, and respondents (students who have committed low-level offenses), 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%).

Promising Influences of Youth Courts for Volunteers

This study also identified a number of ways that volunteers benefited from their participation in youth courts. Youth court participation reinforced three key noncognitive factors that are critical to academic success:

1. **Academic behaviors.** Academic behaviors are indicators of good student behavior. Youth court participation reinforced three important academic behaviors: attendance, participation, and being organized.
2. **Academic mindset.** An academic mindset is directly related to a student’s persistence with school work, which, by extension, contributes to their academic success. Youth court participation encouraged four features of positive academic mindsets: 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.** Social skills linked to academic performance include interpersonal skills, cooperation, empathy, and responsibility. Youth court participation cultivated these skills.

Promising Signs for Respondents

Participation in youth court hearings was also associated with positive signs for respondents. While our data on respondents was too thin to conduct a comprehensive set of analyses, our findings do suggest that participation in youth court hearings may have the potential to exert positive peer pressure on respondents leading them to make adjustments to their behavior. Specific findings include:

1. **Reduced recidivism:**
 - Fewer respondents committed multiple disciplinary infractions after their youth court hearings than referred students who did not attend youth court hearings (26% v. 33%).
 - Fewer respondents received multiple suspensions after their youth court hearings than referred students who did not attend youth court hearings (22% v. 29%).
 - A substantial majority of respondents did not commit multiple disciplinary infractions after their youth court hearings (75%).
2. **Positive peer pressure:**
 - Both youth court advisors and volunteers cited the power of positive peer pressure exerted on respondents to be contributing members of their school communities and to “clean up their act.” Through peer pressure, volunteers were helping respondents stay attached to their school communities.

Lessons Learned

Lessons learned could be important to future youth court implementation, as well as to research that aims to show the effects on youth of participation in youth courts.

Lessons about Program Implementation and Context

- **Inside/outside partnership and district collaboration:** Partnerships with the Stoneleigh Foundation and other external entities provided invaluable supports to CUSD youth courts, and similar partnerships could be extremely valuable to future youth courts. Collaboration within CUSD ensured that youth courts had a place in the school, and provided researchers with access to the courts and to student data.
- **Integrating youth courts into a larger system of restorative practices:** CUSD youth courts were “added on” to a punitive disciplinary policy. A disciplinary system guided by restorative practices would allow the entire school community to engage in a process designed to foster mutual responsibility and accountability for a positive school climate.
- **Program fidelity:** Developing an agreed-upon set of fidelity of implementation indicators for school-based youth courts would provide a basis for the expansion of the model and the development of rigorous research designs to assess their effectiveness.

Lessons for Research

- **Research over multiple years across multiple youth court sites:** Research conducted across multiple sites over time could provide more robust insights into the key features of youth courts, and their effect on participants. A mixed-method design would ensure a better understanding of the relationship between youth court implementation and the outcomes for participants.
- **Protocols and responsible parties for program-level data determined at the time of program start up:** Having access to consistent and complete data is critical to the credibility of research findings. Optimally, those collecting or supervising the collection of data would receive training ahead of the opening of the youth courts.
- **Respondent exit questionnaire:** An intake questionnaire for students committing “level 1 offenses” and referred to youth court followed by a respondent exit questionnaire could provide key insights into respondents’ motivations to attend youth courts and their experiences in the hearings.
- **A broad group of informants:** Conducting interviews or focus groups with a sample of youth court volunteers, respondents and other stakeholders could provide key insights into the effect youth courts may have on participants and would help identify appropriate outcomes to assess.