



Student Outcomes and Perspectives on Youth Court in the School District of Philadelphia

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Overview of School-based Youth Court

School-based Youth Court (YC) is a student-run “court,” with students taking on roles of youth advocate, judge, bailiff, foreperson, and jury.¹ It is a restorative justice program that helps students to problem-solve and mediate conflicts instead of relying on traditional forms of punishment. The goal of YC is to support a student in repairing the harm that their actions have caused.² The School District of Philadelphia (referred to as SDP or the District) started implementing school-based YC in the 2017-18 school year. As of the 2023-24 school year, 16 schools are implementing a District-supported YC.

In SDP’s Youth Court, a student jury asks questions of the student “respondent” who has been referred to YC (Box 1). The program follows a script in order to create a list of restorative tasks the respondent is asked to complete (Box 2). The tasks, called “dispositions,” might include an apology or community service, and are intended to help the student repair harm and become reintegrated into the school community.³

The YC jury typically meets during a weekly elective course. Implementation varies slightly by school, and each YC class uses their time differently. When there is no case to discuss, students may use the time to follow up with respondents. Some of the YC classes learn about different aspects of the law and court from a law class curriculum, and others use the class time to support various school initiatives.

¹ Youth Court may also sometimes be referred to as Teen Court. However, Teen Courts are typically community-based and tied into the juvenile justice system. The current brief reflects courts that are only based in school and not tied to the juvenile justice system.

² Smokowski, P. R., Evans, C. B. R., Rose, R., & Bacallao, M. (2020). A Group Randomized Trial of School-Based Teen Courts to Address the School to Prison Pipeline, Reduce Aggression and Violence, and Enhance School Safety in Middle and High School Students. *Journal of School Violence*, 19(4), 566–578.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2020.1780133>

³ Butts, J. A., & Buck, J. (2000). Youth Courts: A focus on research. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Retrieved from <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/library/publications/teen-courts-focus-research>.

Many offenses referred to YC (e.g., fighting, vandalism, possession and/or use of tobacco or electronic smoking devices) may have been punished with suspension traditionally. One potential benefit of YC is a decrease in suspensions at schools implementing this alternative. Finding alternatives to suspension is important, as research shows that suspensions can have negative consequences for students, such as low academic achievement, increased chances of dropping out of school, trouble with the legal system, and mental health issues.⁴

YC may also benefit the other student participants. While research on school-based YC is scarce, beneficial outcomes to YC participants may include enhanced interpersonal skills, empathy, and a sense of responsibility,⁵ as well as development of maturity, self-confidence, and problem-solving skills.⁶

Box 1. Example Questions Asked by the Jury

The nature of YC is restorative rather than punitive, and juries might ask respondents the following questions as part of the restorative process:

Did you ask anyone to help you before the situation got worse?

Did you try anything to prevent this from happening?

What would you do if this situation happened again?

Who do you think you harmed?

How could you avoid this situation in the future?

What would your advice be to someone if they did the same thing you did?

⁴ The Civil Rights Project, Advancement Project (2000). *Opportunities Suspended: The Devastating Consequences of Zero Tolerance and School Discipline*. Boston, MA: Harvard University. <https://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/school-discipline/opportunities-suspended-the-devastating-consequences-of-zero-tolerance-and-school-discipline-policies>

⁵ Norton, M., Gold, E., & Peralta, R. (2013). *Youth Courts and Their Educational Value: An Examination of Youth Courts in Chester, Pennsylvania*. Philadelphia: Research For Action. <https://www.researchforaction.org/research-resources/youth-courts-and-their-educational-value-an-examination-of-youth-courts-in-chester-pennsylvania/>

⁶ Hirschinger-Blank, N., Simons, L., Volz, G. L., Thompson, R., Finely, L., & Cleary, J. (2009). A Pilot Assessment of a School-Based Youth Court in a Resource-Poor African-American Urban School District: Lessons Learned From Youth Court Volunteers. *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*, 60(2), 31–47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1755-6988.2009.01025.x>

Box 2. Examples of Possible Dispositions

Possible dispositions or tasks that respondents may be asked to complete as an outcome of their YC experience might include the following:

