



PENNSYLVANIA LEGISLATIVE BLACK CAUCUS & HOUSE DEMOCRATIC POLICY COMMITTEE JOINT PUBLIC HEARING

Topic: Youth Perspective on Criminal Justice
Universal Institute Charter School – Philadelphia, PA
September 10, 2019

AGENDA

- 1:00 p.m. Welcome and Opening Remarks
- 1:10 p.m. Panel One:
- Tamir Gorham, Candidate for Jr. Executive Office (served as Judge, Youth Advocate, Foreperson)
 - Heather Kodhelaj, Candidate for Jr. Executive Office (served as Judge, Bailiff)
 - Mia Desheraud, Candidate for Jr. Executive Office (served as Judge, Bailiff, youth Advocate, Foreperson)
- 1:30 p.m. Panel Two:
- Nailah Phillips, Jr. Executive Member and President-Elect (served as Judge, youth advocate, foreperson)
 - Jabril Williams, Candidate for Jr. Executive Office (served as Bailiff, Youth Advocate, Foreperson)
 - Allen Daniely, Case Summarizer
 - Jahmir Woolford, Respondent
- 2:00 p.m. Panel Three:
- Jaide Phillips, Candidate for Jr. Executive Office (served as Judge, Youth Advocate, Foreperson, Bailiff)
 - Anbessa Michelen, Junior Member In Training
 - Zeke Michelen, Junior Member In Training
- 2:20 p.m. Panel Four:
- Jeffrey Williams, Principal, University Institute Charter School
 - Tyrone Highsmith, Dean of Students, University Institute Charter School
 - Francine Daniels, CEO and Founder, Philadelphia Community Youth Court
 - Roi Ligon, Jr., Safe Schools Advocate, Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency
- 2:50 p.m. Closing Remarks

INTERVENTION AND SUPPORT

Philadelphia Community Youth Court offers a peer training and support model that teaches youths to act as coaches and advocates who encourage youth offenders to connect to treatment and to support their compliance with Behavioral health services.

Upcoming Events:

Sept. 10, 2019 – Public Hearing with Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus

Sept. 11 – Philadelphia Barristers Installation, City Hall

Sept. 28, 2019 – Pillars of Peace Training

Oct 4, 2019 – Screening "When they see us"

Oct 5, 12, 2019 – Pillars of Peace Training

Oct 9, 2019 – Trip to Supreme Court

If you are interested in joining PCYC, please contact us at 215-796-5232 or email us at FDanielspcyc@aol.com.

Intake Hours:

Wednesday and Friday
10 am – 3pm

Court Office Hours:

Tuesday, Thursday and Friday
10am – 3pm



Strategic Partners

- Law Enforcement Training Institute-
- Imhotep Institute Charter High School
- Universal Institute Charter School
- Education Works
- Northwest Community Coalition for Youth
- Woodrow Wilson Middle School
- Philadelphia Barristers' Association
- Philadelphia District Attorney Office
- Philadelphia Police Department
- Philadelphia Dept of Human Services
- Good Shepherd Mediation
- Stoneleigh Foundation Fellows
- Mastery Charter School



PCYC Founder: Francine Daniels

PCYC Junior Executive Board

President: Allene Martin
President Elect: Derrick Cheeks
Vice President: Justin Walker
Vice President Elect: Jordan Walker
Treasurer: Alonzo Thomas
Secretary: Nailah Phillips
Appointed Member- Alvin Martin

(Installation of Newly appointed Office-Tentative November 2019)

"Eradicating the School to Prison pipeline one case, one school, one neighborhood, one police district, one city at a time....."



PHILADELPHIA COMMUNITY YOUTH COURT



**CHANGING THINKING !!
CHANGING BEHAVIOR !!**

**Philadelphia Community
Youth Court- PCYC**

**1415 Catherine Street
Philadelphia, PA 19146
215-796-5232**

ABOUT US



The Philadelphia Community Youth Court was founded in July 2012 and operates as a pilot program designed to help eradicate the school to prison pipeline. Youths are sanctioned by their peers for violating school discipline policies and minor infractions committed in the community.

Youths are trained in various roles such as judge, bailiff, juror, youth advocate and foreperson to deliver a restorative disposition utilizing full court room decorum.

