The Politics of Local Control and Program Evaluation in Community Context

Helen Rosenberg, Anne Statham, George Wang, and Esther Letven

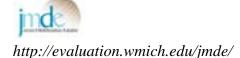*University of Wisconsin-Parkside*

Introduction

This is a case study of an evaluation of a Youth Fair Chance (YFC) program that discusses multiple challenges faced by our evaluation team. We consider the role of evaluators in relation to the overall program structure, struggles among organizational stakeholders with special interests, and power differentials which impacted policy decision making, control of information, and ultimately, the outcomes of this evaluation. In identifying the particular issues that arose throughout the evaluation process, we hope others who face similar issues will benefit from our insights. We realize the issues we face are endemic to any evaluation process.

Background of Project

Youth Fair Chance was a federal program authorized through 1992 amendments to the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) as a crime prevention program funded through the Department of Labor (DOL) during the Clinton administration (Corson,

et al., 1996). The midterm elections during Clinton's second year as president resulted in large budget cuts that were passed along to the localities that had received funding, among them, YFC. This resulted in the loss of nearly half of the six million dollars they had initially been awarded.

The local setting for YFC was the city of Racine, Wisconsin (Population, 85,000), with a target population confined mostly to five census tracts. Those living in these tracts had the highest rates of poverty, minority population, and unemployment, and the lowest number of owner-occupied, single-family housing units in the city. Only one-third of all students from this target area had graduated from high school in contrast to almost three-fourths of students who lived outside the five census tracts (U.S. Census, 1994).

YFC programs took on the ambitious agenda of encouraging youth, ages 14 through 30, to complete high school and enter post-secondary education or jobs through in-school remediation programs designed to reduce gang involvement, drug use and crime. In addition, YFC provided youth the opportunity to develop constructive community relationships and technical and other job skills through school-to-work programs. Finally, it attempted to enhance self-esteem through programs in the arts and recreation -- all these combining to help youth enter mainstream society (Community Toolbox, February 12, 1995; McIlvaine, April, 2, 1995; Metro, May 24 & June 29, 1995; Quist, July 12, 1993). YFC linked their programs with existing community agencies such as the schools and parks and recreation to provide comprehensive services that touched all youth and young adults in the geographic area targeted for intervention.
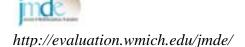
The local project was run by the Youth Fair Chance Resource Board (YFCRB), which was specially formed after the grant was awarded and included many who had helped write the proposal. Local issues arose from the beginning of the project. It was originally expected that all aspects of the program, including the distribution of funds, would be done through a grassroots process. It was hoped that Neighborhood Councils, composed of a cross-section of neighborhood residents, would make recommendations about how YFC monies would be spent. Indeed, the program creators put great stock in the ability of residents of low income neighborhoods to articulate the solutions to problems they faced. In retrospect, one of the Board members allowed that their approach had been naïve, that they had thought they would simply sit back and wait for the residents to tell them what they needed and then would set about doing it. "We were looking for the...big picture...how did we do, did we meet our big goal"?

The initial empowerment of Neighborhood Councils touched off a fierce competition for the funds, as Board meetings of YFC soon became the sites of political struggles among established community-based organizations, grassroots groups, and the Resource Board. Originally seen as the linchpin of the program, Neighborhood Council participation was discouraged after the midterm Congressional election, leaving residents who had agreed to participate in program development feeling betrayed and disillusioned.

Another issue was community leadership. Once the YFC project was underway, there seemed to be a leadership vacuum at the highest levels. Members of the Resource Board had hoped for guidance from the Racine County Coalition for Youth, which consisted of high-level community members who developed the vision for this YFC grant proposal. The Coalition for Youth formed an Oversight
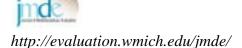
Committee for the project, which was technically in a position over the Resource Board. Some members of that group even served on the Resource Board, but both higher level groups declined to play a managerial role once the grant was awarded. The Oversight Committee served in an advisory capacity, but "…It was sort of a mystery to the Resource Board as to what they did, if they met, or what decisions they made" (Board member). Some of the Board members believed the struggles over funding and other issues that occurred among stakeholder groups, including Neighborhood Councils, might have been tempered, had they received guidance from one of these higher level groups.