Community service	Help teachers, office, or lunch staff
Written apology	Student mentor
Verbal apology	YC Jury Duty
Feelings journal	Essay
Parent conference	Behavior contract
Reflection packet	Seat change

Research Questions

While much attention in research has been paid to identifying alternatives to suspension, with promising results from studies supporting restorative practices in schools,⁷ less attention has been paid specifically to school-based YC. Thus, little research exists on the benefits and drawbacks of using YC as an alternative to punitive discipline. The objective of this current brief is to 1) explore descriptive suspension outcomes of three District schools currently implementing YC, and 2) identify possible benefits and challenges of YC as described by the experiences of the YC student jurors. While outside the scope of this brief, future research will focus on the experiences of students referred to YC.

The current study explores the following research questions:

1. Is there a relationship between schools implementing a YC and the rate of suspensions?
2. What are the perceptions of YC among those who participate in the student jury? Specifically, what do student jurors say are the benefits or positive outcomes of YC participation for themselves and their schools? What do they like about YC? Are there things they would change about YC?

⁷ Velez, G.M., Hahn, M., Recchia, H.E., & Wainryb, C. (2020). Rethinking Responses to Youth Rebellion: Recent Growth and Development of Restorative Practices in Schools. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 35, 36-40. https://epublications.marquette.edu/edu_fac/545/

Data Sources and Methods

District Administrative Records

Administrative records were used to examine the percentage of students who had out-of-school suspensions at schools that participated in YC compared to schools that did not have YC. Records were also provided by the District's YC Specialist in order to provide context about the types of cases specific schools refer to YC. Data from 2020-21 was not included because students did not attend school in person during that year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

District-level results were organized into three groups. "YC Cohort 1" represents the eight schools (three high schools, three middle schools, two K-8 schools) that first implemented a YC program in the 2017-18 school year. "YC Cohort 2" represents eight additional schools (seven high schools, one K-8) that implemented a YC program in the 2018-19 school year. "Rest of District" represents students enrolled in schools that do not have a YC program (excluding K-2 and K-5 schools). Descriptive results for the percentage of students who had out-of-school suspensions are tracked across six academic school years. Descriptive comparisons are made between the YC Cohorts and the rest of the District. Additionally, the percentage of students who had out-of-school suspensions at three schools where we held student focus groups is reported.

Focus Groups

Student focus groups were conducted to answer the second research question. There were 32 students who participated in focus groups across three schools (referred to in this brief as "Middle School 1," "Middle School 2," and "High School"). The District's YC Specialist provided recommendations of schools that have been implementing YC with fidelity for a number of years. While future research is currently in development to explore the YC experiences of respondents, student participants for this particular study were the student jurors, most having been part of the YC for one school year.

The focus group protocol was developed with input from the District's Youth Court Specialist. The District's Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) invited students to participate and obtained student assent and parent consent. Groups were facilitated by two ORE researchers during times when YC met. Students were asked about their YC experience, including what they liked about YC, any benefits they perceived, and anything they would change about YC. Groups were recorded and transcribed by Syncscript. The researchers analyzed and coded the data for emergent themes using Dedoose qualitative analysis software.

What We Found

Youth Court Cases by School

Incidents referred to YC varied by school.

To provide context around the types of YC cases at each of the schools where student focus groups were held, we present the number and types of incidents at each school, and an indication of which were referred to YC.⁸ Each school decides which types of cases are referred to YC (Tables 1 and 2).

Of the total recorded incidents at Middle School 1, 43 (7% of the total incidents) were referred to youth court as cases (representing 58 cases).⁹ The most frequent YC case violation was simple assault (n=11). At Middle School 2, there were nine incidents referred to youth court (18% of the total incidents). The most frequent violation in these cases was bullying/cyberbullying (n=3).

At High School, 163 incidents were referred to youth court (representing 169 cases and 79% of the total incidents). The violation most frequently represented in YC cases here were related to profane or obscene language or gestures (n=36).

Middle School 2 tended to use YC for less serious offenses, while Middle School 1 and High School appear to have had a more proportional distribution of incident type to YC cases.

Table 1. High School had the highest percentage of incidents referred to Youth Court.