Youth offender who participate in the program is held accountable for their actions and responsible for repairing the harm that they have caused. The restorative disposition includes training and service as a youth court member to pave the opportunity forward to another peer.

The restorative disposition may include the recommendation for behavioral health services at the individual or family level.

BENEFITS OF YOUTH COURTS

Youth Courts successfully serves as a pre-diversionary program in response to low level offenses with the goal of preventing future involvement in the juvenile justice and or the criminal justice system.

Youth Courts provides an opportunity for its participants to enhance public speaking, critical thinking, group decision making, writing, conflict resolution and interviewing skills.

Additionally, Youth Court functions to reduce recidivism by connecting youth and families to behavioral health services which are needed to ameliorate some of the motivating factors related to his/her actions.

We strive to develop a generation of youth who understand delinquent behavior as a public health crisis which requires systemic interventions to reduce the likelihood of a youth returning to the legal system and or going to prison.

PHILADELPHIA COMMUNITY YOUTH COURT



SCHOOL TO PRISON PIPELINE

Philadelphia Community Youth Court is a pilot program designed to help eradicate the school to prison pipeline. Our objective is to provide peer-based training and implement peer-based intervention for the development and implementation of school-based youth courts and citywide community-based youth courts.

Good afternoon all. My name is Tamir Gorham. I am a senior at the Academy @ Palumbo and a member of the Philadelphia community youth court. I am here to discuss the unfortunate facts about the school to prison pipeline. However, before I begin, I would like to truly thank everybody for being here today. Thank you, Chairman Kinsey, and thank you to the other distinguished members of the Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus for coming out here to hear us talk about the important work we do. And thank you to all our other esteemed guests for bearing witness to this moment.

The school to prison pipeline is the process through which students are pushed out of schools (typically public schools) and straight into prisons. The students most affected by the school to prison pipeline are minorities, struggling with a disability, or from low income families. Studies show that black students are three times more likely to fall prey to the school to prison pipeline in comparison to their peers. But what is the cause behind this phenomenon? According to thoughtco, a major reason the school to prison pipeline exists is due to zero tolerance policies in schools. These policies take issues that could be solved in various ways and blow them completely out of proportion. For instance, under the zero tolerance policy nail clippers, scissors, or even making a gun with your fingers could be considered a weapon. Aspirin isn't allowed because it's a drug. A small scuffle would be treated just as that of a full-blown fight. Even insubordination and disruptive behavior are listed as offenses under the zero-tolerance policy, and the most disturbing fact is that according to Vox, disorderly conduct is the number one reason students come into contact with law enforcement. Something as small and typical of teens like being rowdy can and has gotten students in unnecessary trouble. And although the students are not directly being arrested for the aforementioned offenses, it starts the

student down a slippery slope of trouble. Another study conducted by Vox states, "students who have been suspended or expelled are three times more likely to come into contact with the juvenile probation system the following year than one who wasn't." I have heard a myriad of stories about kids who got caught with marijuana. Those kids were then expelled. They dropped out and turned to the only things they ever knew- the only things they were ever exposed to- drug dealing. Soon, they were arrested due to their gang activity. Their lives forever ruined. These are real teenagers being arrested every day because the system turned a blind eye to the core problems. As I mentioned earlier, the students who fall prey to this system are poor, minorities, or are struggling with some disability. As such they've seen things no child should see. They've experienced things no child should experience. According to a study done by psychology today, it is these adverse childhood experiences that cause them to act the way they do. But instead of promoting conversation to get to the bottom of these core issues, Schools and the system just punishes them.

Things need to change. It's about time we stop sending children through this one-way pipe to detention centers. It's about time we talk with them and work with them to help them achieve their aspirations.

In summation, we have an epidemic in our society that, although has been taking a slight turn for the better, is still running rampant. The school to prison pipeline is a problem that truly needs to be rectified. The way to fix it might be as simple as more communication between adults and students that explain explicitly what they can and cannot do and the reasons behind the laws. The solution could also be in reviewing the strictness of the laws set and truly looking

to see if they're doing their intended purpose or if they're actively hurting students. I truly hope that soon we can make child arrests a rarity and stop the horrific school to prison pipeline.

