

Lawyers build peer jury programs in Chicago schools

Teaching law while resolving teens' problems

by Tom McCann

Joseph D. Lambert usually spends his days handling multimillion dollar real estate deals. But in May he found himself back in high school, taking notes as five teens counseled a freshman accused of knocking over a classmate on his way to 5th period.

"The whole thing was kind of surreal," said Lambert, an associate at Barack Ferrazzano Kirschbaum Perlman & Nagelberg. "I was in school all over again."

Lambert was visiting Walter Payton College Prep in River North to observe and lend his expertise to a growing Chicago Public Schools initiative that puts disciplinary power and problem solving into the hands of its students.

The peer jury program started with one school in 1996, but it has taken off in the last couple of years. It is now active in 27 high schools around the city, with



Meghan Morrissey



Joseph Lambert

almost 400 student jurors deciding 565 cases during the 2004-2005 school year, according to officials at Alternatives Inc., the non-profit organization that developed the program for the school system. The jurors hear a range of minor infractions, from students ditching class to cheating or using offensive language. Instead of suspension or expulsion, the jurors work with offenders to help them get back on track and fix the harm they caused.

Anecdotal evidence says the program is a big success, but officials want more hard evidence

and are hoping to expand the idea to more serious cases like assaults and theft. So in May they began working with the Chicago Bar Association's Young Lawyers Section to dispatch dozens of volunteer attorneys to go to each school and observe the process in action. Next year the lawyers will become a part of jury process themselves as regular adult advisors.

"We want the lawyers to lend more legitimacy to the program and use their legal training to streamline the process and help these young jurors develop as

leaders," said Karen Lambert of Alternatives Inc. Karen is also Joe's wife. "Many of the students have aspirations to become lawyers themselves and have never actually met one before. The lawyers can explain what it takes and how they should be preparing. They become real-world role models."

Joe Lambert looked on as jurors talked to Andre, a 15-year-old who recently knocked over a blind student in the hallway. They called in the victim, the student who reported the incident and one of the school's administrators to hear all sides of the story. The jurors then got the two kids to talk to each other, discussed the difficulties of being blind and found out the two shared a love of baseball. The jurors recommended going to a game together. In the end, Andre apologized and said it was an accident.

"The kids really took charge in there. They were interested, thoughtful and had really good ideas," Joe Lambert said. "I was impressed. When you give kids a chance to be adults, they take it very seriously. They took just the

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approach I would have taken.”

Assata N. Peterson, an assistant Illinois attorney general, went to Kenwood Academy and observed a case where a student had sworn at a teacher and was getting bad grades.

“The boy said he’d been bouncing around foster homes all his life and was coping with the death of his mother. He said he had a lot of rage,” Peterson said. “A guy juror, a real popular jock type of guy, really formed a bond with him. I don’t think an adult could have reached him the way he did. They referred him to a tutoring program and a social worker. At the end of it, I thought I was going to cry.”

Judy Gall, executive director of Alternatives, said kids listen to other kids much more than they would a principal or other adult. The juries can get at the root of a problem and use peer pressure in a positive way. The jurors themselves also increase their confidence and problem-solving skills.

“It empowers the jurors. They get to polish their speaking skills, take a role in someone else’s life. It transcends cliques and groups and ethnicities. At 14 or 15,

they’re getting the chance to think like a lawyer,” Gall said. “And it exposes them to a world they’ve never experienced before.”

Kids and law

Barack Ferrazzano recently held a career day at their firm for jurors from Senn High School, Karen Lambert said.

“The kids toured the offices, had lunch with attorneys and staff, and heard presentations on every aspect of the firm, from trial work to paralegals and human resources,” she said. “To visit a law firm isn’t particularly thrilling for you or me. But the kids were transfixed.”

In June, the peer jury program held a field trip and awards ceremony at Northwestern University School of Law for the student jurors. Azim Ramelize, Chicago’s deputy commissioner for children and youth services, spoke to the kids about how he grew up a gang member and became a paraplegic from a gunshot wound as a teen. He told them it didn’t stop him from getting his act together, graduating from Cornell University and becoming a lawyer.

“Just look at me. Don’t make the mistake I did,” Ramelize said. “Use your head. Get an education.

Become a professional and make your family proud.”

Peer juries, also known as youth courts, are used in more than 900 programs nationwide, according to the National Youth Court Center in Lexington, Ky. More than 50 percent of the programs operate in conjunction with the justice system,

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while 5 percent are school-based. The CPS model is based on the principals of restorative justice, which focuses less on punishment and more on repairing the harm the offender has caused to the victim and the community.

Sophia Hall, administrative presiding judge of Cook County Circuit Court’s Juvenile Justice & Child Protection Resource Section, is a big supporter of the CPS program and gives pep talks to recruit more volunteer lawyers. She said in addition to reducing the number of suspensions and expulsions in schools, peer juries can also help prevent youths from entering the juvenile justice system.

“When a youth acts out, it usually starts in the schools before it starts in the streets,” Hall said. “Peer jury can be a way for youth to be diverted long before they come to the court’s attention. We just need to work harder to institutionalize peer juries in the schools.”

Meghan Morrissey, an associate at Jenner & Block, plans to become involved on a regular basis next year at Martin Luther King Jr. College Prep on the South Side. She said she wants to give back to the community and likes what she sees in the students she mentors.

“It’s the most logical way I see to put my legal knowledge to work helping kids,” she said. “If we improve the environment at the schools, we’ll get more people to stay in school.”

Theresa Gonzalez, a Walter Payton junior, said she joined the peer jury program because she has always wanted to be a lawyer from watching court shows on TV. She said the experience has made her more comfortable talking in public and voicing her opinion. She hopes to use her peer jury connections to visit a law firm soon.

“That’s my dream,” she said. “With peer jury, I’m already building my resume.”*