



HACIENDA LA PUENTE

UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Hacienda La Puente Unified Youth Court Program Earns Prestigious Golden Bell Award for Fostering Student Growth

CITY OF INDUSTRY— A Hacienda La Puente Unified restorative justice youth court program that promotes an innovative, proactive approach to reducing out-of-school suspensions has been recognized by the California School Boards Association (CSBA) with its prestigious Golden Bell Award.

The Youth Court Program offers students in grades 6-12 a peer-driven alternative to suspension. By encouraging accountability, reflection, and understanding of their actions' impact, along with support from Tobacco Use Prevention Education (TUPE) resources, the program has contributed to a 40% decrease in out-of-school suspensions for grades 6-12 during the 2023-24 school year.

"Youth court has a positive impact on students and their families," HLPUSD Executive Director of Student and Family Services Dr. Karen Dabney-Lieras said. "Respondents take responsibility for their actions and student jurors build upon their leadership skills and listening abilities as they cultivate empathy and understanding. All respondents are required to return and serve as jurors at least once, but many decide to join our program permanently."

Youth Court has 12 leader jurors, made up of both middle and high school students, and tries approximately 35 cases a year, which are referred by District schools. A typical Youth Court trial has six jurors, with students serving as forepersons, clerks, and bailiffs. The students are assisted by Youth Court program coordinator Amanda Cevallos, program advisors Jessica Lujan and Vanessa Ortiz, program translator and parent liaison Cindy Jaquez, and an adult judge.

Workman High School freshman Sofia Velasco has been a Youth Court jury member since the seventh grade. Velasco loves the program for its focus on giving students their day in court and avoiding more punitive measures by getting a second chance.

"What I love about Youth Court is the opportunity to hear the respondent's side of the story, and how they reflect on what they have done," Velasco said. "When students have been through this process, we see that real change occurs. When the respondents come for their jury duty, at first, they can be shy, but after they hear a few cases, you can see their growth and empathy and desire to help out others in the same situation."

MORE

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Mesa Robles School Assistant Principal Daniel Monárrez serves as one of the Youth Court’s rotating judges. He presides over the trials and gives instructions to the juries and respondents. Though he often guest dispenses advice to respondents and their families, Monárrez is not involved in the jury deliberations or the dispositions.

“When disputes are resolved in Youth Court, we see both jury members and respondents going through this process responsibly, professionally, and fairly, and the results have been amazing,” Monárrez said. “When students are working together, with parent involvement and administrative support, the respondents have a good shot at turning things around. Students stay in school, and that’s the true success of the program.”

The Youth Court is seeking to expand its program by partnering with the Los Angeles County Superior Court’s Teen Court program, which would broaden students’ understanding of the juvenile court system, allow them to hear real cases within L.A. County, and collaborate with local judges. The District hopes to have the Teen Court program to be up and running by spring 2025.

“Congratulations to Dr. Dabney-Lieras and the Youth Court team for its inspiring recognition by the CSBA for a program that unites students and teaches them to be responsible and empathetic,” Superintendent Dr. Alfonso Jiménez said. “Hacienda La Puente is committed to providing a nurturing environment for students to grow and reach their potential as they develop into lifelong learners.”

Photo Captions:

HLPUSD_YOUTHCOURT1: Hacienda La Puente Unified Youth Court students celebrate earning a 2024 California School Board Association Golden Bell Award during a program event on Dec. 10.

HLPUSD_YOUTHCOURT2: HLPUSD’s Youth Court leadership team and District officials gather to be named a 2024 California School Board Association Golden Bell Award winner for its restorative justice Youth Court Program during an awards ceremony on Dec. 5.

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