	2022-23 Student Enrollment	# of Incidents	% of Incidents Sent to Youth Court	Most Frequent Violation Represented in Youth Court
Middle School 1	445	621	7%	Simple assault
Middle School 2	209	50	18%	Bullying/cyberbullying
High School	743	218	79%	Profane/obscene language or gestures

⁸ For the purposes of this brief, 'incidents' refers to violations of the District's Code of Conduct or other school rules.

⁹ Incidents can have multiple violations that involve more than one student. For example, an incident may include both simple assault and profane or obscene language or gestures with two students. Such situations can lead to more than one case.

Table 2. Schools refer various types of cases to Youth Court.

Serious Incidences/Code of Conduct/Rule Violation	Middle School 1				Middle School 2				High School			
	Incidents		YC Cases		Incidents		YC Cases		Incidents		YC Cases	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Simple assault	142	25%	11	27%	15	31%	-	-	5	2%	1	1%
Mutual fighting	102	18%	7	17%	4	8%	1	11%	28	13%	20	12%
Profane or obscene language or gestures	52	9%	6	15%	5	10%	1	11%	39	18%	36	21%
Reckless endangerment	73	13%	8	20%	2	4%	-	-	12	6%	6	4%
Bullying/cyberbullying	23	4%	3	7%	5	10%	3	33%	5	2%	6	4%
Possession and/or use of tobacco or electronic smoking devices	6	1%	-	-	2	4%	-	-	21	10%	18	11%
Threats/intimidation	-	-	-	-	3	6%	-	-	15	7%	4	2%
Unauthorized entry into school property	16	3%	1	2%	-	-	-	-	19	9%	19	11%
Classroom managed behavior	-	-	-	-	2	4%	2	22%	18	8%	17	10%
Harassment	34	6%	3	7%	1	2%	-	-	5	2%	5	3%
Inappropriate touch/exposure	9	2%	-	-	1	2%	-	-	12	6%	11	7%
Instigation and/or participation in a group assault	25	4%	-	-	2	4%	-	-	1	<1%	-	-
Extortion (must be by use of threatened force)	49	8%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Inappropriate use an electronic device	18	3%	1	2%	1	2%	-	-	5	2%	3	2%
Cutting	-	-	-	-	2	4%	1	11%	11	5%	11	7%
Destruction of property (totaling \$100 or more)	23	4%	2	5%	1	2%	-	-	2	1%	1	1%
Possession and/or use of alcohol and/or drugs	-	-	-	-	3	6%	-	-	1	<1%	1	1%
Destruction of property (totaling less than \$100)	18	3%	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	1%	1	1%
Theft (less than \$100)	5	1%	1	2%	-	-	-	-	2	1%	2	1%
Mutual group fight	5	1%	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	1%	1	1%
Group conflict	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	2%	5	3%
Theft (more than \$100)	3	1%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Causing serious bodily injury	3	1%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Title IX sexual harassment	3	1%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sexual misconduct	3	1%	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Possession of a weapon	4	1%	-	-	1	2%	-	-	4	2%	-	-
Forgery	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	<1%	1	1%
Cheating	2	0%	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	<1%	1	1%
Threatening mass violence	1	<1%	-	-	-	-	1	11%	-	-	-	-
Use of incendiary devices and/ or explosives	2	<1%	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	<1%	-	-
Possession of an animal	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	<1%	1	1%

Source: Data provided by the Youth Court Specialist in the District's Office of Climate and Culture.

Suspensions

Implementation of YC may be a contributing factor to a decrease in suspensions.

Overall, there was a downward trend in out-of-school suspensions throughout the District (Figure 1) from 2017-18 to 2022-23. In the 2017-18 school year, both YC Cohorts (schools that started implementing YC in 2018-19 and 2019-20) had higher rates of suspensions compared to the rest of the District. The suspension rate for YC Cohort 1 was nearly 6 percentage points higher than schools with no YC in 2017-18, and the rate for YC Cohort 2 was nearly 9 points higher than non-YC schools. From 2017-18 to 2022-23, Cohort 2 experienced the greatest decrease (7 percentage points) in the student suspension rate, compared to Cohort 1 (2.2 points) and the other District schools (2 points) (Table 3).

