

Youth-Led Evaluation: Empowering Youth to Lead Assessment Efforts in Butte County

by Belinda Basca



CASE STUDY

In 2003, the Butte County SDFSC team had a vision of embracing the expertise, talents, and passion of young people at a new level. This vision led to the launch of Butte Youth Now, a youth-led evaluation team. As a result, young people have been engaged at every stage of evaluation — conducting community assessments, analyzing data and developing key findings, reporting findings back to key stakeholders, and making recommendations for program improvement efforts. This innovative youth-led evaluation model has assisted the Butte County team in receiving a National Exemplary Program Award and contributed to the local Service to Science initiative by increasing evaluation rigor and documentation of evidence at the local level.

The SDFSC Case Study Series is intended to provide a snapshot of the programs implemented and lessons learned by SDFSC grantees as a service to other grantees and alcohol and drug prevention providers.

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INTRODUCTION

Information is a powerful tool. When young people participate in conducting and analyzing research on their communities, they are empowered to shape action that improves their neighborhoods, programs and community institutions.

Youth participation in evaluation is a process of involving young people in assessing community programs that affect their lives. It entails active engagement where youth have real influence in decisions. Increasingly, after school programs, youth development initiatives, and community organizations are taking this new approach to research and evaluation. Programs are realizing that involving youth in evaluation and research about the programs in which they participate serves multiple purposes.

These purposes include:¹

- Enhancing the individual development of youth and encouraging their active involvement in the decisions that affect their lives.
- Contributing to organizational development and capacity building.
- Providing youth with the opportunity to create real community change.

The Harvard Family Research Project (2002) conducted a set of focus groups with representatives from 14 youth-serving organizations nationwide in order to learn more about what it means to involve youth in evaluation and research work. They found there are a variety of youth-involved research and evaluation projects currently in implementation throughout the United States in rural, urban, and suburban areas. These projects involve youth in a range of activities, including community mapping, evaluation of programs and services, community-based strategic planning, education and advocacy, and social change projects in areas such as the environment, health, and safety.

ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL YOUTH AS RESEARCHER/EVALUATOR PROJECTS

Based on feedback from focus groups, the Harvard Family Research Project (2002) identified five essential components to successful youth-led research and evaluation projects. These include:

- Organizational and community readiness
- Adequate training and support for involved youth
- Adequate training and support for adult staff
- Selecting the right team
- Sustaining youth involvement

ORGANIZATIONAL AND COMMUNITY READINESS

It is important to “ready” both the organization and the community to this new way of doing research and evaluation work. For example, if the organization typically operates within a hierarchy model, a shift may need to be made to become more participatory in terms of the organizational structure. Within this framework, adults involved would also need education in how to work with, listen to, and respect youth.

Likewise, the community itself must ready itself to working with youth, in particular respecting youths’ work. For example, youth may present their findings to the community during a council or coalition meeting. If youth are not respected, it may be difficult to sustain their commitment over time.

ADEQUATE TRAINING AND SUPPORT FOR INVOLVED YOUTH

A second key element identified by the Harvard Family Research Project (2002) was the provision of proper training and support to youth. However this was also identified as a critical challenge.

Evaluation can be very intimidating to adults...even more so for youth. Youth need to understand the project and have the skills necessary to do the work. The steps of evaluation must be broken down into concrete, yet manageable steps without excessive technical jargon that would deter youth from the process.

¹ Youth Involvement in Evaluation and Research. (2002). Issues and Opportunities in Out-of-School Time Evaluation. Harvard Family Research Project.

One way to support and train youth is to pair them with “expert” partners or coaches. This enables youth to learn evaluation methods and also gives a greater level of credibility to evaluation and research work.

ADEQUATE TRAINING AND SUPPORT FOR ADULT STAFF

Not only is proper training and support essential for youth, but for the adults working with the youth as well. This often involves changing the way adults typically work with or look at youth. This may challenge adults to take on the new role as facilitator rather than leader of the group. Adults may be resistant to viewing youth in new ways, letting them play new roles, giving them the space to have a voice in decision-making, and treating them as true “partners.”

