Engaging Youth for Positive Change: A Critical Analysis of Case Studies on Local Action

Daniel G. Cooper
Vanderbilt University
Nashville, Tennessee

Scott P. Hays
Center for Prevention Research and Development
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Abstract
This paper discusses the experiences and outcomes associated with Engaging Youth for Positive Change (EYPC), a youth civic engagement program developed to address clean indoor air policy, piloted in four Illinois communities. Youth involvement in public policy offers a potentially powerful tool for empowering youth to affect change, especially when youth representatives are involved as partners in identifying needs, conducting research, and making decisions. The EYPC program seeks to 1) facilitate a critical consciousness about factors at multiple levels that contribute to local problems; 2) facilitate a high level of understanding about power and politics; 3) make youth participants more effective in their efforts to advocate for a clean indoor air policy; and 4) teach youth participants how to collect and analyze data to further support their arguments when speaking to government officials and community members. The paper discusses the difficulty of reconciling a desire for deeper youth engagement with adult-directed civic education and policy goals, addresses youth experiences with the program, and discusses preliminary program outcomes and lessons learned.

Keywords: youth, policy, participation, tobacco, smoking, civic engagement

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Introduction
The role of youth in influencing local public policies is often overlooked by community-based coalitions and policy advocates. If youth are involved in change efforts, participation is typically organized and directed by adults. Enabling youth to gain a critical understanding of their environment and empowering them to become future community advocates is often ancillary to positive public relations associated with youth involvement. Urban planners also sometimes solicit the participation of youth in charettes or design exercises. However, there is little documentation of efforts to help youth develop a critical understanding of their environment—including its resources, powerful stakeholders, and political processes—and translate it into organizing and advocacy around a specific local policy.

It has been suggested that a systemic understanding of societal problems by youth is related to the income and education levels of their families (Flanagan and Tucker 1999). However, helping youth develop a deeper understanding of societal problems can empower them to become more engaged with their civic environment while also helping them to become more active and successful adults with an interest in social justice (Evans and Prilleltensky 2005). Further, providing youth with meaningful, ecologically valid opportunities for involvement in important community issues is essential for developing future civic involvement (Pittman 1999; Roth and Brooks-Gunn 2003). Empowerment happens when individuals perceive themselves to have some control over their environment (Zimmerman 1995, 2000). The degree to which youth are empowered and committed to civic actions is related to their perception of the meaningfulness of their involvement (Andolina et al. 2002). Extensive literature exists on the benefits of engaging youth in community-based programs, yet there is little research on the impacts of youth involvement in local policy advocacy.

This paper discusses a program called Engaging Youth for Positive Change, which intends to give youth knowledge and political skills in order to empower them to influence a specific policy that applies to their city. It offers insights into the challenges of engaging youth in meaningful policy advocacy while at the same time imparting a sense of empowerment and community-oriented values. The paper presents four case studies of different groups attempting to translate newly acquired civic knowledge and skills into efforts to organize community support and advocate for a local clean indoor air ordinance. In all cases, a clean indoor air, or smoke-free, ordinance was chosen in advance as the policy of focus during the pilot development phase. Future iterations of the program would ideally allow youth to choose a policy in which they are interested. The efficacy of this model—where policy choice is predetermined—with regard to empowerment and youth-directed decision-making, along with other research observations, will be addressed throughout.

In order to become effective advocates for change within their environments, youth need a strong sense of empowerment and both external and internal political efficacy. External political efficacy is citizens’ sense that the community and its government care what they think, and internal political efficacy is citizens’ sense that they personally can influence government (Craig et al. 1990). Together, these
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concepts are at the core of a healthy community (Craig et al. 1990). Recent studies of youth development reinforce the notion that youth are a valuable asset for building healthy communities (Zeldin et al. 2000; Haid et al. 1999; Zaff and Michelson 2002). Youth who have strong bonds to their families, schools, and communities tend to be invested in the beliefs and standards held by these groups (Zeldin et al. 2000). Bonds are created by providing opportunities for youth to be involved in meaningful ways and by providing skills and recognition for their involvement (Zaff and Michelson 2002). Adolescents who are involved in civic affairs have been shown to have a stronger work ethic, are more likely to be involved in voluntary activities and to vote, and display more socially responsible attitudes as adults than those who are not involved (Zaff and Michelsen 2002). Further, as teens they have been shown to have more success in school and are less likely to use drugs than their peers who do not participate (Zaff and Michelsen 2002). Youth civic engagement has also been linked with a sense of personal competency, self esteem, and involvement in prosocial activities (Yates and Youniss 1996). Youth participation in community-based programs has also been linked with positive academic performance (Johnson et al. 1998).

Studies of youth engagement suggest that engaging youth in the civic life of their community and in national politics can have profound effects on their civic attitudes. For example, programs such as “Kids Voting USA” can help youth become better informed about civics and can have a significant positive influence on participants’ sense of efficacy and trust in the motives of elected officials (McLeod et al. 1997). Other studies find that youth can have a significant impact on the organization in which they participate and the larger community, as well (Zeldin et al. 2000). Researchers involved in the Community Intervention Trial for Smoking Cessation (COMMIT) noted that many of their target communities documented the important role youth played in successful local policy change (McGranaghan et al. 1995).