We were asked to conduct an evaluation of Youth Fair Chance well into the second year of program operation after the political climate of YFC was well established and the Resource Board was focused on how to spend their remaining funds in the most effective way. They were attempting to make these decisions amid a host of contradictions: 1) There were Board members who received a large amount of the funding but refused to share outcome data (most notably the Racine Unified School District; RUSD); 2) In the absence of good outcome data, all parties seemed to have defaulted to using public awareness of programs as a proxy for success, despite the Board's strong commitment to obtaining quantifiable measures; and 3) Funding was awarded to individual entities that competed with one another, despite the strong desire on the part of many Board members to revise the segregated way various agencies provided services to the target population.

We involved stakeholders in every aspect of planning and executing the study (Patton, 1986) and launched ourselves into the role of mediator of differing perspectives rather than simply assessor of objective facts (Christie and Alkin, 2003; Guba and Lincoln, 1987; Palumbo, 1987). This approach raises a host of

political issues that evaluators must navigate, e.g., considering diverse stakeholder perspectives, creating meaningful evaluation goals among these stakeholders and recognizing the political underpinnings of any evaluation (Kirsh et at, 2005; Thayer and Fine, 2001; Abma, 2000; Hallett and Rogers, 1994). We were brought in because one member of the Resource Board had been encouraging others to do some sort of assessment from the beginning of the program and saw the funding crisis as an opportune time to push for some sort of assessment. But the funding cuts had made it difficult for any of the national programs to initiate evaluations (Needels, et al., 1998) and we were unaware of the depth and extent of existing pressures and tensions present when we began our evaluation.

The Data

To help the Board make their decisions, we settled on an integrated methodological approach that included both qualitative and quantitative methods to evaluate YFC. First, through open-ended, in-depth interviews with the YFC Director, and 30 Board members, former Board members and program staff, we explored issues that challenged officials to define the implications of dealing with the federal government, the structure of internal dynamics and relationships with stakeholders, and the process of determining the effectiveness of YFC programs among staff, Board members, participants, and community members. Our questions dealt with perceived outcomes of the programs, e.g., program goals, collaboration with other programs in the targeted area and sustainability. Questions directed to program staff asked about current program operations, how programs might be improved, and the effectiveness of each program.

Secondly, we distributed self-administered surveys to 160 YFC participants, except those from the Aviation Academy,[1] and 63 target community members[2] exploring issues of participants' knowledge of and involvement in YFC programs, as well as views of the impact of YFC on themselves and the community. Staff distributed surveys when programs were in session and thus, most likely over-sampled the most active participants in each program. Phone surveys were conducted for participants in programs not in session during the evaluation period, e.g. Midnight Basketball. Residents were surveyed by students in our classes who went door to door within the five Census tracts. Drafts of interview questions were reviewed and revised by the YFCRB. This procedure reinforced the importance of creating an evaluation that was meaningful to them and provided multiple methods to assess the diverse groups and provide validity checks across responses (Lipsey, et al., 1985; Waysman and Savaya, 1997).[3]
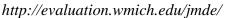
Of a total of 21 current YFCRB members, 13 were interviewed (62%), as were four of seven Former Resource Board members (57%). Among the 20 program staff, 13 were interviewed (65%).[4] A few program staff told interviewers to call

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[1] The Aviation Academy trains such a small number of students for a limited period that most participants would have no knowledge of this program.

[2] Community respondents had low levels of awareness about most YFC programs, other than Midnight Basketball. About two-thirds of community members surveyed said that neither they nor a family member had participated in any program.

[3] Copies of interview schedules for the YFCRB and program staff, as well as self-administered participant and community surveys are available upon request of the first author.