Once again thank you to everybody who came and thank you for listening to my testimony. Have an amazing day.

Good Afternoon Chairman, Representatives of the Pennsylvania Black Caucus and esteemed guests. I am Heather Kodhelaj and I attend Central Highschool as a junior. I would like to thank everyone in this room for being here today to hear the testimonies from my wonderful peers. Right now, I would be in Chemistry class, however, the reason we have gathered here today goes beyond a class. This is about my peers. Today, you're not only hearing my voice but the voice of thousands behind me who can't be here today. You've heard from Tamir and Mia about the importance of slicing the school to prison pipeline and the core concepts of changing behavior in youth by changing their thinking. To change thinking in youth also means to change the thinking in adults. We are all human and we learn from our experiences, it doesn't matter how old or how young. Our experiences have the power to mold our decisions. Our brains are still very delicate and are still developing their core values and morals. It's hard to think of a time when you were kids yourself. I still can't remember when I didn't have a worry in the world or any expectations. It seems to be forgotten that everyone is different, and people need extra support. This is coming from the bottom of my heart; my peers are struggling. Whether I hear about it, see it firsthand, or experience it myself. It is still happening all around us. We forget the power we have when we all come together. Helping the younger generation is forming the future. Youth Courts are the first stones to bridge families, peers, and people together. Being in a youth court for 3 years has shaped me into who I am today. It benefits the respondents, members, and adults that get to witness this phenomenon. I truly believe change for the future happens here with the decisions we make right now. Youth Court changed my life and it continuously changed every person that walk in our courtroom. Think about the thousands behind me wanting their chance to share their story. And you can give them that opportunity through Youth Courts. Again, I would like to Thank you for lending your time and ears to this

cause that I hold very close to my heart. We can reform the world and leave it a better place than we found it together. Thank you.

Good afternoon Chairman, Representatives of the Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus, Board Members, and distinguished guests. My name is Mia Desheraud, I am an 8th grade student at Universal Institute Charter school and a founding member of the Universal Institute Charter School Youth Court. In our court, we try to help kids who have caused harm to their families, community, friends, and to themselves by changing their thinking in order to change their behavior. Our goal is to improve the lives of the youths and families who live in our community. We use restorative methods to get to the root of the problem. We offer sanctions that are specific to each respondent. The Respondent learns to think about consequences and how they affect others, before acting. Youth court gives youths a new chance to turn a new leaf and start focusing on their education. When youths are more focused on education, their grades improve and their chances of getting into the school they want will increase.

Youth court not only changes and helps the respondents but also the youth court members as well. Thanks to youth court, we learn skills that improve our stage presence, writing abilities, and understanding of the judicial system of today. We also get many great opportunities to meet professionals like you today. Sometimes they even show us what they do and offer internships.

To conclude, youth court is a life changing experience for the respondents, parent, and the members. The respondents get a chance to go down a good path. They can prove to everyone that they can change. Parents get to see their kids improving and moving forward with their lives in a positive way. They get to see how much they've grown mentally. As members, we are able to improve our community and have access to many great opportunities. As a member of youth court, I have experienced all the positive outcomes. I truly believe that having more youth courts can change many peoples lives. Thank you for your attention and taking the time to come here today.

Nailah Phillip

Youth Court Testimony

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen of the Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus ,

My name is Nailah Phillip. I am 16 years old and a junior at Central High School. I have been a part of youth court for 3 years, in which I serve as an active member, as well as the secretary for the executive team. Within my years of involvement, I've witnessed first-hand how beneficial and effective our program is. My experience with youth court has motivated me to strongly believe that the number of youth courts should be increased in Pennsylvania. Today I will explain our process to give you a better understanding of its significance and why we should expand our horizons.

When we are first presented with a case, we evaluate whether it is appropriate for youth court. That is to say, sometimes there are situations too mature or serious to be handled by adolescents. In making this decision, it is our main concern that the respondent receives the best help, which may mean leaving it up to adults. Once we accept a case, we then have an intake process. This includes talking to the respondent prior to the case, gathering more information about the individual and the situation. This is immensely important for the youth advocate, who is responsible for supporting the respondent by highlighting their positive attributes.