A study of efforts to pass tobacco ordinances in three cities in Contra Costa County California suggests that one of the key lessons learned was to mobilize and develop youth as advocates because they can have an influential voice at public hearings (Pratt and Freestone 2000). The authors go on to state that, “mobilizing youth to be involved in all aspects of the process was crucial to the Tobacco-Free Youth Ordinance adoption” (Pratt and Freestone 2000, p. 8). Another study attributes the success of two Southwestern cities’ clean indoor air ordinances mostly to the efforts of teen-led organizing. A 15-year-old campaign leader discussed how using youth lobbyists seemed to be an effective strategy, due in large part to the novelty of youth participating in political processes. (Rogers 2003). In a study of tobacco control campaigns from 20 communities across the country, the success of several of the communities’ efforts was attributed in large measure to the work of youth (Hays and Hays 2002).

Youth alcohol, tobacco, and other drug (ATOD) prevention programs are numerous but tend to focus on the individual rather than on his or her social environment. Evaluation studies have shown evidence of the failure of this one-sided approach (Brown and Kreft 1998; Ennett et al. 1994). In fact, civic engagement of youth can
have far-reaching impacts on a variety of detrimental youth behaviors. The Search Institute found that focusing on youth assets and building positive youth leadership skills achieves the same the positive impacts—in terms of substance use—desired from more direct alcohol and other drug use prevention programs (Benson et al. 1999). The active participation of youth in the change process has been shown to contribute to positive alcohol, tobacco, and other drug (ATOD) outcomes in youth—outcomes that are even more pronounced if these programs involve the community, as well (Tobler and Stratton 1997; Tobler 1998). There is much potential for youth participation in policy advocacy to produce positive impacts for youth and the community at large, whether on substance-related policy or not. It is also preferable that youth exhibit a large degree of control in the process. However, in order for youth to successfully mobilize a community, a program must be able to instill a sense of communal values above personal interest (Balsano 2005). This necessitates the successful merger of educational goals with youth-driven activities.

**Program Overview**

Engaging Youth for Positive Change (EYPC) is a program designed by the Center for Prevention Research and Development (CPRD) at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign to educate junior high and high school-age youth about local government and to empower them to advocate for change in their community. During the development phase, clean indoor air policy was the predetermined focus for all implementation sites in order to ensure that participating groups possessed enough information and tools to successfully act as policy advocates. In the program, youth participants spend time learning about the physical and political environment of their neighborhood and city and work as advocates for the adoption of a local ordinance. Development began in 2003 by documenting the benefits and drawbacks of engaging young people in policy change efforts (Hays and Scholla 2003). This analysis pointed to the need for a more comprehensive youth engagement curriculum based on the logic model depicted in Appendix A.

The curriculum was developed in fall 2003, with a closely monitored developmental trial implemented in the spring of 2004 and three other trials implemented through early 2005. This paper reports the results and youth experiences of these trials. As mentioned previously, this version of the curriculum focuses exclusively on an ordinance requiring public places in the community to be smoke-free—usually called a “clean indoor air ordinance”—but future iterations of the program would ideally allow youth to choose other policies as the community’s needs and youth interests dictate. Developmental funding is tied to substance abuse policy activism, and clean indoor air policies are currently diffusing rapidly statewide following a recent rescinding of a state law that prohibited local governments from enacting clean indoor air ordinances. However, reconciling a predetermined policy focus with the desire to facilitate youth empowerment represents the biggest challenge for the program and ultimately the greatest lessons to be learned for researchers and program developers.

The program is designed to be implemented in an after-school setting during 21 two-hour weekly sessions. Program sessions include various activities, including visits from guest speakers—local elected officials and community organizers, among
others—youth-driven research and data collection, and finally, organizing the community and holding a community forum. At the community forum, the youth discuss with neighborhood residents and others what they learned about the community, how the policy issue impacts their environment, and why it is important to support and advocate for the policy. At a minimum, the program was designed to heighten community awareness of the smoke-free issue and, at best, to facilitate the adoption of a clean indoor air ordinance.

The EYPC curriculum is comprised of five distinct core units with separate learning goals and outcomes designed to enable the youth to organize a community forum. The first unit introduces youth to the role of government, laws, and policies in their everyday lives and environments. The youth learn about how they currently interact with their local government on a day-to-day basis—both directly and indirectly—and the potential power they can have in influencing government policy. They also begin to learn about the specific local policy, as well as basic advocacy skills through activities and a visit from a local policy advocate. In the second unit, youth learn the avenues through which they can impact their local government; they learn about their local political structure, who their elected officials are, and what they do. This unit includes a visit by a city clerk and local alderman or city councilman, and a field trip to observe a city council session. The third unit helps youth develop a deeper understanding of the resources, problems, and needs surrounding their neighborhood and city environment. The youth explore their own unique conceptualizations of their environment and are challenged to develop a critical understanding of the structural complexities of problems, culminating with a discussion of how community resources can be utilized to help solve them. A visit by a local community organizer helps them to better understand their neighborhood environment and its resources. The fourth unit applies their newly acquired knowledge to data collection activities, the results of which will be presented at the community forum. Youth collect opinion data about the specific policy from people in the community and opinion and behavior data from restaurant owners and/or managers. Finally, unit five is devoted to organizing and planning for the community forum during which they combine all that they have learned into a presentation. If possible, the group presents their findings directly to the city council.

