

Legislation Text

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Authorizing City Council's Committee on Public Safety to conduct hearings on how Youth Courts could reduce juvenile recidivism rates, violence in schools, bullying and in conclusion have an effect on the expenses of incarceration by engaging and empowering previously disconnected youth in a participatory and democratic system.

WHEREAS, Youth court is far less expensive than formal court proceedings and detention, reduces racial disparity and the school-to-prison pipeline, and achieves lower recidivism rates than current practices; and

WHEREAS, Youth courts are alternative school or juvenile justice disciplinary systems where students are trained to hold disciplinary hearings, and deliberate to form an appropriate disposition for student offenders. Agencies operating and administering youth court programs include juvenile courts, juvenile probation departments, law enforcement, private nonprofit organizations, and schools; and

WHEREAS, First arrests have devastating consequences for youth. Youth arrested in high school almost double their odds of not completing high school. For youth who actually go to court, school dropout rates increase by four hundred percent; and

WHEREAS, When defendants successfully complete a youth court program, 63% of youth courts dismiss the charges, and 27% immediately expunge the defendant's record. Further, according to an Urban Institute evaluation of youth court programs, the six-month recidivism figures among programs range from 6%-9%, greatly improving public safety; and

WHEREAS, FBI statistics found that over a million and a half juveniles are charged with crime annually. According to the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund's report entitled "Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline," in the year 2000, over three million students in the United States were suspended and over 97,000 students were expelled. Many youth are pushed out of school by formulaic and harsh disciplinary policies and are more likely to turn to crime; and

WHEREAS, The objective of Pennsylvania's juvenile justice code is restorative justice, but overcrowded juvenile justice dockets are not always conducive to the full application of those principles; and

WHEREAS, Youth courts are structured to provide positive alternative sanctions for first-time offenders by providing a peer-driven sentencing mechanism that allows young people to take responsibility, to be held accountable, and to make restitution; and

WHEREAS, Youth courts operate in 49 states and the District of Columbia with over 1,050 programs, of which only 15 are in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. As the largest state without a robust youth court system, Pennsylvania is well positioned to take advantage of the best practices being used in existing youth courts and those in other states; and

WHEREAS, Youth courts are not just an alternative program for juvenile justice, but also an excellent teaching instrument for law curriculum and civics. Youth trained by legal professionals and teachers can use positive

peer pressure and restorative justice to reduce errant behavior within their own communities. In the process, students acquire valuable cognitive, coping, socialization, and civic engagement skills. Many believe that youth violence and problems such as flash mobs are caused by a lack of adequate after-school programming for youth, and that youth courts are instrumental in engaging youth and curbing unsupervised free time; and

WHEREAS, Youth court programs strive to nurture in youth a respect for the rule of law, help develop positive citizenship attitudes, encourage civic engagement, and promote educational success through a diversity of service learning opportunities, strategies and activities; now therefore,

RESOLVED, BY THE COUCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, That it hereby authorizes City Council's Committee on Public Safety to conduct hearings on how Youth Courts could reduce juvenile recidivism rates, violence in schools, bullying and in conclusion have an effect on the expenses of incarceration by engaging and empowering previously disconnected youth in a participatory and democratic system.