For many youth, the opportunity to change adults’ images of youth is an important motivating factor for participation in youth-involved research projects. The Harvard Family Research Project (2002) found that some programs have done a series of educational sessions with adults to improve their perceptions of youth credibility. The audiences for these educational sessions include the evaluation audience, or partners in the evaluation process (adults the youth are working with).

SELECTING THE RIGHT TEAM

The Harvard Family Research Project (2002) also noted the importance of bringing together youth with diverse opinions and

experiences. The right team of youth includes a diverse group of individuals within the areas of race, ethnicity, gender, income, and education. In addition, the youth should be open to taking on a variety of different roles—both as leaders as well as supporting roles.

SUSTAINING YOUTH INVOLVEMENT

A key challenge noted by the Harvard Family Research Project (2002), which is also common with many youth-focused projects is sustaining youth involvement. Youth do not always have full control over their own time—they may have to meet other school, extracurricular, or home commitments. Adults must recognize that youth will participate at different levels of intensity, at different times. Youth-involved research teams must be prepared for the “ebb and flow” of youth involvement. The study found that several factors help sustain youth involvement:

- Use research for change—Youth need to see the results of their work in tangible, immediate, and important ways. This can be achieved by seeing program changes or that others were willing to listen and consider what they have to say.
- Develop lasting relationships—Youth find real and long-lasting value in developing close relationships with peers and adults.
- Compensate with visible rewards—Youth need rewards and validation for their work. This may involve monetary compensation, a concrete product, utilization of results, presentation of findings to various audiences, travel to present or collect data and work with others, and making an impact in the community.

- Serve as mentors and role models—Youth who worked on research and evaluation projects can be encouraged to mentor and serve as role models for newer members of the projects.
- Provide logistical support—Youth may need food and transportation. Simply put, if youth are hungry, they may not be able to concentrate; if youth can't get there, they cannot participate.

Several SDFSC Governor's Program grantees have utilized these strategies in working with youth to lead evaluation efforts in their counties. Butte County is a prime example of this through their Butte Youth Now project. Their successful efforts are the subject of this case study.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Butte Youth Now is a coalition involving the Butte County Department of Behavioral Health (DBH) Prevention Unit, local school districts, youth, law enforcement, parents, and other vital sectors of the community. Its goal is to sustain, enhance, and expand drug and violence prevention efforts in Butte County by building on the success of existing Friday Night Live (FNL) and Club Live (CL), FNL Kids, FNL Mentoring, and Youth Nexus (a county-wide youth council/philanthropy board). This includes the implementation of environmental prevention projects, the expansion of Friday Night Live Mentoring (FNLM) services, the expansion of Youth Nexus, and the expansion of youth-led evaluation including annual data collection, administration, analysis, and an annual report of the Butte Youth Now components.

BUTTE YOUTH NOW: YOUTH-LED EVALUATION

In 2003, Butte County Department of Behavioral Health Prevention Unit Program Manager Danelle Campbell had a vision of embracing the expertise, talents, and passion of young people at a new level within the unit's programs and services. This vision led to the launch of Butte County's youth evaluation team. To support this vision, Butte County contracted with the Youth Leadership Institute (YLI) to provide training and technical assistance to the youth and adult staff.

Butte County identified the need to include young people at every stage – from community assessment to program design and implementation to evaluation. To accomplish this, young people in Butte County review local data, develop key findings and present those findings to key community leaders on an annual basis. Young people work side by side with adult staff to implement effective prevention services specifically designed to address the key findings from the assessment process then move on to evaluate the experiences and outcomes of those efforts.

Working in partnership with their adult allies, the youth evaluation team surveys more than 1,000 students from seven high schools in the county, gaining valuable insights into how young people in the county view substance use and violence, as well as on the related messages they receive from media, peers and other sources. Youth who conducted the survey used its findings to develop a set of recommendations on how their community

could reduce substance use and violence, and presented these recommendations at a countywide Youth Summit.

The youth-led evaluation project, with the support of YLI, has been extensive including training, instrument design, implementation and administration, focus groups, interviews, case study development, analysis of data, development of program recommendations, project refinement and a compilation of the results (i.e. final report).