[4] At contact, all respondents were assured that their identities would not be revealed.

back and then never answered follow-up phone calls, while some telephone numbers were disconnected and some people simply refused to participate.[5]

At a later time, we conducted two focus groups, one with the official Project Director (the grant writer and employee of the grant awarded organization) and a key Board member (who had urged that the evaluation be done) to clarify some of the issues that only became apparent to us in retrospect. The second focus group, representing about 40% of the original Board, including representatives from institutions such as parks and recreation and community members, was conducted with five additional key members of the Resource Board to reflect upon the dynamics of the organizational structure, the outcomes of YFC and our role as evaluators. We found information collected from these last two focus groups to be especially helpful, as the program was completed and the participants no longer had interests to protect. Possibly because of time for reflection, we found Board members were much more open and forthcoming, a methodological issue that may arise in other studies, as well.

Narratives about Issues

The change of direction on the federal level, in terms of both funding cuts and eliminating the grassroots-directed nature of the program, provides a frame for the

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[5] Program staff understood that an evaluation team was contracted to make recommendations to the YFCRB regarding program success and funding, so those who refused to participate may have been from programs that served few among the total participants in YFC or simply were more threatened by the intervention of the evaluation team.
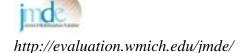
other issues that arose, and for our efforts as evaluators. Almost all Board and Former Board members commented on the difficulty of maintaining quality programs in the face of changing policies and looming monetary cuts proposed by the DOL after initial YFC grant monies were awarded.[6] One Board member commented, "YFC was an excellent program in the beginning, before the government decided to cut back on the amount of years it said it would give us...from 5 to 3 years." The funding cuts seemed to allow the YFCRB to relocate blame for delaying the program evaluation onto the DOL and to use the evaluation team as a buffer between itself and programs in the decision-making process that cut programs (Posavac and Carey, 1997).

The issue of grassroots leadership was mentioned in our original interviews, but became a key focus of our follow-up conversations. One concern raised by both neighborhood and institutional representatives was the impact of bureaucratic regulations about how federal grant money can be spent. These regulations proved beneficial to those who had experience with jockeying federal specifications, but were deadly to newly developing Neighborhood Councils. Some of those associated with the more bureaucratic side of the community tried to compensate: "…I always tried to sit next to a neighborhood resident and coach them into what

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[6] Reports of outcomes from data collected on national YFC programs indicate that while reading and math skills improved for program participants, there were almost no other outcome differences between participants in the target areas and comparison groups. However, since outcomes were measured relatively early in YFC programming, any outcomes must be interpreted with caution. "The premature end of YFC weakened its ability to affect youths and the local communities hosting the programs" (Needels, et al., 1998, p. xvi).

was going on in the meeting because so many of 'em just got lost in the bureaucratic conversation that was going on" (Focus group). In the beginning, the YFCRB insisted that all proposals come from the Neighborhood Councils, but this proved unworkable in part because of the maneuvering by existing community based organizations to take over the Neighborhood Councils, but also because the proposals coming from the Councils did not seem to fit into the bureaucratic guidelines of YFC. The neighborhood residents came to feel their ideas would not be implemented, as they saw DOL mandated programs or ideas brought by established institutions (Racine Unified School District, parks department) funded over those suggested by the Neighborhood Councils. One Board member recalls,

> ...I remember we were talking about getting kids involved with instruments...Most of these ideas got shot down for one reason or another...We gave you an idea, why can't it work?...It created a lot of expectations...that weren't clear from the get-go, that actually just kind of eroded the trust level and...led to a downward situation….What they were sounding like they wanted was bona fide neighborhood residential involvement. Yet these people were in a room and presented ideas and apparently didn't feel they were taken seriously because then you run into the whole, this is a federally funded program and we have to do things this way and not that way"...a lot of people were disillusioned along the line as it became one of our enterprises in bureaucracy (Board member).

Without direction from other organizational components of YFC, the Board found that it became impossible to say "no" to certain community-based organizations seeking funding, and to proceed with ideas suggested by the Councils. With pressure to fund programs, the YFCRB began to question their allegiance to supporting new programs.

> Hey, people, why are we reinventing the wheel because these guys are rolling along quite well with it. Let's see if they can maybe gear that program that's working so well towards our specific goals, what we're trying to do with youth… (Focus group).

