

Charisse Hilton:

Has anybody else heard the term restorative practices or restorative justice? Yes. What have you heard about it?

Kirsten Stewart:

It's a hot summer day, just before the start of the 2020-2021 school year. And a select group of students...

Charisse Hilton:

[crosstalk 00:00:14] do that term quite a bit today. Okay? Part of [crosstalk 00:00:16]

Kirsten Stewart:

... are learning about three important pillars of justice.

Charisse Hilton:

The three values I want you to remember are empathy, compassion, and equity. Those three things are very, very important.

Kirsten Stewart:

That's Charisse Hilton, Program Administrator for Canyons School District's Responsive Services Team. She heads up a new Peer Court, the second of its kind sponsored by a school district in Utah. It's a panel of students who will hold fellow students accountable for minor offenses, like fighting, vandalism, or shop-lifting.

Charisse Hilton:

Um, let's say that Logan has a little problem at school and his assistant principal decides to refer him to Peer Court. The assistant principal will meet with Logan and his parents. Going to Peer Court means we're not going to charge you through the police, okay? This is a big piece of Peer Court. It gives students the opportunity to correct behaviors, to learn from their mistakes, to make restitution to those they may have hurt or injured, without having to go through the legal systems. And we're going to talk more about that.

Kirsten Stewart:

Hilton is coaching more than 20 sophomores, juniors, and seniors to help their peers get out and stay out of trouble.

Charisse Hilton:

[An] important part you need to remember, Logan has to admit his guilt before he comes to Peer Court. You are not determining whether he is guilty or not. What you're going to determine is the best course of action to help Logan correct his behavior. Does that make sense to everybody?

Kirsten Stewart:

Hilton is using Logan [Christiansen 00:01:43] just as an example. He's actually on the Peer Court panel. Logan says he's excited to help students his age make better choices and avoid what experts call the school-to-prison pipeline.

Logan Christiansen:

Being able to be a part of something that helps students, in our district particularly, growing. If I can help in any way possible, I just think it's a great opportunity.

Kirsten Stewart:

I'm [Kirsten Stewart 00:02:12] and this is Connect Canyons, a podcast about the heart and science of education. The school-to-prison pipeline is how juvenile justice reformers described the national trend of schools referring youth to the courts for minor offenses. Offenses that used to [be] handled as a disciplinary matter within the schools. The reforms aim to keep students connected to their schools, to the caring adults who work there and to their peers.

Kirsten Stewart:

One way to look at Peer or Youth Court is that they harness the power of positive peer pressure instead of automatic suspension or expulsion to address minor offenses. BJ Weller, Director of Canyons District Responsive Services Team explains it this way.

BJ Weller:

Sometimes, you know, students would make a poor decision and, as an adult, often times, the consequence for that student was based on the adult's, like, mentality and perception of the wrong, right? And they're not adults yet, right? But we were still trying to hold them accountable to the same standard as the adult. There were some studies that were done that came to the conclusion that in many situations we were creating what is called the school-to-prison pipeline.

BJ Weller:

Because a student would make a decision. They would, they would break the law and then they would end up in the court system. And then while they're in the court system, right, then they would learn other behaviors or they would have less opportunities than their peers.

Kirsten Stewart:

These student judges must maintain their grades and sign a confidentiality agreement to participate, meaning they won't disclose details of Peer Court cases to friends at school.

Abby Simmons:

My dad is actually a prosecutor for the county and I've always been interested in stuff like this.

Kirsten Stewart:

That's Abby Simmons who wants to be a civil rights lawyer one day. Serving on the panel will allow her to focus not just on punishment, but on what harm has been done, who's been harmed, and what can be done to repair the harm.

Abby Simmons:

So this kind of thing is super important to me because I know about the school-to-prison pipeline. I know there are so many injustices right now and I think it's really important that we need to start recognizing that there's a root cause and we need to help solve the problem instead of just sending these kids right to prison.

Kirsten Stewart:

The time commitment for students is two Wednesday nights a month. They'll mete out consequences for offenders. Common sentences might be to repair a vandalized object, return stolen goods, or write an apology letter. Offenders who volunteer to be part of the Peer Court process may even be sentenced to serve on a Peer Court judges panel.

Charisse Hilton:

We have to be trusted by the kids coming through because the fact that those kids are coming through Peer Court means they want to change.

Kirsten Stewart:

The court panel of students will ask the defendant a series of restorative questions, then make a disposition of goals for the defendant to work on. And they'll have four weeks to complete them with weekly check-ins from Responsive Services. For students who choose Peer Court, there's a cost of \$50, refundable if they meet their behavior goals and make restitution.

Kirsten Stewart:

Draper and Sandy Cities have their own version of Peer or Youth Courts in conjunction with local law enforcements. Canyons Superintendent Dr. Rick Robins says the concept is a win-win for students, law enforcement, and the school district.

Dr. Rick Robins:

I just think it's absolutely critical because it really helps to solve these issues at the lowest level. And it allows students to be a lot more reflective about what's happened and really, you know, create appropriate solutions for the situation they're in. I think in years past for the most part, a lot of our reaction to student misbehavior has been very much around compliance and punishment. And we know that with young kids that that isn't always the most effective. And so being able to go through a process with their peers and really understanding what has happened and what's the best remedy for that, I think is just a tremendous thing.

Kirsten Stewart:

Created in 2017, the Department of Responsive Services has hired 20 social workers and contracted four mental health agencies in the county to address student needs. These resources come in handy in conjunction with Peer Court, providing an emphatic path to justice.

Maren Christiansen:

There's only so much that adults can understand about teenagers in this specific modern age.

Kristen Steward:

That's [Maren Christiansen 00:06:32], another student chosen for the Peer Court program.

Maren Christiansen:

Adults remember what it was like to be a teenager but I think that they don't have a concept of what it's like to be a teenager now. And I feel like those two experiences are very different and there are different sources of stress and pressure. To have a peer who has been where you have been and who has experienced and is still experiencing the same things with school and social life to understand where you're coming from is a much better place for student to come. I also think that it builds trust with the people that are trying to change and grow.

Kirsten Stewart:

Join us again for the next episode of Connect Canyons, a podcast sponsored by Utah's Canyons School District. If you have any comments for us, questions or ideas for topics you'd like us to explore, email us at communications@canyonsdistrict.org. You can also follow us on Twitter [@canyonsdistrict](#). Today's show was reported and edited by Andrew [Reeser 00:07:44] with assistance from Stephanie Christensen. If you like this episode, please be sure to share it with a friend. I'm Kirsten Stewart and this is Canyons School District.