As illustrated in the program logic model (see Appendix A), some of the intended immediate outcomes include teaching youth life skills (e.g. problem solving, decision-making, communication); helping them develop a critical understanding of their immediate environment at the neighborhood and city level; increasing civic understanding; and helping them dissect and understand a specific public policy. Intended short-term outcomes include increasing networks between youth and influential adults, increasing the ability to gather, synthesize, and present materials to the public, and increasing advocacy and organizing skills. Expected intermediate outcomes include increased positive problem-solving skills, increased perceived social control of their environment, increased leadership and communication skills, increased self-esteem, increased sense of community and group cohesion, and belief in the efficacy of mobilizing for the purpose of social change. Expected long-term outcomes include an increase in educational and career goals, increased
awareness of environment and a sense of civic duty to change that environment for the better, increased self-esteem and a belief in their ability to succeed academically. Beyond raising community awareness of the issue, the ultimate intended impact of the program is the successful adoption of a clean indoor air ordinance. This occurred in each of the three implementation cities—along with a decrease in both intended and actual tobacco use.

The researchers complete pre- and post-program data collection, including surveys and focus groups, and monitor the implementation of the program at each site. Pre- and post-program focus group questions solicit participants’ understanding of the local political environment, opinions about public officials, belief in the ability to change their environment through policy advocacy, and concern about the specific policy. The post-program focus group also asks questions about youth experiences with the program, current belief in their ability to influence their environment, views of politicians, and views about the policy. Pre- and post-program survey measures are intended to evaluate future goals, self-confidence, cooperation and communication, perceptions of the community, attention to public affairs and political engagement, political trust, political efficacy, and substance use, among others. Our current data do not possess a sufficient sample size for higher statistical analyses, so results will be discussed more generally and in terms of means and percentages. Observational data were obtained by evaluators through direct observation of sessions or through facilitator conversations and journal entries. The following case studies document program outcomes and youth experiences as understood by CPRD researchers—including successes, failures, and challenges—related to the four different communities that have implemented the program in 2004 and 2005. We use pseudonyms for all Chicago neighborhoods and program implementation sites described in this paper.

Case Study 1: Jackson Henry Behavioral Health Center, Elmwood Park Neighborhood, Chicago, IL

Overview
Elmwood Park is a predominantly African-American neighborhood within the City of Chicago. The program was implemented at the Jackson Henry Behavioral Health Center in Elmwood Park, which offers adult mental health counseling and provides youth anti-tobacco and anti-drug curricula. The program ran from winter 2004 to early summer 2004. In Chicago, a campaign to pass a city-wide clean indoor air ordinance was underway and led by an active coalition. By coincidence, Jackson Henry was located in the city council district of a major advocate of a proposed clean indoor air ordinance.

The program at Jackson Henry began with 11 youth, (all African-American, four female and seven male) who had already completed an anti-drug curriculum and had been previously engaged in some level of community activism. As an incentive for participation in this first developmental implementation of the program, all youth were offered a stipend payment of $20 for each session that they attended. There were at least eight youth participating in more than 80 percent of the 21 sessions. The peak attendance per session was 16 youth and the average
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attendance was 11 youth. Participating youth completed all aspects of the program including a visit by a woman from the city clerk’s office to talk about city government, a field trip to a council meeting, a visit by their alderman, community activist guest speakers, and field data-gathering activities. The youth hosted an impressive community forum in front of more than 100 people, including the sponsoring alderman. In late 2005, the city of Chicago passed a smoke-free ordinance spearheaded by this area alderman. Although no data were collected to ascertain the impact of the ordinance on youth participants, they were nonetheless clearly on the cusp of a sweeping smoking policy change in the city, the ultimate intended outcome of the program.

Pre-Program Characteristics
Pre-program survey data regarding cigarette smoking indicate some level of use among youth, but not in the year preceding their participation. Only two out of 15 participants reported ever using tobacco at all. Use of other substances was slightly more common. More than half of the participants reported having used marijuana in the past and four participants reported having used alcohol. Sense of community and community bonding was moderate at the outset of the program (M=2.83 on four-point Likert scale). Most youth also tended to agree that a group of community residents working together could successfully initiate change, a question intended to measure collective efficacy (M=3.56 on 4-point Likert). However, political participation and attention to public affairs was comparatively low (M=1.74 on 4-point Likert). Pre-program focus group results indicated that both political knowledge and political trust were very low.

Observational Data and Lessons Learned
Many of these activities were new and eye-opening experiences for the Jackson Henry youth. Youth reported visiting a city council meeting, seeing the mayor, and meeting their neighborhood alderman as positive experiences. The stories from the community activist guest speakers were both engaging and inspiring. Further, the success of the forum made all of the youth feel that their efforts were worthwhile. While much of the audience was comprised of Jackson Henry clients and staff, they were nonetheless members of the community and were very engaged during the presentation. In applying their knowledge, youth successfully responded to audience questions during the forum and felt a sense of accomplishment in doing so.