In the vacuum that developed after the disbanding of the Neighborhood Councils, the Board turned to established programs as a site for YFC activities. They essentially opened up a competition in which programs were pitted against each other for funding, a process that undercut the development of a new integrated model for meeting the needs of their target population. Instead their process encouraged lack of communication across programs, discouraged coordinated effort and any systemic change. Nine of twelve program staff said there was little or no communication across programs. Most had no idea about what the other programs in YFC were doing. "All the programs should know by now the others...the truth is, they don't know a lot about the other programs" (Program staff).

The programs the Board had funded began to see each other more as competitors than as allies and the evaluation team came to be viewed as a threat by many who participated in the study (Cook and Shadish, 1986). As a result, the evaluation process was compromised and became a political arena where control of information regarding program successes and failures became important to program survival (Weiss, 1987) and programs were motivated to report their successes without dealing with their shortcomings (Chen, 1990).

The Board's preference to work with existing programs further undercut its original intention of creating a new approach of working with their target population. Already existing, well-established programs were funded, while innovative programs without long-term community support were not. In its effort to be responsive to DOL outcome goals, the Resource Board succumbed to existing powerful stakeholders in the community and thwarted the efforts of grass roots organizations to create new programming in Racine. With an Oversight

Committee that provided little guidance and Neighborhood Councils systematically excluded from developing programs, the players in the funding process were narrowed to the Resource Board and existing programs powerful enough to influence Board members, including powerful stakeholders like the Racine Unified School District.

Another question was whether the Board itself had built relationships with outside entities that would ensure the sustainability of the program. The Director of the YFC program was especially proud of the fact that the Resource Board became partners with the Workforce Development Center (WFDC), the primary job placement agency in Racine. However, jobs for youth, once they completed apprenticeship programs, were not forthcoming. Youth who passed the apprenticeship tests were listed for employers to hire through the WFDC. But trades are union controlled, and closed professions, racism, and gender issues were factors that contributed to the disconnect between youths' completion of skills programs and their inability to get jobs in the community. In general the Board felt that the program had not successfully forged relationships with community businesses with the potential to hire youth trained through YFC programs. Of nine Board and Former Board members who responded to a question on this subject, four reported minimal involvement between the YFCRB and the community and one Former Board member commented that connections were temporary and would not continue beyond the funding period.

Without an evaluation component instituted from the onset of YFC, programs never developed explicit goals and saw our evaluation team as a tool of the Resource Board, with our interests tied to the dissolution of some programs over others. Furthermore, without access to the data needed to assess outcomes, the
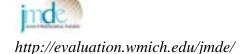
Board members—and indeed others involved in the program—were left to improvise a way to determine program success. The Board required data from the local school system (RUSD) on such outcomes as student reading and math scores, school drop out and graduate rates—data they had supplied when the YFC grant proposal was written, but data that was withheld once the program was underway. This seemed to be the result partly of political infighting among members of the Board, but also reflected a lack of foresight on the part of program staff and Board members about the types of data they would need on an ongoing basis (Poulin, et al., 2000). Also, RUSD may have been attempting to protect itself from negative publicity by refusing to release some of the outcomes that may have reflected poorly on them. As Chelimsky (1987) argues, evaluations are dependent on bureaucratic relationships and conflicts, something that was not accepted nor understood by stakeholders and the Resource Board from the onset. During times of conflict between the YFCRB and the RUSD, the Board threatened to withhold funding from the schools to get information regarding students, and the schools would retaliate by continuing to withhold this information. Indeed, by the close of funding, YFC had not received the data it needed to assess participant outcomes that would aid it in evaluating programming for youth. One Board member commented:

> ...The real question was is Unified sitting on this because they don't want it or is something going on over there that we just can't comprehend, to the point where ...it's inconceivable it takes 12 months to make this kind of decision (Focus group).

