



Video Essay: Youth court is in session

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by Action News Photojournalist Gino Canella

CHESTER, Pa. - June 16, 2011 (WPVI) -- At 3:30 p.m. on a recent Wednesday afternoon, there was a trial under way in a classroom at Chester High School.

There was a bailiff, judge, jury and defendant - or in this case, a respondent.

Tevin Moton was that respondent and he was on trial.

"I was cutting class," Moton, who has a 3.0 GPA, said.

There was no prosecution.

Moton felt the coursework and pace of the class was not moving quickly enough.

"We're not above the law in youth court," he said. "Everything has a cause and effect."

That's why this program was started in November of 2007 by Stoneleigh Foundation fellow and attorney Gregg Volz.

"The motto of the Chester High School Youth Court is students helping students make better decisions," Volz says.

"What we want is to not punish that individual because they're not a fully functioning adult. We want to correct the harm, repair the harm and help them not engage in that activity in the future."

One of those youth who has learned from the youth court is Brian Foster.

Foster is a senior and a former respondent.

"I was one of those students that could've been on that school to prison pipeline and being involved with youth court changed my whole persona and the way I act," Foster, this trial's acting judge, said.

Volz realized the statistics are not promising once a youth enters the system and the goal of youth court is to deal with those behavioral issues within the walls of the school.

"Peer to peer decisions on what to do with errant behavior is preferred to adults," he said.

Volz believes removing the student from school with a suspension is not the answer.

"And through that they begin to realize there are reasons for the laws that society creates," Volz said.

The cost of running a youth court is not exactly known, but Volz says the investment is very small when you consider the district saves considerable time and resources on administrative and disciplinary costs. Many of those participating in the program as supervisors are doing so on a volunteer basis.

The students are also reminded that although a judge is in a position of power, they are there to help rehabilitate the offender.

"Even though we might have the presence of a court room, all our jobs is to help that one person realize what they did wrong and what they need to do and what can benefit them," Foster said.

The students sitting in as the jury asked questions of the respondent in order to deliberate and order a disposition.

"Mr. Moton," Kareem Greenwood, the jury foreman, said, "we have assigned you 10 hours of jury duty to help you understand all actions have consequences. We have also assigned you two written apologies."

The success of the Chester High Youth Court has encouraged Volz to present their courtroom as a model.

There are over 1,100 youth courts around the country, but less than 20 in Pennsylvania.

"These kids need help," Volz said. "And what we've found is that they may be best suited by helping themselves."

The Pennsylvania Bar Association recently unanimously passed a resolution seeking to promote youth court expansion both in the schools and juvenile justice system.

"I think our kids are capable of a whole lot more than we think," Volz said, "if we set the bar for them."

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