Participation of approximately 8-10 youth during 2006 in the youth-led evaluation project was associated with a variety of positive impacts:

- Youth evaluation youth were recruited throughout the community. Known as “Mental Health Interns,” these youth work 10-15 hours/week for the Department of Behavioral Health.
- YLI conducted trainings to Youth Evaluation youth on transcribing, probing, question asking, and methods of evaluation (administration, analysis of data, developing program recommendations).
- Youth created policy recommendations based on the responses from over 1,000 high school students on access and use, and then presented policy recommendations to key community leaders at a “community inquiry” session.
- Youth interviewed FNL/CL participants as well as FNLM proteges and mentors.
- Youth conducted focus groups with non-FNL participants to better understand why they were not involved, gather information on youth stereotypes of FNL, as well as to gather information on if the FNL/CL youth-led environmental projects were making an impact.
- Survey results for youth violence and harassment supplemented with mini grant data and school data.
- Policy recommendations made by youth were reviewed in terms of their implementation progress at a retreat.
- The Youth Evaluation youth are trained by YLI to conduct focus groups and interviews with youth—often focus groups are conducted with non-participants from schools where environmental prevention project was done.
- Environmental Prevention Case Studies: The youth evaluators used observation tools, and the above mentioned tools to compile case studies. The following sites participated in the case study process. Chico High Friday Night Live, Rock Creek Group Home Friday Night Live, CAL alternative school Club Live, Bidwell Junior High.
- Evaluation Finding/Recommendations: All evaluation methods are compiled and analyzed by the youth evaluation team. Key findings and recommendations on program change are given to staff. The staff creates an action plan of program change with key benchmarks throughout the year to help monitor the progress of the integration of the evaluation findings.

This innovative youth evaluation model has helped Butte County receive National recognition and awards and has contributed to the local Service to Science initiative by enhancing the evaluation model to include more rigorous elements and furthering the development of model programs, demonstrating effectiveness that can be replicated in other communities.

BEST PRACTICES AND STRATEGIES

There are several key strategies that Butte Youth Now has utilized as they empower youth in youth-led evaluation efforts.

#1 READINESS IS A GRADUAL PROCESS

One of the most effective approaches to youth-involved research and evaluation is a gradual one. There are several technical assistance organizations throughout California (such as Youth Leadership Institute and Youth in Focus) that build the capacity of community-based organizations to involve and sustain youth participation in community and organizational development through youth-led research, evaluation, and planning.

For Butte County, empowering youth to lead evaluation efforts was definitely a gradual process. The county had no history of surveying youth, let alone having youth lead surveying efforts. To begin this effort the county had to assess whether they were ready to do this. They asked themselves important questions such as “How do you already engage youth in program services?” They realized that in Butte County youth were just recipients of prevention services. The first step was to involve youth in the planning of program services...which was a huge jump. When the county first began to hire youth, their initial tasks were to assist in running the prevention programs. Gradually they began to assist with planning efforts. And finally they moved onto evaluation and data collection. But the overall process took some time.

Amanda Montgomery, from the Butte County Department of Behavioral Health, Prevention Unit, also noted that a major factor in preparing staff is having concrete and clear expectations for their job roles. One question Amanda pondered while

preparing staff for their role in working with the youth was how they could ensure that when the youth leave the program, they have gained real world work experience that they could transfer somewhere else. It takes a lot of time to prepare young people to be involved in planning and the staff needs to support this. Staff members need to make sure youth are adequately trained to ensure they are not put in a situation they are not prepared for, they need to clarify what youth roles are, and guarantee that the youth feel confident, comfortable and professional when attending coalition meetings. It is during these times that youth discuss why prevention services are a priority and use data to support it. Youth need to understand the data themselves and staff need to support this. All of this takes time to do so effectively.

#2 STAFF TO SUPPORT THE PROJECT

In addition to having a youth-led evaluation and research effort be a gradual process, a program also needs to have the right staff and sufficient staff time allocated to support such an endeavor. In addition, outside support, in terms of training is also a critical component in a program's success.

During the formation of Butte Youth Now's youth evaluation team, the program managers carefully selected who was going to support the youth team in terms of their support staff. The management staff knew that they could not decide to form such a team without adequate staff support in terms of a specific amount of hours a staff member would be expected

to work on the project. Although the staff members were not chosen based on their evaluation skills, they did have extensive knowledge of the program itself. Then when YLI conducted trainings for the youth, the staff members were trained in evaluation and research methods as well, and then supported the youth as they conducted their research and analyzed their data.