This first developmental implementation of the program also revealed challenges and lessons to be learned. Tedium and frustrating experiences, such as a cancelled visit by the alderman and tedious routine tasks of council meetings, call for more opportunities within the program for youth to discuss and process these events to make sure learning occurs rather than disempowerment. Another problem had to do with the sense of ownership of the tasks. The program asks youth to conduct community member interviews and do their own restaurant observations between programming sessions. Youth perceived these activities as “homework” and rarely completed the tasks, which is especially problematic for a program that aims to facilitate a sense of empowerment. In addition, youth did not complete some key activities—such as press releases, flyers and other notices—to promote their
community forum among the larger community. The room was full during the community forum, but attendance had more to do with the Jackson Henry Center Director promoting it within the center than with any community mobilization efforts by the youth. Lastly, the youth were somewhat cynical about their alderman’s support for their efforts after he essentially “stole the show” during their presentation. Again, we feel that such an experience calls for more space in the program devoted to helping the youth process and learn from experiences so that they have the chance to become partners in the program and the future advocacy strategy.

**Post-Program Data**
Post-program focus group and survey data showed that despite difficulties, the program improved the future outlook of participants, their career goals, their self-confidence and their sense of political efficacy and trust. It increased their participation in, and attention to, civic affairs and reduced their intended and actual substance use. It should be noted, again, that the low sample size of this research prevents the data from being statistically significant. Youth reported a better understanding of the legislative process and felt that the program had helped them pass a state-mandated government test in school. Interestingly, while overall trust in public officials did not change much, most admitted they could trust the alderman they had met. They also felt that public officials “care what people like us think,” indicating a favorable change in political efficacy. Attitudes about secondhand smoke also became stronger with one youth stating, “it made me tell my mom what I wanted for Christmas: stop smoking inside.” Overall, the data gathered from the evaluation of the program suggests that the youth gained empowering skills and experiences as a result of the program.

**Case Study 2: Madison Middle School, Champaign, IL**

**Overview**
Champaign is a predominantly white city in rural Illinois that is home to a major university. The program was implemented at Madison Middle School, which serves a mixed-race, middle-income community. The program ran from late fall 2004 to early summer 2005. Like Chicago, the city of Champaign had an active community campaign for a clean indoor air ordinance underway and a member of the local community adult coalition attended every session at Madison. The program began with 16 eighth-grade youth: eight African-American (two female and six male) and eight white (four female and four male). The program offered a $50 gift card upon program completion as an incentive, and provided pizza and soda before each session. Ultimately, 10 youth completed more than 80 percent of the sessions with an average attendance of 11. The youth completed all program activities, including a community forum that gave the youth the opportunity to present their findings and recommendations alongside coalition members in the City Hall chambers. In the spring of 2006, the Champaign City Council also passed a smoke-free ordinance that included both restaurants and bars. Again, no follow-up data had been collected from youth at the time of this publication; however, this group has also had the opportunity to witness the intended policy change take place.
Pre-Program Characteristics
Similar to the case of Elmwood Park, pre-program data indicated a very limited level of past substance use among youth and none within the past year. None of the youth reported using tobacco, and only three out of 16 reported having ever tried alcohol. Four participants reported the desire to try both alcohol and marijuana in the future. Both survey and focus group results indicated very low political knowledge and trust. Sense of community and community bonding was also moderate for this group at the outset of the program. Similar to the Jackson Henry youth, participants displayed a belief that citizens acting together could initiate change in the community. But the current level of political participation and attention to public affairs was similarly low with this group.

Observational Data and Lessons Learned
Program activities that seemed most empowering and exciting for the youth included a trip to a city council meeting, and guest visits by Champaign’s mayor, a supportive city council member, and a long-time community activist. At the city council meeting, the youth spoke directly with the mayor and were publicly acknowledged by the supportive council member. They also had the opportunity to speak with another council member after the meeting. Other activities had more of a mixed impact on the youth. For example, during their interviews with restaurant owners or managers about the smoke-free issue, youth confronted rejection—in some cases bordering on hostility—which was challenging and discouraging even though most interviewees were pleasant. Dealing with both rejection and support made this an authentic real-world research experience.

In contrast to the Jackson Henry group, the youth of Champaign did most of the planning of their forum presentation and did their own data analysis, and while their own promotional efforts fell short, they did make a good attempt. The community forum was a notable success. Youth were much more involved in its preparation at Madison than at Jackson Henry. The forum was held in city council chambers on a non-meeting night with youth seated up front along with several other community guest speakers invited by the community coalition. After their presentation, several of the youth were able to respond effectively to spontaneous audience questions that challenged the secondhand smoke ordinance. This was an empowering experience for the young people, and they reported enjoying the opportunity to present their findings at the city council chambers. Stories about the forum were on the radio, television and in the local newspaper, stimulating a genuine community-wide dialog on the smoke-free issue. While attendance was slightly lower than Jackson Henry, there were many more community members—both supporters and opponents—who attended as a result of its promotion. As a result of this attention and media coverage, the Champaign City Council took up a clean indoor air ordinance on its official agenda a week later and passed it in the spring of 2006.

