



General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
Joint State Government Commission
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Short Summary in response to Senate Resolution 32 of 2017
**YOUTH COURTS: Report of the Advisory Committee on the Use and Effect of Youth Courts
in Pennsylvania's Education and Juvenile Justice Systems.**

Youth courts (also called teen, peer, and student courts) are diversion programs in which youth are sentenced by their peers for minor crimes, offenses, and/or violations. These programs offer communities an opportunity to provide immediate consequences for primarily first-time youthful offenders, and are intended to offer an alternative to the traditional juvenile justice system and school disciplinary proceedings as well as a means of promoting restorative justice. While empirical evidence is scarce, anecdotal support seems to suggest that youth courts are a promising pathway, which in addition to diverting youth from further contact with the juvenile court, could lead to more intangible benefits such as improved student-teacher relationships, civic engagement, and the development of public speaking, problem-solving, and leadership skills.

Acknowledging the potential benefit of promoting school-based youth courts in Pennsylvania, the Senate adopted Senate Resolution 32, P.N. 832 (2017), directing the Joint State Government Commission to organize an advisory committee comprised of education experts, school administrators and teachers, former youth court participants, juvenile court and law enforcement representatives, academicians and knowledgeable laypersons to conduct a study of youth courts in Pennsylvania's juvenile justice and education systems, proposals and policies of other states, best practices, and other resources on the topic. The final report containing recommendations to increase availability of youth courts, an analysis of the costs and benefits of implementing youth courts and other issues relating to youth restorative justice programs.

Recommendations in the report include:

- A continuum of youth court programs for adolescents should be encouraged.
- The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), through the Office for Safe Schools, should provide guidance and support to schools wishing to adopt a youth court program.
- PDE's guidance should include best practices identified in this report.
- Youth courts should be considered both a restorative justice strategy and a type of diversionary program that qualifies for both Commonwealth-funded Safe School Targeted Grants and School Safety and Security Grants.
- School memoranda of understanding with local law enforcement should be reviewed and revised as appropriate to identify circumstances in which referrals of juvenile offenses may be diverted to youth courts.
- Yearly reports by schools with youth courts should be provided to PDE. An evaluation of this data should occur after 3 years, coordinated by PDE, the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency and the Juvenile Court Judge's Commission.
- Student participant surveys should be conducted pre- and post- each youth court session. This includes both students serving as members of the court and jury as well as respondents.
- Opportunities for training and education in youth courts should be encouraged: institutions of higher education could develop curricula related to training and operation of student youth courts, as well as internships and volunteer opportunities within local schools; and educators, principals, and administrators could be offered training as a continuing education option. Pro bono opportunities could be offered to the county bench and bar to provide the students with "real world" mentoring experiences.

The full report is available on our website, <http://jsg.legis.state.pa.us/>