Furthermore, before a case, we also appoint the following roles to our members: the judge, essentially responsible for controlling the whole court; the bailiff, who not only helps maintain order, but presents all the facts of the case; the jury, or the group of members that question the respondent and the parent, coupled with creating the dispositions; and the youth advocate, as previously mentioned.

At the start of every hearing, the bailiff swears in all parties with the oath of confidentiality and the judge recites the courtroom decorum. This is a crucial step in which it ensures everyone will tell the truth and be respectful. Next, the bailiff provides all that facts of the case including

Nailah Phillip

Youth Court Testimony

the respondent's and victim's impact statements, and the violation of the offense under the community or school rules, as well as the PA consolidated statutes. The youth advocate then offers a statement appealing to the jury by including details such as the respondent's interests, aspirations, and how remorseful they are. Next, the jury questions the respondent. One key thing to remember is that we are a restorative court. So during questioning, our goal is to find out the reasoning behind the individual's actions considering other factors like their personal and school life, their character, mental state, or any problems going on around the incident. The jury also questions the parent to gain extra information and more insight. After questioning the youth advocate provides a closing statement. Finally, the jury creates the best dispositions that will help the respondent to repair the harm that has been caused, and simultaneously help them with any problems and serve as a learning experience. For example, one of our main sanctions are consecutive session at youth court. During the sessions we check up on the respondent, tracking their progress. They also learn the youth court process and participate in cases. In addition, youth court offers counseling and mentoring programs to assist with their mental health.

All things considered, how passionate and determined we are about helping our fellow peers, I feel that the rest of the state of Pennsylvania would greatly benefit from having more youth courts. After all, "there's nothing about youth without youth". Thank you!

Good afternoon Chairman and members of the Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus. My name is Allen Daniely. I am 14 years old and a 9th grade student of the Academy of Palumbo. Today I will be presenting a summary of a case submitted to the Philadelphia Community Youth Court on July 22, 2019 under Docket number PCYC- 231-100-121802-001. The Respondent was accused of retail theft, fraud or other wrongful appropriation of money and or property. As a result, a civil claim was filed against the parent who was held liable for the cost of the merchandise. The parent referred the case to Youth Court. The Respondents statement of fact is summarized as follows: I went to Century 21 after work with a few friends to purchase a pack of Polo t-shirts. I purchased my shirts and so did everyone else except one of my friends didn't have any money. He asked me if he could put it in my bookbag. I knew he didn't pay for them, but me trying to be a good friend, I let him put the shirts in my bag. When we were on our way out the door, they checked my bag and found the shirts and held me until my Mother Came to pick me up. During the hearing the respondent was humble, reflective and very remorseful for their actions. The Respondent realized that he needs to make better decisions and be more selective when choosing his friends. When the jury went into deliberation, we came up with ways to help the respondent restore the harm he had caused. They included the following:

1. Serving on the Philadelphia Community Youth Court for 8 consecutive sessions.
2. Writing an essay on negative behavior and how it impacts the future of youth
3. A letter of apology to Century 21 and to Mom
4. Keeping a feelings journal
5. Restitution and Mentoring

repair the harm that was caused, the Respondent could be in a different situation that could potentially ruin his future. To conclude no one is perfect, we all make mistakes and the

important part about mistakes is by learning from them without judgement or punishment and that is our job one case at a time.



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Mission and Vision Statement:

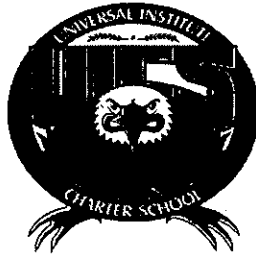
The mission of the Universal Institute Charter School is to provide a school to career academic program that emphasizes self-sufficiency, civic responsibility and problem solving through mathematics, language arts and the sciences. The educational program utilizes community resources within the school's immediate neighborhood through a variety of before, during, and after school partnerships with families, businesses, social agencies, civic groups and community organizations to enhance the academic program and to support students and their families.

"Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." ~
James Baldwin

Greetings to the Chairman, Black Legislative Caucus members, stakeholders and guests, my name is Jeffrey L. Williams and I am the Principal of Universal Institute Charter School. Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to talk about juvenile justice reform and the success we have had in this area with the use of the Philadelphia Community Youth Court founded by Francine Daniels affectionally referred to here as "Mama." "Judge", the or the "Lady in the Court Room." I have used the services of the Philadelphia Community Youth Court (PCYC) for my students and families since its inception in 2012 as an innovative way to, "change one's thinking, thus changing one's behavior," as the PCYC motto states. PCYC is commitment to combat the school to prison pipeline using a restorative practice model.

I vividly recall the first time I used PCYC while as the principal of a Philadelphia Charter School in 2012. During a random search, one of the school's hallmark scholars was in the possession of a knife. Face with the option of using the existing School's Code of Conduct which would have resulted in expulsion and possibly a criminal record I sought out PCYC. During the court hearing it was revealed that the scholar was suffering from post-trauma stress disorder (PTSD) from a home robbery that had taken place weeks earlier. The scholar being the oldest sibling in the house led by a single mother discussed how he slept with the knife every night to protect his family in the evident that another robbery occurred. The court case also revealed that he was extremely active in his house of worship, and was a proficient musician on the saxophone. The restorative stanchions in this case included professional support for his PTSD, volunteering at a local nursing home by providing music on his saxophone, journaling. The scholar was able to graduate with no long term disciplinary or criminal record. The scholar continued to volunteer work at the senior center long after his required sanction was completed. ***"These sanctions are not to harm you but are meant to repair the harm you have cause."***

In 2015 I became the Principal of Universal Institute Charter School. Immediately I began to utilizing the services of PCYC to confront the disciplinary challenges in a restorative way. It was evident that in order to make the significant change in discipline I desired a School Based Youth



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Mission and Vision Statement:

The mission of the Universal Institute Charter School is to provide a school to career academic program that emphasizes self-sufficiency, civic responsibility and problem solving through mathematics, language arts and the sciences. The educational program utilizes community resources within the school's immediate neighborhood through a variety of before, during, and after school partnerships with families, businesses, social agencies, civic groups and community organizations to enhance the academic program and to support students and their families.

Court would be required. At the beginning of the 2017-2018 School Year, UICS opened its first School-Based Youth Court. In October of 2019, UICS had a ribbon cutting ceremony of our newly constructed Youth Court and celebrate the merging of our School Based Court with the Community Based court.

PowerPoint presentation

"Change will not come if we wait for some other person or if we wait for some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek." ~ Barak Obama

Good Afternoon!

My name is Tyrone Highsmith and I am the Dean of Students here at Universal Institute Charter School. First, let me say thank you for allowing me to speak at this auspicious occasion, where we will, at last, get the opportunity to showcase the work that is being done to carve our children and youth out of the school-to-prison pipeline.

As the Dean of Students at UICS, for the past 2 years, we have been intentional in our goal to decrease out-of-school suspensions and expulsion. Each year, we have seen significant improvement in the way we address discipline, as we have been shifting the paradigm from punitive responses to 100% restorative practice.

Since we have welcomed the Philadelphia Community Youth Court into our school, we have had the opportunity to address matters that include cyber and other bullying, mutual fighting, the inappropriate use of electronic devices, and reckless endangerment, and even issues that were referred directly from the community.

Without a doubt, the use of the Philadelphia Community Youth Court in our school has changes the flow of energy in our school and community at large. In addition, as our youth court members and participants become exposed to the judicial system, through the Community Youth Court, their interest in doing good and taking their place in the community is also becoming more intentional.

Our work is not just about addressing challenges; it has also been about developing respectful relationships with our youth, teaching appropriate social behavior, restoring harm that was caused to self, others and the community, building partnerships with parents, determining suitable intervention, and most of all, helping our youth to identify strategies to confront and address challenges on their own.

We are grateful for the work that Francine Daniels is doing, not only at UICS, but also throughout the entire city of Philadelphia. She is truly leading the charge to save our youth and prepare them to lead this generation forward. And we also owe a debt of gratitude to the fine principal of this institution, principal Jeffrey Williams, for having the vision and foresight to bring this program to UICS as a viable intervention. We look forward to continued growth and success; as we endeavor to position our school to be the beacon of light and hope for this community.

