

ACCESS Youth, Inc. 2014

ACCESS' mission is to recognize the un-fostered potential in each child and provide youth with access to resources, support, and services that empower them to make life choices that positively impact their future. Our primary program, the Early Intervention Juvenile Mediation Program (EIJMP) offers prevention and intervention programs designed to divert first-time youth offenders away from the juvenile justice system through participation in victim-offender mediation, life skills courses, and community service learning activities. Programs goals are to: reduce recidivism rates; decrease truant behavior; and increase pro-social behaviors. Mediation is an alternative to court and incarceration during which youth meet with each other, their respective families and neighbors to discuss conflicts in a safe and confidential setting. Juveniles take accountability for their actions, take steps to repair the damage, and have the opportunity to understand that their actions have consequences for which they are responsible. ACCESS is the sole source of juvenile-victim offender mediation in Washington, D.C.

Life skills curriculum uses active games, artistic expression, group dialogue, media, and role-plays to engage juveniles in conversations about identity, trust, communication, respect, future planning, financial literacy, decision-making skills, anger management, conflict resolution, self-awareness, and relationships. Community service activities provide youth with the opportunity to learn about the needs of the community through service learning projects. With the help of our experienced volunteer base, and our strategic partners in law enforcement, education and juvenile justice, our programming helps guide youth to choose alternatives to crime and other harmful activities, develop professional interests and strengthen relationships with their families, community, and law enforcement officials.

ACCESS intends to hire the staff necessary to develop and implement the Pilot, conduct focus groups, training for teachers and administrators as well as staff and mediators. This will include: the development and distribution of program materials, mediation manuals and program evaluation. Since this is the first program of its kind in Washington, DC, providing training information sessions and opportunities for questions and feedback for parents, students and the community are essential.

In DCPS, suspensions disproportionately affect students in special education and students attending school in high-poverty wards. Students attending school in wards with higher levels of child poverty are suspended at higher rates than their peers in more affluent wards. Numerous studies highlight the high frequency of suspension for children of color and students from other historically disadvantaged groups noting that school suspensions and expulsions resulting from zero tolerance disciplinary policies have directly expanded the "school-to-prison pipeline" while disproportionality and negatively affecting minority students. The neighborhoods targeted by the Pilot have the highest percentage of African-American and Latino residents, the highest unemployment rates, highest poverty rates, as well as the highest percentage of violent crimes reported in the District. These characteristics of highly distressed and underserved communities are strongly correlated with juvenile delinquency.

By investing in the Pilot, we will offer these disadvantaged students an opportunity to stay in school and address their behavioral challenges and reduce the likelihood that they will suffer from the typical effects of suspension including: weaker academic skills, higher dropout rates, and higher rates of involvement with the juvenile justice system. A key assumption of many disciplinary policies is that troublemakers need to be removed from school in order to provide a safe learning environment for the remaining students. However, a review of quantitative research conducted by the American Psychological Association found that more frequent usage of suspension and expulsion was associated with lower academic achievement across the school's entire student body and the American Academy of Pediatrics concluded, "that schools with higher rates of out-of school suspension and expulsion are not safer for students or faculty."

Unlike suspension, mediation as proposed in the Pilot engages key stakeholders, students and parents to discuss their motivations, how the conflict affected them, and appropriate outcomes, thus providing a mechanism to hold the student accountable while also facilitating emotional growth. Given the recent research showing that being suspended even once in ninth grade is associated with a twofold increase in the likelihood of dropping out, from 16% for those not suspended to

32% for those suspended just once -reducing the number of students suspended through alternatives such as this Pilot should be a priority to all parents, educators, taxpayers, and policymakers.