**YOUTH COURTS**

**POSITIVE PEER PRESSURE, RESTORATIVE JUSTICE, & YOUTH DEVELOPMENT**

Youth courts are student run alternatives to juvenile justice and school discipline. Students

are trained by lawyers, law students, teachers, and other volunteers to perform all court functions (judge, bailiff, advocate, jurors, etc.). Through court imposed positive peer pressure offenders reflect on their behavior, learn their actions have consequences, and accept responsibility.

Neuroscience informs us that the stress and trauma disadvantaged youth experience impairs their decision making and impulse control. Absent nurturing relationships with stable adults, some youth fail to acquire the executive function skills to cope with their environment. Teachers confirm such youth have problems following instructions and socializing. Without effective intervention they often fall behind, becoming a danger to themselves and their community.

Youth court participation in under-resourced schools improves life outcomes for these youth.

These participants report its transformative impact as they learn coping skills they otherwise fail to acquire, and will use the rest of their lives. Using restorative justice, youth court students contribute to the well-being of their school/community and seek to help the student offender rather than punish them. The most successful youth courts limit the role of adults to that of trainer and mentor, empowering youth by trusting them to control the entire process. Youth courts are integrated within social studies or language arts classes, or stand alone as an elective course. They can also act as a pre-arrest juvenile justice diversionary program.

**Youth Court benefits for respondents**

1. Offenders tell their story to their peers who understand their life situation.
2. Offenders experience restorative justice, instead of being suspended they stay in school.
3. Offenders respect peer justice more than adult discipline.
4. Offenders have lower recidivism rates.

**Youth Court benefits for student participants (some are former offenders)**

1. Participants learn legal concepts and processes.
2. Participants develop a positive attitude towards the legal system.
3. Participants contribute to their community through experiential and service learning.
4. Students acquire life-long skills: concentration, public speaking, and communication.
5. Students acquire socialization skills by collaborating to form a restorative disposition.
6. Students become engaged and empowered and learn to become good citizens.
7. Youth court is a drop-out prevention program; members graduate from high school.

 **Youth Court benefits for schools, justice systems and neighborhoods**

1. School safety/climate is improved especially if used with other restorative practices.
2. Disciplinary systems gain “youth as resources”, as well as adult volunteers.
3. Costs of school discipline and juvenile justice diversionary programs can be reduced.
4. School curriculum is enhanced by hands-on application of civics education.
5. Communication between juvenile and educational systems can be improved.
6. Improved relationships among students, and between students and teachers are reported.