Like the program at Jackson Henry, there were several lessons the researchers learned from this implementation. While the trip to city council chambers was a positive experience for the youth, only five of the 11 regularly attending youth were able to attend the evening meeting. In addition, youth were left with a somewhat
poor image of the mayor, who came to speak with a pack of Pall Mall cigarettes plainly visible in his white shirt pocket! Moreover, repeated cancellations by the supportive council member left the youth questioning their importance to him and ultimately his commitment to the smoke-free issue. Even though the participants expressed frustration, the experience presents an opportunity to help the youth process such events and learn to overcome the adversity and frustration that is often associated with community change efforts.

Three-quarters of the way through the program, the youth expressed ambiguity about the goals and direction of the program, raising questions about how much they truly understood about what they were doing. In advance of the forum, some youth felt unclear about the role they were supposed to play. Finally the sub-team of youth assigned to promote the community forum, while accomplishing much more than the Jackson Henry youth, in the end did not get far, and most of the promotion was done by the adult coalition. This happened in part because the power dynamic between the adult coalition members and youth was such that little space was given to the youth to drive the promotional activities. The event was not very youth-driven and there seemed to be less of a sense of ownership and, consequently, less of an impetus on the part of the youth to promote the forum. It seemed that the high degree of adult-directed activity of the program significantly impeded youth ownership and understanding of the program policy goals and objectives.

Post-Program Data
Despite the program’s shortcomings, youth seemed to gain much from the engagement experience. Post-program focus group data indicated an improvement in youth following local civic affairs, and some improvement in trust and a reduction in cynicism about local government and their own ability to impact their local government. Responses to a question about how much knowledge they had about the local government were much more sophisticated than those solicited prior to the program. Many agreed after the program that they could do as good a job as most people in public office. They also improved their self-confidence and efficacy as youth. Youth also reported feeling more attached to the community and a stronger belief in the community’s ability to initiate change. In terms of substance use, none of the youth reported any tobacco use during the program, nor any intention to use in the future. However, both actual and intended use of alcohol and marijuana increased slightly.

Case Study 3: Youth Central, Buffalo Grove, IL

Overview
Buffalo Grove is a predominantly white, middle- to upper-middle-class suburb of Chicago. The implementation site was Youth Central, a social service organization that provides counseling and alternatives for youth struggling with substance abuse issues, as well as after school programs and activities geared toward substance abuse prevention for youth in general. Youth Central ran the program from fall of 2004 to early summer 2005 with a group of nine high school boys and girls, most of whom had previously voluntarily participated in Youth Central after-school
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Programs. Average attendance was five students, and five students attended at least 80 percent of the sessions. The group was a mix of white and Indian-American students. The participants were interested in academic achievement and extracurricular activities. Further, they were already interested in substance abuse prevention, having taken an organizational pledge to refrain from any substance use while participating in Youth Central activities. The program was implemented from fall 2004 to spring 2005, at which point there were five remaining core participants (all female). The group completed all program activities, including a community forum at Youth Central and a presentation to the city council during a regularly scheduled session, with approximately 50 citizens in attendance. After the presentation, the council voted unanimously to have a committee look into the issue, and in the spring of 2006 the full council passed a smoke-free ordinance for the entire city.

Pre-Program Characteristics
According to pre-program survey and focus group information, the participants by and large all believed they would have success in school, go to college, and be successful later in life, more so than the other implementation groups. They were somewhat unique in that many of them noted they were participating in the program as a means of adding lines to their resumes in order to get into better colleges and universities. As was the case with all groups, there was no reported tobacco use within the year prior to participation. However, the majority (six of nine) of these youth reported occasionally using alcohol and one youth reported using marijuana. The sense of community and community-bonding was similar to the other groups. In terms of political knowledge and participation, most did not follow politics, and if they did, only marginally. Knowledge of the local political environment was also generally low, and most did not engage in any political activities. However, most participants possessed a high sense of trust in relation to politicians and government in general, as well as a relatively high degree of political and collective efficacy. Most strongly believed citizens could initiate policy change.

Observational Data and Lessons Learned
The program implementation at Youth Central was successful in numerous ways, but also provided much evidence of weaknesses and challenges that require addressing in the future. The program culminated with a presentation to the village council, where the youth discussed the findings of their research and their recommendations for policy change. They received a loud applause from the community members in attendance and the council voted to have the health committee examine the issue. This was possible because the youth had established a connection with one of the council members, who had visited the group as a guest speaker early on in the program to talk about the village government. Their findings illustrated a desire on the part of the citizens to have a smoke-free municipality. Presenting this information to the citizens and council members was an exciting and empowering event for the youth participants, because of the degree to which the council seemed to take them seriously. As a result of the youth efforts, the council did take up the issue and ended up passing an ordinance in the spring of 2006. This represents the first instance in the life of the program in which the youth were actually a major impetus for policy change.
This moment represented the crowning achievement of Youth Central’s program implementation, but there are also elements of the program that the authors feel represent, to some degree, failures, or at the least, indicators of future challenges. For instance, attendance was consistently a problem throughout the life of the program and the group finished with half the number of participants with which it started out. It is understandable that high school students have many other priorities and engagements; however, we take this to be a sign that our curriculum needs to be redeveloped in a manner that is more engaging to the youth participants. Those youth who continued to participate remained positive throughout the life of the program. However, this group was particularly eager to please both the facilitator and the evaluators, so it was slightly more difficult to solicit critical feedback. The youth took ownership of activities but constantly looked to the adult facilitator for guidance. As many of the participants were excellent students and used to following directions from adults, it was difficult to tell if this group felt as though they truly owned the goals and objectives of the program. Further, participants were discouraged by any rejection or opposition from community members. Although this could have provided a potential space for important advocacy learning, the youth had a difficult time recovering from rejection. The experiences of the Buffalo Grove youth have led the evaluators to believe that there need to be more explicit opportunities for youth to reflect on their understanding and the nature of their ownership of the goals and objectives of the project.