These initial trainings provided the opportunity for Butte County staff to build their capacity to provide the critical ongoing support and technical assistance to the youth evaluation team.

#3 HAVE A PLAN TO INFUSE PROGRAM MODIFICATION BASED ON DATA ANALYSIS

When prevention staff first develops a plan for the prevention program, rarely does the final program reflect what the initial plans entailed. Outside variables always play a role in the shaping of the final program (staff turnover, logistical issues, time constraints, etc.).

When you let youth have a part in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of a program, it is especially important to let the program shape itself as the youth work through it. If you let the youth in your community analyze data, interview people, and generate a list of program recommendations, it is critical that you listen to the youth and their suggestions. If you do not plan on making program modifications based on their findings, the youth will feel as though their work was not honored, valued or respected.

Therefore it is important that a program listens to its youth, but at the same time be clear on what recommendations are realistic based on funding/

resources, staffing, research findings, current policies, and best practices.



Butte Youth Now began with the development of a plan with the youth. They then developed a program manual that contained the plan. As they progressed through the year, they periodically reviewed the program manual with the youth, and made appropriate modifications to the plan as needed. For example, if the plan set a certain deadline for the completion of a survey and it was not met, then the plan was revised. Not only was this important for the youth, but critical for the adult support staff as well. The program needed staff that was willing to be flexible and make changes to the program when it was needed. Flexibility was another essential component of the program's success.

TIPS FOR REPLICATING SUCCESS

Butte County also shared concrete tips and strategies for replicating successful youth-led evaluation efforts.

To Ready Youth and Adults Gradually

- ✓ Be prepared to provide additional trainings that were not initially anticipated as the need arises.
- ✓ Set up a clear timeline of trainings and have them correspond to data collection methods.
- ✓ Ensure that the youth really understand the importance and the purpose behind the program implementation and data collection used. In Butte County, the young people involved understand the program's philosophy and why they are asking the questions they are asking. Youth understand what the "standards of practice" are and why they are infused into all program services. This required proper training support, and assistance throughout service delivery.

To Select the Right Staff to Support the Project

- ✓ Carefully decide who will support the youth evaluation team and the number of hours they are expected to work on the project. – Allocate sufficient time!
- ✓ Consider what training you will provide for staff based on their prior experience. If CARS provides evaluation trainings of any kind, try to get staff there to give them a broader perspective, especially in terms of evaluation.
- ✓ The right staff needs to know how to move young people through a project and be able to provide critical feedback when necessary. They should constantly strive to improve the youth's evaluator's skills.
- ✓ Remember that it is a lot to expect for the youth who do this work, so the right staff needs to be selected to support them. It is important to resource young people in a meaningful way. Consider paying your youth evaluators an hourly



wage for their time, considering the fact that a one-hour interview takes two-three hours to transcribe. It may be difficult to find youth to volunteer to do something like this without some stipend.

To Be Clear on what Outcomes You Want Youth Evaluators to Measure

- ✓ Be really clear on what outcome measures you want your youth evaluators to measure. This needs to be clearly stated from the beginning. This ensures that at the end of the project, there is no confusion between what the youth report and what the program's intended outcomes were. This may need to be revisited on an on-going basis throughout the program's planning, implementation, and evaluation.
- ✓ Talk to other programs that have experience doing youth-led evaluation. Do not reinvent the wheel, learn from others.
- ✓ Optimize the natural convening of young people to do focus groups and interviews. Butte Youth Now uses the Reach for the Future conference to do this. Throughout the conference, the youth evaluation team conducts 3-5 focus groups and approximately 20 interviews. This cuts back on transportation issues which can impede these types of data gatherings. In addition, the youth evaluators gather this data concurrently and feel support from each other. It enables them to convene and reflect on what is going well and what may need to be changed.
- ✓ Do not water down what you want your evaluators to measure because youth are doing it.
- ✓ Be flexible, especially when obstacles come up that effect your overall plan. Modify and revise accordingly.



Additional Resources

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