Table 3. Cohort 2 had the greatest change in student suspensions from 2017-18 to 2022-23.

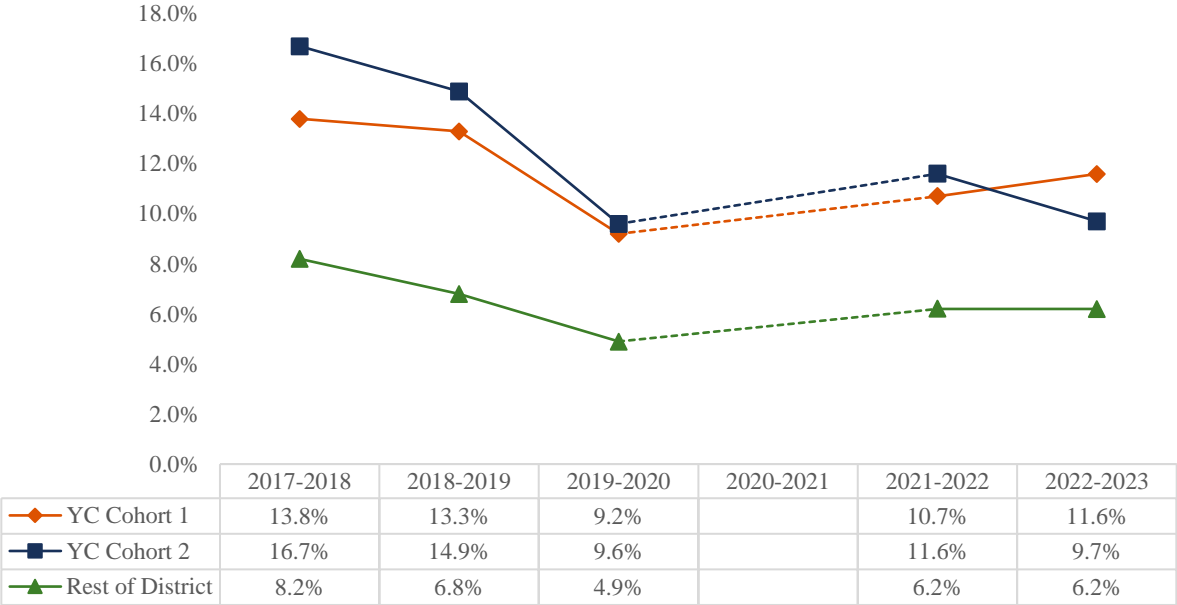
	YC Implementation Start Year	School Types	%-Point Change in Student Suspension Rate (2017-18 to 2022-23)
Cohort 1	2018-19	3 high schools 3 middle schools 2 K-8	- 2.2
Cohort 2	2019-20	7 high schools 1 K-8	- 7.0
District	NA	37 high schools 6 middle-high schools 11 middle schools 100 elementary-middle schools 2 elementary-middle-high	- 2.0

Note: Elementary School (K-2 and K-5) data is not included. 2020-21 data is not included due to the COVID-19 pandemic. 'NA' indicates schools without a YC.

There was a notable drop in the number of suspensions in the District between the 2018-19 and 2019-20 school year. Some of this is likely due to the transition to online learning for the 2020-21 school year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, these drops were much greater in the schools with YC (Figure 1). In the eight YC Cohort 1 schools (schools that started implementing in 2018-19), the percentage of students with suspensions dropped by 4.1 points, and the drop for the eight Cohort 2 schools (schools that started implementing in 2019-20) was 5.3 percentage points. The decline for the schools without YC was 1.9 percentage points, but note that these schools started from a lower student suspension rate, thus giving the rate less room to decrease. We believe that while the transition to online learning inflated the reduction in suspensions for YC schools, the differences are large enough that not all of it may be attributed to these factors.

In recent school years, there has been a slight increase in the percentage of students with suspensions in the District as a whole. However, in the YC Cohort 2 group, there was actually a decline of 1.9 percentage points between the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school year (Figure 1). It is possible that YC may be a contributing factor to this reduction by providing a restorative practice option to schools.

Figure 1. Both YC Cohorts and non-YC District schools experienced a decrease in the percentage of students with an Out-of-School Suspension.