Greetings Chairman, Representatives of the Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus, Board Members of UICS and distinguished guests. I am Francine Daniels, CEO and Founder of the Philadelphia Community Youth Court. I want to first thank everyone for being here today. I like to give a special thanks to Principal Williams, Board Members, faculty and staff for their diligent support of the Philadelphia Community Youth Court. It is both an honor and a pleasure to be before you today. We are especially thankful that the voices of our youth could be heard.

I began this journey to eradicate the school to prison pipeline in 2012 when I became certified by the Minor Judiciary Education Board of the Supreme Court as a Prospective Arraignment Court Magistrate. At the urging of my Mentor, the late Edgar Howard I went to visit Arraignment Court to introduce myself to the Magistrates and observe some preliminary arraignments hearings. I was very disheartened at the disparity of people of color compared to their counterparts. Out of 60+ cases I observed, 41 cases were people of color and almost all of them appeared to be in there late 20's and younger. I remember thinking.... "What happened to them". "How do we interrupt this cycle".

I immediately began researching diversion programs for youth and stumbled across youth courts. I reached out to the schools and communities in neighboring cities that housed or supported youth courts. It was a community-based youth court in the District of Columbia that grabbed my attention. It was directed by a woman by the name of Carolyn Dallas. Mrs. Dallas successfully directed the youth courts in the District of Columbia and utilizing the resources within her district, she implemented programming that resulted in considerable savings to the District of Columbia. When I contacted Carolyn Dallas, it was very apparent that her passion for youth courts was contagious. She invited me to train with her. She became my mentor and one of my biggest supporters.

And from that training, I developed a customized system to train students based on the behavioral challenges of youth that were prevalent in the city of Philadelphia. We were very intentional. We were committed to producing a model that was truly restorative, sustainable, served with integrity and prioritized the needs of our youth. We were deliberate in partnering with entities that modeled the same mantra. We put the call out to the youth in the city of Philadelphia and began training.

Armed with prayer and faith that if we build it, they will come, in October 2013, we piloted our first youth court in Philadelphia and began servicing our community through the pilot. In October 2013, with the support of State Representative Isabella Fitzgerald, we opened the doors of our first Community Youth Court.

Our youth court members must successfully complete a rigorous training that is rooted in the in the principals of Restorative Justice. They are also certified in Mental Health First Aid. Currently, our youth court members receive a small stipend for training through an Incentive Initiative offered by the Philadelphia Youth Network. Upon successful completion of training, youth court members receive a certificate of completion and are eligible to serve on the Junior Executive Board. After two years of service, youth court members receive a Citation for service from the City Council of Philadelphia.

With the tools that are provided to them, our youth court members do an extraordinary job making their peers comfortable to open- up and share the reason for their behavior. But the work does not end there. In fact, this is where the work really begins. Before we can change the behavior, we must change the thinking by unpacking the root cause of the behavior, applying resources when necessary and restoring those that have been harmed by the behavior.

Along the way, we garnered a great deal of support and a host of strategic partners. Today we stand strong with over 100 youth court members trained in our brand of Youth Court and 41 students on a waiting list to be trained. Most recently, we entered into a strategic partnership with long- time supporter, Former Deputy Police Commissioner Kevin Bethel, Philadelphia Police Department, and the Philadelphia School District to serve as the youth court for the city of Philadelphia. In October we will also be hearing cases in a dedicated courtroom in family court.

What we commonly see in our courtroom is behavior that is affected by conditions ranging from normal adolescent behavior, anger, abuse, poverty, social and emotional neglect, and trauma related to adverse childhood experiences. Our job is to humanize, heal and restore.

Our Criminal Justice System offers solutions that perpetuates a cycle of recidivism. In the words of Adam Foss, "ARREST, NEW FOSTER HOME, NEW SCHOOL, RUN AWAY, SUSPENSION, EXPULSION, ARREST, ADULT JUSTICE SYSTEM, ADULT JAIL, REPEAT."

We clearly understand the relationships between crime and poverty,

We clearly understand the relationship between crime and trauma.

We clearly understand the relationship between crime and addiction.

We clearly understand that when a child witnesses abuse or is a product of abuse, violence becomes their new social and emotional norm.