Indeed, others on the Resource Board had interests in preventing certain types of negative information from becoming public, another common issue when doing program evaluation (Hills, 1998; Naumes and Naumes, 1999). Since relevant

outcome data were kept from us, the information we could collect consisted of assessing attitudes of program participants regarding their perceptions of YFC programs. These data most likely could be used to the advantage of YFC programs.
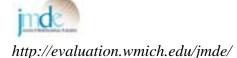
We worked with the Resource Board and program staff to articulate the criteria they used to judge program success, which helped to reveal the ideological underpinnings of the meaning of success (Weiss, 1991). Because of lack of outcome data on program participants from RUSD, Board members came to define success in terms of public visibility and potential for funding sustainability beyond the granting period. Public appearance or image became a proxy for program effectiveness. Program sustainability was indicated, in part, by the nature of partnerships each program formed with other community entities. Such criteria reinforced the coincidence of success with established community programs previously known to youth and community members, and militated against the goals of developing programs not already available to youth and creating a "new way" of dealing with youth issues in Racine.

Assessments of program effectiveness by Board members and program staff were based on "word of mouth" information and were speculative.[7] Such outcomes as development of job skills, job attainment, promotion of social skills, youth participation in the community, positive outcomes on the academic progress of children, and overall improvement of GPAs were mentioned as positive outcomes of programming in YFC, all outcomes based on verbal reports from program staff. Statements regarding students' academic achievements were based on information

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[7] This method of assessing programs and advertising them to the community was used in all YFC programs.

reported from the RUSD rather than on the examination of actual statistics on students' GPA's and academic progress. A former Board member stated, "...from my observations there's been a tremendous change in the community. I believe everyone has benefited from it [YFC]." But no hard data was presented to support this claim.

Participant awareness of programs supported through YFC became an important indicator of program effectiveness partly because program staff felt that the ability of certain programs to catch the community's attention might be built upon to help them disseminate information and involve others. From our survey of program participants, most knew about Midnight Basketball, a highly visible, voluntary program (80%), almost half were aware of the STEP program, and about 40% knew about School-to-Work and Main Gallery. Relatively few knew about Youthful Inroads, a cultural program and Quantum Opportunities, an in-school remediation program mandated by the DOL.

Nationally, only about one-tenth of youth participated in programs with which they were familiar, partly because they thought they didn't need the services offered. This included youth who were school drop-outs, unemployed youth, and those earning low wages (Corson, et al., 1996). Racine had the highest percentage of youth from its target area participating in YFC, but Racine youth tended to participate in only one program, while nationally, youth tended to participate in two or more programs (Needels, et al., 1998).

Half the Board members interviewed felt YFC was successful in achieving its objectives, and the other half was unsure about this. The programs of which Board and Former Board members were most aware and therefore liked the most were the

same programs best known to program participants and were credited with doing a "good job" overall. Eighty-five percent of the board members interviewed ($N = 14$) felt Midnight Basketball was a good program, but they mentioned the employment and training program Short Term Job Skills, the cultural program Main Gallery, and the sports programs R.E.A.C.H. as being effective as well.

School-to-Work, STEP, and Quantum Opportunities were remedial, school-based programs, which were not known to ten Board members. They reported that School-to-Work was valuable in connecting school and employment, offering positive career choices and creating systemic change in the schools. "There are some programs in which you can see immediate results, like Carpentry...the participants tore down the bad buildings, and with the help of carpenters in the community, the participants put up nice new homes" (Board member).[8] STEP was valued because it provided child-care and transportation, enabling YFC participants to attend school. Board members were uniformly negative about Youthful Inroads and Quantum Opportunities, partly because they did not know much about the programs and felt they had poor visibility in the community, and so, little long-term impact on participants. This was compounded by the fact that Quantum Opportunities was mandated by the DOL. One Former board member stated:

> I'm not real familiar with Quantum Opportunities, [it was] not initiated locally but imposed...something they said all YFC projects had to do...In my opinion, it's not gonna go anywhere because it's something that was imposed from the top down, contrary to what the intent of YFC was.

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[8] The Carpentry Program is part of the School-to-Work initiative.

While Board members focused on public awareness, popularity of programs, and visible signs of accomplishment in determining which programs were "the best", these were not always good measures (Mog, 2004). This can be seen in the case of Quantum Opportunities, the program mandated by DOL. Since program visibility was taken as the main indicator of program effectiveness and sustainability, the lack of awareness of Quantum Opportunities by the YFCRB as well as this program's lack of community connections led to its dissolution.