**Post-Program Data**
Post-program focus group and survey data were collected from only the four participants who remained in the program at its completion. The focus group revealed that the program helped lead the youth to believe more strongly in their ability to influence their environment through public policy advocacy. They also reported that they would now be more likely to engage in further change efforts. Further, youth reported feeling more attached to their community. Interestingly, in terms of substance use, two of the four remaining youth reported using tobacco and alcohol who had not reported the same prior to the start of the program.

**Case Study 4: Adams Park after School Program, Chicago, IL**

**Overview**
Adams Park is a predominantly African American (98 percent) neighborhood in Chicago that suffers from years of economic disinvestment and crime, similar to Elmwood Park. The Adams Park After School Program (APASP) was started by a concerned parent who, after years of worrying about the safety of her own children in the neighborhood, decided to start a program where local youth would have a place to hang out and engage in positive activities to keep them away from neighborhood problems. APASP began the program in February of 2005 and opted to meet twice a week in an attempt to complete the program in half the amount of time (approximately 11 weeks). At the outset of the program there were nine participants (seven male and two female) and an average of five of them attended
the sessions. All of the participants were in the upper grades of high school (15 to 18 years old).

**Pre-Program Characteristics**
According to pre-program survey and focus group data, the APASP group was different from the other groups in several ways. In general, APASP participants reported a much lower degree of trust in politicians and the government system in general, and they had a lower sense of political efficacy and a lower expectation in the efficacy of organizing and public policy advocacy. However, each participant strongly agreed that citizens could initiate change in their community (M=4.0). Further, although many participants had high expectations of academic and future job success, not everyone believed they were likely to attend college. Similar to the other groups, APASP participants possessed a low degree of knowledge about their local political environment, and the city government in general. Sense of community was similarly moderate (M=3.03), and political participation was similarly low (M=1.8) in relation to the other groups. Finally, unlike the other groups, many of the youth reported regularly using substances such as alcohol and marijuana (seven of nine in each case), although only two reported using tobacco within the past year. Concern or interest in a smoke-free ordinance was also not initially very high.

**Observational Data and Lessons Learned**
The program played out very differently at APASP than it did with the other groups. One of the major differences was that many of the participants were substance users—or at least had acknowledged to being substance users. It should also be noted that the program facilitator was herself a smoker, and although the program was designed to not communicate any judgment on individuals who smoke, at the very least this provided a possible influence on the intended outcome of reducing substance use. It became obvious very quickly that the youth were not overly concerned about the smoke-free ordinance, and they also continued to express doubts about their prospective degree of influence over their political and physical environment.

Setting up a meeting with their city council representative proved to be a challenging and disempowering event, as the alderman missed consecutive meetings that had been arranged, and there had been a miscommunication about another meeting time that prevented a visit from ever happening. This seemed to further exacerbate feelings of low collective and political efficacy. The bright spot in the program was that the youth became actively engaged in several discussion sessions on the community environment. These discussions revealed to the authors that the program was not necessarily ecologically valid for this particular population. The youth perceived there to be far too many other issues and problems in their community environment to find the issue of secondhand smoke meaningful as a focus for their action. Furthermore, some of the youth held the opinion that a smoke-free ordinance was not needed or was not even a good thing. This was problematic because the curriculum, as it stood, was designed specifically to focus on a local smoke-free policy.
Although the youth were able to learn to apply a critical analysis to their environments and discover community problems and resources, empowering them to advocate for an indoor smoking policy change proved to be difficult. In fact, one of the authors who observed the discussions about root causes of community problems concluded that the youth seemed to develop less belief in their efficacy as change agents. Through several discussions with the APASP facilitator, we decided to attempt to adapt the program to allow for discussions about other policies the youth might want to organize around and advocate for in the future, while relying on the smoke-free ordinance purely as an example. This was marginally successful in continuing to engage the participants, who were also inspired by the visit of a prominent African-American alderman from another area of town—the same alderman who had spoken to the Jackson Henry youth—who was himself an advocate of a proposed smoke-free ordinance. However, the experience was also a source of frustration, as the alderman did not engage the youth in dialogue but rather “stole the show” much in the same way as he had at the Elmwood Park community forum. The youth continued to participate in the program through unit four, where they went out into the community to collect data about community opinions and smoking behavior in restaurants. At this point, however, the school year was ending, summer vacation was starting, and program attendance proved impossible to sustain. Since the program was not run to completion and many of the students were no longer around in the summer, no post-program data were collected.

