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Press Release

#### **ESTABLISHMENT OF ALBANY HIGH SCHOOL YOUTH COURT**

United States Attorney Richard S. Hartunian announced today that U.S. Department of Justice - Project Safe Neighborhoods initiative has awarded \$20,000 to the Albany City School District to develop a school-based Youth Court. The Albany Youth Court will be the newest addition to over 1,000 Youth Courts operating across the United States. Youth Courts are structured to provide positive alternative sanctions for first-time, low level offenders by using a peer-driven sentencing mechanism that allows young people to take responsibility for their actions and be held accountable in ways that encourage them to get on the right track and avoid the criminal justice system.

Ninth graders committing low-level violations including disruptive behavior, minor altercations, intimidation, harassment, menacing, bullying, criminal mischief and/or theft will have the opportunity to appear before the Albany High School Youth Court. Ninth through twelfth grade

students will be recruited and trained to serve as Youth Court members and conduct sentencing hearings before peer staffed courts. Three teen judges will listen to arguments by both sides and recommend a sentence based on evidence heard in the courtroom and the needs of the offender. The Albany Youth Court will be modeled after the highly successful Syracuse City School District Student Court, which is a voluntary alternative to suspension for young people who face disciplinary action by the school district.

Sentences will focus on repairing the harm or damage and may include restitution and participation in community service activities. The school district will dedicate a staff person for the Youth Court and recruit additional adult volunteers from various legal, part-time law enforcement and family service agencies. The ninth through twelfth grade student volunteers will serve as judges, prosecuting and defense attorneys and Youth Court bailiffs. They will also serve as role models for their peers, both in the courtroom and in the classroom. At its core, the program will provide Youth Court members with opportunities to take ownership of their school's governance and increase their skills in areas of problem-solving, communication and public speaking.

U.S. Attorney Hartunian noted that “most individuals who commit serious crimes start out by committing minor offenses. Our goal with the Albany Youth Court will be to use positive peer pressure to deter young people from engaging in more serious criminal conduct. While we remain committed to aggressive enforcement of the law, we also understand that prosecution alone is not the answer. We believe in crime prevention programs like the Albany Youth Court, which give our young people hope and recognize the positive potential of our citizens. ”

Albany Mayor Gerald D. Jennings said, “The Albany High School Youth Court will implement restorative justice and will reintegrate the youth offender into the community, while sending appropriate messages to the offender regarding unacceptable behavior. I applaud the City

School District and Albany High School for their willingness to offer yet another mechanism for student accountability.”

Former New York State Court of Appeals Chief Judge Judith S. Kaye, who co-chairs the New York State Bar Association’s Special Committee on Youth Courts, and Albany City School District Superintendent Ray Coluciello issued a joint statement: “We are thrilled that the Albany City School District is making a school-based Youth Court a reality, and we are grateful to Richard Hartunian, U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of New York, and the Department of Justice, for providing the funding to make this happen. Youth Court has the potential to educate young people about the law, to encourage a greater sense of civic engagement, and to offer an important early intervention for misbehaving teenagers. The creation of a Youth Court in Albany High School sends a powerful message about the importance of creating off-ramps that give troubled kids a real chance to step off the fast track to incarceration.”

Steven Younger, President of the New York State Bar Association, created the Bar Association’s Special Committee on Youth Courts in June, 2010. Mr. Younger said, "Youth courts can transform lives. According to national statistics, kids who go through youth courts are less likely to get in trouble again than those processed through conventional courts. The State Bar applauds United States Attorney Hartunian for his support of this critical initiative.”

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