After Quantum Opportunities lost funding in 1996, four of the forty participants in the program became pregnant and 39 of the 40 did not graduate from high school. We learned later that this program was re-instated because of these very negative outcomes for students. A newspaper article reported these findings, prompting a large private corporation to re-fund Quantum Opportunities. Since its refunding, Quantum Opportunities has been successful in keeping students in school, helping them with homework, and seeing 39 of the 40 students in the program graduate from high school. Apparently, using popular awareness or support for programs as a proxy for success was not a valid measure.

Impact of the Evaluation

When we first began working on this project, we thought we would conduct a summative evaluation using accessible data from RUSD, but lack of information transformed our project from summative to formative and moved us to asking questions about what people "liked" as opposed to how well they performed (Gillham, 2000). The fact that we were allowed to collect data on program participants, but not given access to graduation rates and standardized test scores for students meant it was difficult for us to do anything other than validate the
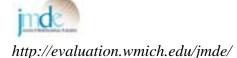
outcomes that the RUSD and YFCRB wished us to validate (Yin, 1994). The attitudinal data we were allowed to collect was most likely to provide positive feedback regarding programming for youth (VanSant, 1989). We were also unable to illuminate the contradictions in the approach being used, such as the disjuncture between the goal of creating a holistic process and the competitive process for funding or the negative consequences of measuring success through public awareness of programs. Throughout the evaluation, it seemed stakeholders supported their special interests at the expense of the overall good, which, as Patton (1987) explains, is a hurdle that often has to be overcome in this work.

Since we entered the picture so late in the game, these outcomes may have been inevitable. As one Board Member put it,

> ...obviously you're at the dead-end of a program that everyone saw the handwriting on the wall, when you're looking at the evaluation component, it becomes an academic exercise rather than a study in improving the process for later on. And that's a difficult thing to sit through. You wonder what are you accomplishing and what shelf is the evaluation gonna sit on (Focus group).

Five years later, we have the benefit of seeing which programs were successful in sustaining themselves and which were not and of knowing the views of participants after several years of reflection. The programs that survived, much as we predicted, were from institutions such as the RUSD and the city parks department. Some programs, such as Quantum Opportunities, were initially eliminated, even though they may have been quite effective, because they did not have name recognition. This underscores that despite evaluators' recommendations, programs with stakeholder support and community connections can survive, given the right combination of circumstances (Weiss, 1987).

Many argue that evaluators should see evaluation as a political tool "…supported by those policymakers whose job it is to allocate resources among competing programs" (Banner, et al., 1975. p. 121). In the end, the role of the evaluator is one of educating policy makers and stakeholders about their programs, i.e., the diverse ideological perspectives of stakeholders, the political implications of these diverse perspectives and the implications of this upon the functioning and outcomes of the program. We assume multiple roles: educators, conflict managers, reporters, liaisons, as well as one additional stakeholder in the evaluation process. This multiplicity of roles is especially true when looking at a program attempting such dramatic changes in program creation and delivery through its neighborhood participation model. As educators, we could emphasize the importance of communication among stakeholders and the evaluation team and define our role in terms of multiple needs rather than tying our role directly to one power source, in this case, the Resource Board (Guba and Lincoln, 1987). Indeed, evaluation is a constantly renegotiated process (Folkman and Rai, 1997), and in that process, perhaps it is misleading to define ourselves as evaluators primarily when we do so much else in the situation.

Several specific suggestions have occurred to us, based on our study:

1. Negotiate for an expanded role, beyond simply "evaluator," to include the mediation of divergent perspectives;

2. Prepare stakeholders to deal with the divergent perspectives likely to emerge;

3. Develop methods for bringing divergent perspectives together, to find common ground, throughout a stakeholder-driven evaluation process;

4. Anticipate the confusion and ambiguity on the part of all parties that is likely to accompany a radical attempt to turn power back to disadvantaged communities;

5. Develop creative ways to help program administrators see that certain strategies are thwarting the very goals they are so keen to achieve;

6. If possible, do focus groups and interviews several years out, to get a clearer picture not only of outcomes, but of program dynamics.

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