The question, why this behavior is manifesting itself has been answered. The new question is what reforms in our Criminal Justice System can be implemented? How quickly and safely can they be implemented to impact those who are suffering the most?

While we see some forward motion in the criminal justice reform, the criminal justice system has resisted being adaptable to current social and emotional conditions of people in our communities. They lean to the more traditional ways of doing things. While tradition has its place, the current conditions in our communities demand new innovative, effective measures to not only eliminate crime but to heal communities.

The Philadelphia Community Youth Court is dedicated to doing that one case at a time. While I have your time and attention, I ask this honorable body to increase your support for Criminal Justice Reform. Implement legislation that in innovative ways that humanize and heal communities and reduce recidivism. Our children are counting on us.

Thank you for your attention and the opportunity to be before you today. Thank You Chairman.



COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
PENNSYLVANIA COMMISSION ON CRIME AND DELINQUENCY

Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus and Democratic Policy Committee

School / Community Youth Court

September 10, 2018

Good Morning, Chairman Kinsey, Chairman Sturla and members of the committee. I want to thank you for your interest in the Youth Court programs, and for inviting me to provide input from the perspective of my office.

The Office of Safe Schools Advocate is physically housed within the School District of Philadelphia central administration building. Under my leadership OSSA is responsible for advocating for families and individuals impacted by school violence. This victim advocacy often has us look at overall school climate and the different programs schools implement in order to maintain a safe learning environment and Youth Court is one of those programs.

School Youth Courts have been in existence for decades. They serve as a restorative alternative to traditional, often exclusionary and disparate school discipline. Research suggests that punitive approaches to discipline sometimes result in causing more harm and can have devastating consequences to the student and society. The School District of Philadelphia and many other districts across the state have been re-orienting their school discipline process from being zero-tolerance and strictly punitive, to being more restorative, in order to help "derail" the "School to Prison Pipeline". Youth Court is one example of the type of restorative practices that are being used.

I first became familiar with the concept of School-based Youth Court programs in Philadelphia and the surrounding area through contact with the Pennsylvania Bar Association and the US Attorney's office in 2011. Later I had the privilege of speaking with students involved in Youth Courts at Universal Charter School. The students that I spoke with were articulate and extremely passionate about the opportunity to serve their school communities while helping their peers, truly a quality that must be reinforced and replicated. I learned that one of the unique elements of Youth Court programs is that all of the participants, not just the offender, derive some benefits from participating.

Studies show that youth brains aren't fully developed which can contribute to bad choices. Diversionary programs like Youth Court gives schools an additional tool rather than more severe and punitive courses of action. They can help youth make better choices and could ultimately help reduce contact with the juvenile and criminal justice systems, resulting in reduced corrections costs for Pennsylvania.

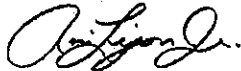
In my role, I frequently interact with students after they have made a poor decision. I find that in many cases they were unaware of the underlying dysfunctional behavior that got them into trouble or they simply had not given thought to their behavior before the incident. Fortunately, Youth Court has the ability to transform a mistake into an educational experience. It provides a safe environment where thoughtful dialog guided by peers can help them gain more insight into the dysfunctional behavior that got them into trouble hopefully resulting in better decision making in the future.

Furthermore, these programs train students to conduct the process and fill all of the roles that are seen in a traditional court setting such as youth advocate, judge and the jury. Most programs focus on uncovering the facts, assessing the harm and exploring ways to fix the situation, along with taking responsibility for the behavior. Disciplined students and participants alike reflect on the "buy in" that was needed for Youth Court, resulting in a feeling of ownership and involvement in the culture and climate of their school. Participants improve skills in public speaking, solving problems and leadership. These are real life skills we want our educational system to provide. Students will use the skills they develop for the rest of their lives.

OSSA views the Youth Court programs as a viable school discipline alternative for low level infractions that has the ability to have a positive impact on both the young people involved and overall school climate. A thoughtfully set up Youth Court, using some students who may be on the verge of disruptive or risky behavior to run the program, can prevent future disruptive acts and potential harm to victims.

I encourage you to provide any assistance available to support the programs both in the School District and across the Commonwealth.

Sincerely,



Roi A. Ligon Jr.
Safe Schools Advocate