**Conclusion and Implications**

Our experience of developing a program that aims to help youth understand and change their local environments has proven to be a challenge. The efficacy of our model, which attempts to empower youth while at the same time educating them about local government and a specific policy related to tobacco, must be called into question. Evaluation of these four pilot implementations has revealed a glaring incompatibility between the educational and advocacy goals, and the desire to engage youth and impart a sense of ownership over the program. It is clear that the program in its current form relies too heavily on adult-directed education, leaving little opportunity for youth decision-making. Although programmatic activities such as the opportunity for youth to “speak truth to power” have been shown to be empowering experiences, the larger programmatic process through which they have occurred was flawed. The authors have reflected extensively on whether or not a program with such heavy educational components can be truly empowering for youth participants.

Balsano (2005) argues that effective mobilization is predicated on careful education that, ideally, instills a sense of communal values in youth participants. This mobilization is similar to the type of participation that the EYPC program seeks to facilitate. First and foremost, empowerment and deeper youth engagement are less attainable if a specific policy is chosen for the youth. Our interest was to create a program that could be easily implemented by a community site, so we chose—based also partially on the authors’ interest in smoke-free policy—to select the policy in advance in order to ensure that each site would have the tools necessary to become successful advocates. In the case of Buffalo Grove, the youth were
already interested in the second-hand smoke issue so the youth had a chance to feel a sense of ownership, but this was clearly not the case for the Adams Park group, which had little interest from the outset. As a result, the program was more didactic than it was engaging or empowering. When programs fail, it is probably often because of a lack of fit between the interests or needs of youth and the advocacy or policy goals of a program.

In spite of the critiques, the authors are not ready to concede that educational goals are entirely incompatible with youth engagement and empowerment. If policy change is the intended long-term impact outcome, education still needs to be a strong component, but we believe it is possible for program developers to provide enough general information about policy advocacy that youth can then apply it to an issue of personal interest. This would involve providing a wealth of policy information for youth to draw on and apply as they see fit. In this program, the activities that were the most engaging involved eliciting narratives from youth and treating them as experts—such as the activity in which youth discussed neighborhood assets, problems, and needs. In virtually all programmatic activities, there could be more space devoted to facilitating youth narratives about their experiences and helping them to make connections between their visions and communal values associated with policy advocacy. In this sense, the focus of the program would shift slightly from ushering youth through predetermined activities in a timely fashion to providing youth with advocacy tools, suggested activities, and space for reflection and decision-making.

Providing more space for youth leadership, however, calls for extremely skilled facilitators who can provide enough direction to ensure youth are learning the necessary skills to make informed decisions, while at the same time allowing enough space for youth to drive the process as experts. In this sense, the facilitator becomes both teacher and skilled narrative therapist who helps youth relate new information to their personal stories and goals so that they can make informed decisions about what they want to change in their environments, and how to go about doing it in a community-oriented fashion.

We feel that the EYPC program as it currently stands has the potential to be a successful tobacco advocacy program, albeit a primarily educational one. The clean indoor air policy issue is currently a politically important topic in the state of Illinois and throughout the country. A testament to this is the fact that the three implementation cities have all successfully adopted a smoke-free ordinance, and in each case the youth were involved in the effort. Further, in the case of the smaller cities—Champaign and Buffalo Grove—the youth played a key role in the process. We believe these experiences have potential long-term implications for the future advocacy work of youth, even though the process was not entirely youth-directed. The current curriculum could be successfully implemented by youth groups that are already interested in the secondhand smoke issue and whose participants have chosen to dedicate themselves to the issue. The authors intend to work on developing two separate program curricula, one that attempts to provide training for youth already interested in becoming smoke-free advocates, and one that
attempts to engage youth to develop a deeper understanding of their environments and become advocates for a policy of their choice.

Lessons learned by these pilot implementations of the EYPC program also have general implications for program developers. The capacity of implementation sites is of the highest importance. Their ability to handle logistical issues is one of the major challenges of successful advocacy program implementation. Everything from scheduling meetings with government officials to providing transportation for youth participants was difficult for program facilitators. In fact, these case studies raise questions about whether the program places an overwhelming burden on the facilitators. The program requires both knowledge and planning skills, including knowledge of one’s local community and local government. It was clear that in most cases, facilitators were stretched in terms of their commitment to the various things they were already doing and had little time available for advance preparation, such as reading ahead, much less prepare for scheduling speakers and arranging trips. This would likely be alleviated if the program were implemented with staff members who were assigned to implement the program as part of their regular responsibilities and not in addition to them. Furthermore, a crucial aspect of successful implementation is the facilitator’s ability to provide enough space for youth reflection and critical learning. Facilitator capacity becomes even more important if the program focus is shifted further toward youth engagement or empowerment rather than education. Maintaining constant attendance also proved to be a continual struggle, and we took this as an obvious sign that the program needs to be further refined in ways that are more engaging to the youth, as previously discussed. As youth progress through middle school (12 to 14 years of age) and high school (15 to 18 years of age), extracurricular demands become increasingly intense. This was reflected in the attendance of our wealthiest community—Buffalo Grove—where youth in the 11th grade were busy with college preparation. Again, this would probably be solved if the activities were more youth-directed, and hence more engaging for them.

