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Fires in the Bathroom: Advice to Teachers from High School Students

The New Press, April 2003
By Kathleen Cushman and the Students of What Kids Can Do. Introduction by Lisa Delpit.

[Preview and order](#)

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Youth IMPACT: Youth-Led Evaluation

*"Who said that evaluating had to be boring or scary!"
— Youth IMPACT evaluation report*

When the facilitators of Youth IMPACT in San Francisco offered 17-year-old Lily a raise to \$9.50/hour in her after school job, she jumped at the opportunity. "But it wasn't the money," she explains, "it was the project. I wanted to make sure that the work we did went on and didn't end up in a closet somewhere."

The work done by Lily and a dozen or so other teens on the Youth IMPACT team was nothing less than the evaluation of 40 community-based organizations (CBOs) funded by the Department of Children, Youth and Their Families (DCYF). Conducted for DCYF in collaboration with JMPT Consulting and the nonprofit Youth In Focus, the Youth IMPACT project may be the largest youth-led evaluation ever undertaken in California, and possibly the nation.

Youth Voices Inspiring Creative Change

- Youth IMPACT team 15 members, aged 15 - 18, San Francisco, CA
- 8 x 8 inch softcover report, 32 pages
- Published July 2001

Funded by a dedicated municipal property tax, the project marks DCYF's long-term commitment to making youth input central in the planning, funding, and assessment of all its youth services.

The final evaluation report, Youth Voices Inspiring Creative Change, features an undeniable youth

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voice: "If you follow all of our suggestions and Ten Commandments, you are guaranteed to have the best CBO in the universe." The report's self-described youth "flava" is enhanced by vibrant graphics and photo layouts, and informal section titles. "The Method to Our Madness," for instance, details the team's research methodology, while "The Meat" reports its findings. In "Ahhh...the Memories" and "Shout Outs" youth reflect on their experiences, yearbook-style: "Thanks to my family both at home and work for being there and supporting me and most of all listening to me when I couldn't stop talking about CBOs."

The publication of the final report, in July 2001, was just the last of many stages in a nearly year-long process. The teens began the previous November with training in team-building, leadership development, critical thinking, and evaluation design. Next they discussed their overarching research questions, settling on two: How well are the CBOs in San Francisco serving children and youth? What makes a CBO feel trustworthy to youth? The team then selected and developed their research instruments—observations, a questionnaire, and focus groups—persevering through multiple revisions of the questions they would ask about programs in health and wellness, academic support, youth employment, and enrichment.

The next phase, data collection, lasted two and a half months. In pairs, team members visited CBOs to interview program coordinators, drop off questionnaires (with lollipops as incentives), complete 45-minute observations, and conduct focus groups. Challenging enough in themselves, these assignments were often made more so when youth had to locate CBOs in unfamiliar city neighborhoods or rush to arrive on time while traveling public transportation during after-school commuter hours. At one CBO in Chinatown, a pair of team members faced a focus group whose participants spoke both Cantonese and Mandarin but no English; one of the Youth IMPACT teens, a native of Hong Kong, translated on-the-spot in all three languages.

Team members acknowledge that the ensuing data analysis was trying—and with good reason. They had collected 800 questionnaires, completed 35 observations, and conducted 33 focus groups, which required transcribing tapes, entering responses into a database, then analyzing the resulting qualitative and quantitative data.

Youth IMPACT Recommendations

- Increase space, supplies, and resources.
- Have access to computers and the internet.
- Have a diverse range of programs and trainings for youth.
- Build respect between youth, staff and be aware of ageism.
- Hire staff that reflect the youth you serve.
- Think about convenience, access, and food when planning your programs.

Ultimately, the team developed six recommendations (see sidebar) based on four themes: space, facilities, and program resources; the sense of accomplishment youth participants feel; youth-to-youth relationships at the program; and youth-staff relationships.

"Everyone was so proud of the work we did, and we got the chance to make a real difference for the youth in our community."

Then the team began to write the report. The teens also selected photos (which they took themselves), created graphics, and worked alongside the designer (Mark Malabuyo of designotron.com) they'd hired from several interviewed for the job. In the end, the report confirmed the value of San Francisco CBOs but cautioned against complacency: "Overall, we found that many of the CBOs are serving youth well and that youth are generally satisfied with their programs. However, there is always room for improvement." The Youth IMPACT team

realistically expressed a similar assessment of its own work. "We wanted a high quality product," Lily said, but due to late-night scrambling to meet production deadlines, the final report "wasn't as good as we wanted it to be."

But it was awfully good all the same. DCYF distributed 2,500 copies to all 140 of its funded CBOs, to education and youth development funders throughout the Bay Area, to city and other public agencies that deliver youth services. TV and print media, along with a range of public officials, joined the celebration marking the report's release. The mayor of San Francisco and the city's Board of Supervisors proclaimed official "Youth IMPACT Days." The team later presented the project at city-wide meetings of DCYF-funded CBOs, a Stanford University class, a U.C.-Berkeley action research center. "Everyone was so proud of the work we did," recalls Lily, "and through the [report], we got the chance to make a real difference for the youth in our community."

The report has had lasting impact. DCYF is currently undertaking a two-year Phase II of Youth IMPACT facilitated by the nonprofit Literacy for Environmental Justice, mapping assets and assessing needs of city youth. It has made the Youth IMPACT report required reading for all applicants in its request-for-proposal process. And in a subtle change in the agency's institutional culture, DCYF staff have adopted the Youth IMPACT practice of avoiding terms like "junior" and "senior" to differentiate between youth and adults, and instead simply say over or under 18.

A high school senior year next fall, Lily now sits on the Board of Directors of Youth IMPACT's technical assistance partner, Youth In Focus, and has joined the project's second phase. An enduring lesson of this unique effort, she believes, is "how valuable youth involvement in government" can be. After all, she concludes, "Who knows what youth need better than youth?"



Excerpts from the final evaluation report in PDF format

["The Meat" \(research findings\)](#)

[CBO Profile](#)

[Questionnaire Results](#)

[Click here](#) to read the full evaluation report in PDF format. You must have Adobe Acrobat Reader installed to download these files.



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