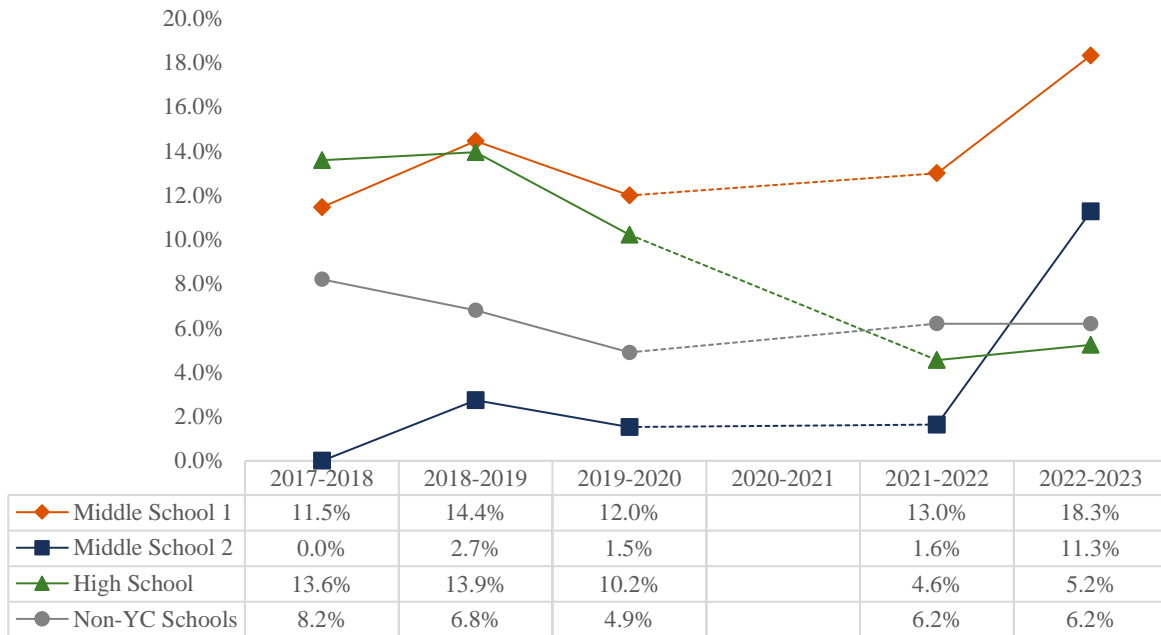


Source: Climate Matters Qlik Viz App

Note: Elementary Schools Data is not included. 2020-2021 Data is not included due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Looking at the three schools where student focus groups took place, between 2017-18 and 2022-23 both Middle School 1 and Middle School 2 experienced increases in the percentage of students with suspensions, while High School experienced a decrease (Figure 2). This could indicate that YC may contribute to a decrease in suspensions, as High School referred a much larger percentage of cases to YC compared to the other two schools. As noted earlier, Cohort 2 experienced a greater reduction in suspensions than Cohort 1. Cohort 2 also had a greater number of high schools.

Figure 2. At the three focus group schools, the greatest decline in percentage of students with suspensions was at the high school level.



Source: Climate Matters Qlik Viz App

Note: Elementary Schools Data is not included. 2020-2021 Data is not included due to the pandemic.

Students’ Perception of Youth Court

Students generally has positive feelings about YC.

Overall, students’ perceptions of Youth Court were very positive, with most students indicating that participating in YC benefitted themselves and others. Additionally, students believed that school climate as a whole was improved by reducing suspensions for what were perceived to be minor infractions, and by improving conflict resolution, empathy, and understanding among students and school staff.

Students described developing skills through YC like leadership, communication, and student voice.

Participants described improvements in their own communication skills, such as interacting and negotiating with others, including school leadership. For example, one student said, “[YC] helps me be more comfortable with talking in larger groups.” Participants also cited having more confidence interacting with teachers, administrators, and large groups. A student noted that, “normally, around the administrative team, like principals and all of them, I would be normally afraid to speak to them, talk to them about what’s happening and stuff. But now it’s more comfortable.” Other students described feeling that they have “matured” through their YC experience, and that students are given a voice through YC, saying, “I think it’s amazing how youth court allows for us, the students, to have a voice in situations.” Another stated, “Because most schools, they don’t have a student point of view

from most stuff, they just do what they want to do.” Another student expressed, “I like about youth court is at the end of it, everybody really – they come together in a way. I don’t know how to really explain it, but they come together and we really just have a good conversation even though it’s about a student doing what they’re not supposed to be doing. But we still have a good conversation.”