It is important for program developers to determine the degree to which a program is a good fit for a community before implementation, or how it could be adapted to better meet community interests. Part of the reason the program was not successful in Adams Park, as mentioned previously, is that it did not connect with the community’s needs. There is a lot to be learned by this ultimate program failure. First, it speaks to the need to conduct a thorough analysis of the capacity and readiness of the organizations that implement the program. We want to be able to empower youth in disenfranchised communities such as Adams Park, so one of our biggest challenges is developing the program to be general enough to be able to be adapted and made relevant by them. We are even concerned that poorly conceived programs may do more harm than good. Although we have no post-program data to confirm whether or not this was the case with the APASP group, it would be a detriment to everyone involved if a program not only failed to empower youth to understand and change their environments but actually disempowered them. When conducting processes that are intended to raise consciousness about the systemic nature of problems associated with a given environment, there is always a risk of unintentionally imparting a sense that change is not feasible, and
that youth do not possess any power or social control. However, one of the potential strengths of EYPC is in helping youth to translate real-life experiences of frustration, disappointment, and even disempowerment into critical learning about the process of change in their community. Each group of youth experienced their own set of frustrations, such as being treated rudely while collecting data, being confronted with opposition, or seemingly being ignored by elected officials. These experiences present opportunities for youth to learn how to overcome the adversity and frustration that is almost always a part of community change efforts.

Critical and analytical skills are a core educational component of the program. We were concerned that we were not able to measure the degree to which the program imparted critical and analytical skills that youth could use in the future. For example, part of the challenge presented by the Youth Central group in particular was that participants were high functioning and had high levels of current and expected achievement. Several students talked about extracurricular programs and their resumes with frequency, and they may have ultimately viewed the program as more of a resume-building endeavor than an exercise in critically altering their understanding of their environment. Although the information we received from the Youth Central post-program focus group indicates that the youth seem to have a higher sense of collective and political efficacy, and they report that they are likely to get involved in change efforts in the future, it was hard to assess the degree to which they gleaned a deeper understanding of their environment. Our future research will need to develop measures to assess the impact of such programs on critical thinking skills that youth can apply to their physical and political environments.

In the three sites that completed the program, youth did have an impact on the wider community in which they live by raising awareness of the clean indoor air issue. Moreover, the program directly impacted the political process in both Champaign and Buffalo Grove, and ordinances were passed in each of the three cities. These kinds of impacts reinforce the notion among youth that they can influence their communities. Even though there were shortcomings in the program, our results suggest that youth did improve their factual knowledge and understanding of their local government and increased the attention they paid to civic affairs. We believe that the critical thinking skills and knowledge imparted to EYPC participating youth about their community and government will last far beyond the clean indoor air issue and will facilitate the process of building active citizenship.

Daniel G. Cooper, M.S., is a doctoral student in community research and action at Vanderbilt University. His research focuses on civic engagement and policy change, participatory community development, urban planning, affordable housing, and organizational change. Along with Dr. Scott Hays and Kurt Schola, he was responsible for developing and implementing the program "Engaging Youth for Positive Change."
Scott P. Hays, Ph.D., is a research scientist with the Center for Prevention Research and Development at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His research has included tobacco ordinance adoption in local communities, state substance abuse prevention systems, policy innovation, and youth involvement in policy change. He is currently directing the development of the new prevention policy curriculum "Engaging Youth for Positive Change."

References


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the Midwest Political Science Association Annual Conference, Chicago, IL, April 25-28, 2002.


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<td>CPRD implements the Youth Civic Engagement Project, a program that focuses on engaging youth in the process of local tobacco policy change.</td>
<td>• National, state and local civic education  • Specific local policy  • Defining community  • Understanding local environments at multiple levels including resources, problems, and needs  • Collecting and synthesizing relevant information from numerous sources  • Organizing a community to support a specific policy  • Holding a community forum to educate residents about the specific policy</td>
<td>• Increased knowledge and understanding of life skills (goal setting, problem solving, decision making, and communication)  • Increased knowledge of national, state, and local politics  • Increased knowledge of local environments including problems, resources, and needs  • Increased knowledge of local tobacco policy  • Increased knowledge of data collection skills</td>
<td>• Increase in networks between youth and influential adults  • Increased ability to synthesize and present materials to influence opinion  • Increased public speaking skills  • Increased ability to use media advocacy as a promotional tool  • Ability to organize and coordinate a community forum  • Ability to organize and mobilize a community around a common goal.  • Ability to research and write an municipal policy ordinance/proposal</td>
<td>• Increased awareness of local environments  • An increase in perceived self control of environment  • Increase in assertiveness and leadership skills  • Increase in self perceived leadership qualities  • Increase in self efficacy  • Increase in positive sense of self  • Increase in group or friend cohesion  • Increase in sense of community and attachment  • Increase in efficacy of organizing a community for change  • Increase in youth to adult connections</td>
<td>• Successful adoption of an ordinance aimed to prevent second hand smoke among local populace  • Decrease in overall tobacco use</td>
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