

NEWTON YOUTH COMMISSION Meeting

November 4, 2009 MINUTES

Location: Newton City Hall Cafeteria

Present: Joe De Vito (Chair), Richard Dyer, Donna Gordon, Robert Staulo;
Tony Bibbo, Marianne Cook, Matt Green, Ellen Manning, Stephanie Pelkowsky,
Stephan Ross, Terance Sack, John Staulo, Kirsten Tuohy
Students:

Regrets: Chris Fortunato, Peter Harrington, Ofc. Jeff Mace,
Students: Zachary Eagle, Gerry Lueng, Tamara Matama, Kyle Olson, Zoe Pepper-
Cunningham, Adam Sangiolo, Ariana Tabatabaie

Staff: Beverly Droz, Director, Human and Volunteer Services

Guests: Officer Katie Doyle; NSHS teachers: Josepha Blocker, Rich Catrambone, Henry
Turner, and Charlie Myette

The meeting was opened at 7:05 PM and chaired by Joe De Vito.

Introductions were made and we welcomed Katie Doyle since Officer Mace was unavailable this evening, as well as the teachers from NSHS.

Presentation: Restorative Justice

Rich Catrambone began by providing an overview of what has been happening in Newton with Restorative Justice Circles. He has been leading the effort at Newton South High School for the past three years with the help of other teachers. They have been seeing some exciting outcomes and this program has become a part of their continuum of intervention as it relates to discipline in their school. The program is geared toward helping both the victim and the perpetrator. Our juvenile court is now in Waltham serving both cities.

Restorative Justice comes from the Native American culture. The goal is to work with the victim, the person who committed the offense and the community involved – to seek healing for all. The circles are composed of students, parents, teachers and ideally community members. Rich has done about 20 trainings over the past 3 years.

Traditional justice focuses on the law that has been broken, which implies the need for punishing the offender. The question then becomes how this will help the offender avoid re-offending and help the victim to heal from the offense. Courts of today are limited in how they can address the harms – they can involve all of the stakeholders in the offence, particularly the victim.

Restorative Justice requires that we address the victims' harms and needs. The offender of such harm should be held accountable for their actions. The community should work toward resolving the damage which has been caused. This can best be accomplished by bringing all the parties together in a restorative circle which is aimed at re-establishing trust and repairing the relationship amount the offender and the victim and the community. This is an old remedy which gives us a new tool to combat crime within our community. But we must work closely with the police and the courts if this proposal will have an opportunity for success, Rich said.

Rich gave an example: students caught cheating typically automatically get a zero on their exam. As those caught cheating went through the Restorative Justice Circle, they learned a lot and saw how the administrators really cared for them. They learned how to repair the situation and learn and grow from it, instead of sinking into a circle of repetitive bad actions.

Henry gave an example of how a large group of disenfranchised boys were involved in a fight. They came together, working for over 10 weeks in the circle process and emerged as almost friends.

Josepha said that a cornerstone is having the student offenders take responsibility for what he or she did before they can begin the circle process. Therefore it doesn't work for all students. But for many, it is the opportunity to build community and have intervention that helps them. There is a whole process that the participants go through. If a victim doesn't want to, a participant takes that role. However the experience has been that the victims come through feeling validated and healed.

Rich stated that he sees this as something that can grow in the Newton community. H and the other teachers are here tonight to present it and ask the Youth Commission to consider adopting this program in order to promote it to the larger community. He noted that they presented this to the Human Rights Commission in June 2009 and those members were very interested. That Commission would be willing to help support the effort.

NSHS is the only school in Massachusetts to sponsor this. It's easier to suspend a student than to go through the Restorative Justice Circle process – with a contract and many meetings and actions. RJC is time consuming but he noted that the students who go through the circles emerge with an overall understanding of healing for not only the victim, but themselves.

A facilitator leads the circle and gathers the participants. A mentor works with the student. After weeks of work, they come back to the circle to celebrate the accomplishments. Discussion that takes place within a circle is confidential. The end result is that the perpetrators do not keep offending.

This is a volunteer program. It was noted that Mark Hall at the Safe Schools/Healthy Students grant, now call "The Newton Partnership" is involved with a component of the RJC program but it is not really funded.

Instead of court and punishment, this is a whole different way to look at justice. If an offending student fails to accomplish his/her tasks and assignments, the case can go back to court. Assignments include community service, letters of apologies, and much more.

Rich said that Youth Officers can recommend that kids go through the circle process.

Henry said the flaws of the circle are that it takes a lot of time, and one can ask if the offenders are really sorry. But they feel that the success they've seen in Newton shows that both the victim and offender have benefited greatly.

Rich said the training takes 5-6 hours. The commitment of being a mentor is significant, just like volunteers who sign up to be mentors with other organizations. Circles can last for 1 to 2 hours, and the mentor also spends individual time guiding the student.

The District Attorney's Office is interested and committed to diversion programs but their process doesn't involve the victims.

Officer Doyle noted that the Police are getting calls daily from parents wanting intervention. The goal is diversion from the court system. If this existed at a community level, the Police would need to be involved.

Rich summarized by saying this program currently only deals with students who have committed offenses within NSHS. He would like to see the Youth Commission adopt it and promote it, making it a community program that could be accessed.

The Youth Commission members were very receptive and thanked Rich and the guests for their time and their presentation.

DISCUSSION

Donna Gordon said that if the Youth Commission agreed to sponsor this program, she would chair the committee on it.

Joe noted that obviously this program will have to evolve step by step. We have neither the resources nor the staffing to just jump in.

Katie noted that the other schools should be involved. About half of Police cases come from the schools. There is a memo of understanding between the D.A. Office and the Police Dept, and the schools to try to help students.

Stephanie said we could start with initial outreach to other schools to adopt what NSHS has been doing. Kirsten was concerned that teachers are on overload and it will be hard for them to take on more, especially time consuming measures. Everyone agreed with that and there was discussion on a process to outreach to community members to take on some of the leadership roles. It wouldn't just have to fall on the shoulders of Youth Commission members nor teachers. Our role would be to be the instrument to make this program evolve.

Tony made a motion, and Terry 2nd, to establish a Committee to do research on how the Youth Commission can sponsor this, and for the Committee to bring back information to our Dec. 2 meeting – and the motion passed unanimously.

Donna will chair it and be helped by Stephanie, Ellen, Katie, Terry, Tony, Marianne.

A motion to accept the minutes of October 7, 2009 was made by Rick and seconded by Ellen.
The motion to accept the minutes passed.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:35 PM.

The next meeting will be Wednesday, December 2 at 7:00PM

Respectfully submitted by Beverly Droz