Students expressed development of empathy and reflection through YC.

Participants also spoke about how their experiences with YC helped them to develop more empathy. One student said that by participating, “*You get a deeper understanding of the emotions others are feeling.*” Another shared,

[YC] teaches you how to become more in touch with empathy and people’s feelings, because if you get the type of person who comes into youth court and actually explains how they felt in the situation, it can teach you to be more empathetic. Where you could understand how they feel. Because sometimes I feel like the youth court, since they’re the person who did the bad thing, everybody is going to automatically be like, they’re in the wrong – but I feel like once you really listen, they don’t always be in the wrong.

Students perceived that YC helped to reduce suspensions and increase disciplinary “fairness” at their schools.

Students believed YC benefitted their school by reducing suspensions for minor infractions. Students described lower rates of suspensions, especially compared to non-YC schools where it was “*straight suspension, straight expelled.*” Youth Court “*takes stress off the principal with having to deal with putting out punishments, in-school suspensions, suspensions, expulsion, stuff like that.*” Additionally, since students no longer get suspended “*for the smallest things,*” YC was perceived to be more a more fair system: “*But also, a very fair thing, and it also doesn’t get that serious with parents or principal, so it’s a very fair system*” where minor mistakes or mishaps can “*get hashed out.*” Thus, students believed that having YC reduced the number of suspensions, and made the reasons more fair for why students did get suspended, both of which were seen as benefitting the entire school.

Students also believed individual outcomes from YC were better than suspensions. One shared, “*Coming to youth court, I feel like it’s a better opportunity to have them talk to us, students, about what they have done and see what kinds of consequences they could have, which is better than to get suspended for such things.*” Participants mentioned benefits for the respondent, such as giving the respondent a better opportunity (compared to traditional punishments), and providing space for reflection. A student shared, “*Say someone got into a fight and they suspend them. When they come back, they’re probably still going to feel angry. It would be chaos. Youth court gives them a chance to express.*” Another shared, “*I feel like youth court is a step that can help people think about what they’re doing or how they’re doing it...it could really help people.*”

Few students had suggestions for improvement.

Most students did not express anything they would change about Youth Court. A few wished they had more details about cases. One student said, *"We don't really know much or anything. So, when we talk to the students, they just tell us, 'No, we were playing.' There's a student who also said, 'That's not what happened.' So, we're confused on what the heck is really going on."* Another said, *"the only part that I find annoying is that sometimes when a person is filing a case, they won't give you full details of what's going on. They just say, 'They were fighting each other, and one of them started actually getting pissed and did this.'"* Others wanted to ensure that all YC participants themselves *"take it serious."* A student stated, *"I feel like some students come in just to laugh and not take it serious, but at the end of youth court we still do get a grade, and sometimes based on how those students acted, it affects the type of grade you get."* Another said, *"Some people come in just to play around and just to have more time with their friends, but it's not a joke. I mean, have fun, but don't overdo it."* A few students suggested additional opportunities for training or mentoring for students before doing YC.

Conclusions

Results from this study show that Youth Court may provide positive outcomes for both respondents and student jurors, in addition to decreasing suspensions. Descriptive results show that the percentage of students with suspensions decreased for Cohorts 1 and 2 by a slightly larger degree than schools without YC. Analyses of schools where student focus groups took place indicated High School experienced a much greater decrease in the percentage of students with suspensions compared to the two middle schools.

Although the research design of this study does not allow us to examine whether Youth Court directly impacts the amount of suspensions at a school, this study offers support that Youth Court may be related to a decrease in suspensions. Additional data collected from focus groups provides evidence that YC may offer other benefits for students. Student jurors who participated in YC had positive experiences overall and felt that they experienced growth in areas such as communication, development of empathy, and conflict resolution.