

Youth Planners at Work

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Is our present interest in "doing something about youth" merely a temporary concern awakened by having seen 14-year-olds smoking in the alley and young girls walking the streets at midnight? Or is it part of a new movement which will outlast the war? These significant questions and others associated with them are raised by this author in discussing the work of youth centers. Theodore D. Rice is director of the Michigan Secondary School Curriculum Study.

KIDS CROWD AROUND the juke-box. Someone yells for "Is You Is or Is You Ain't My Baby?"—and the jitterbugs are off again.

In communities where there is planning, this is the scene rather than street-corner loafing or pick-up joints. It is natural that we should look with interest on neighborhood undertakings of this sort, which have such important implications for education.

One of the developments in Michigan which is stimulating thoughtful consideration on the part of schoolmen has been the way in which youth have assumed community responsibilities and have had an increasing share in community planning. As a result of the "wave" of juvenile delinquency, much concern has been expressed for better provisions for youth in community living, recreation, and home living. Many groups have found that an effective means for taking steps toward these better provisions has been to include youth themselves in planning and developing programs of improvement.

At a meeting on youth recreation sponsored by the Adult Education Program of the University of Michigan, one of the first principles agreed upon as basic to sound planning was that *youth must be in on the planning*. The field service staff of



Courtesy of Burt Upjohn

Kalamazoo teen-agers checking in at their own canteen

the Michigan Governor's Youth Guidance Committee has agreed that "youth have demonstrated through youth centers, employment in war industries and other jobs, that they can take responsibility and want to prove their worth. Where such projects as youth centers are successful, it is because youth have been given an opportunity to assume a controlling share in planning and operating. Many youth centers have failed because of too much adult

control or interference."¹ These statements support the thesis that youth learn to assume responsibility by having responsibility and by exercising it.

Youngsters Pioneer

It should not be assumed that efforts to increase the degree of youth participation in planning have been recent. In Michigan there have been several aspects of youth participation which might be considered as forerunners to the growing conviction that youth must have a part in community planning. Student experience in planning has been gained in many school programs. In 1940 a survey showed that there was an extensive development of student council organizations in the state.² The existence of these councils within schools is evidence that there has been concern for developing student participation in general school life. In 1941 and 1942 many schools organized, either separately or within the student council, what have been commonly called "war councils." The purpose of these councils was to develop ways and means whereby youth could participate more extensively in the war effort.

A second forerunner to the extension of youth participation and planning in community life has come from efforts to bring about more pupil-teacher planning within conventional classrooms and through unified studies of core courses. One result of the extension of pupil-teacher planning has been a greater realiza-

tion that activities in the classroom should arise from an increasing recognition of the interests, needs, and purposes of the students. In considerable degree their interests and needs stem from their home and community life. This has brought the work in classrooms closer to problems in the community and has enabled students to undertake activities in the community.³ In as far as participation in such planning within schools by student councils and by pupils and teachers gives opportunity for carry-over into the community, students have gained in planning skill and adults have become more willing to accept them as active members of the community.

Another forerunner to youth planning in communities has arisen from the organization over the past several years of community councils. In some communities these councils have not had youth representation, but were merely coordinating councils of adult service agencies. However, as concern for the role of youth in communities has intensified, youth advisory groups were called into the community councils and in some communities youth councils were organized in addition to community councils. The participation of youth in such groups as 4-H Clubs, Hi-Y, DeMolay, Campfire Girls, Boy and Girl Scouts, and church organizations has provided a reservoir from which to draw in planning for their participation. The almost phenomenal growth of youth centers throughout the state during the past two years was fed by these and school groups as well as by adult agencies. Within these youth centers may now be found the greatest degree of youth participation in community planning in the state.

¹ Quoted from a report by Walter M. Berry, executive secretary, Governor's Youth Guidance Committee; Social Welfare Commission, Lansing, Mich.; August 31, 1944. Much information concerning youth guidance and youth centers is available from this committee.

² *Democracy in Action*, Bulletin No. 320, Michigan Department of Public Instruction, Lansing 2, Mich.

³ "Youth Learns to Assume Responsibility," *Leads to Better Secondary Schools in Michigan*, pp. 100-107, Michigan Secondary Curriculum Study, Lansing 2, Mich.

How Youth Centers Operate

In this brief review of forerunners to current youth participation, reference has been made both to planning within schools and to planning within communities, but not to school-community planning. Further analysis of activities of youth in youth centers will indicate that this latter type of planning has not yet appeared in any noticeable degree. "Club de Youth," "Kids Inn," "Teen-Age Club," and "High Spot" are for the most part organized under adult recreation committees. In a recent survey of forty-seven youth centers in Michigan it appears that about two-fifths are under the management of adults. Eight are reported to be under the control of a board made up of youth membership only, and eight are controlled by a board of youth and adults.⁴ In many youth centers, while the board is of adult membership or predominantly adult, youth are participating directly in activities committees.

The history of the origin of youth centers around the state indicates that in many places these centers originated through specific stimulation and request on the part of youth. Their needs and their enthusiasm resulted in support from service clubs, church groups, schools, or from community councils or city managements. In Belding, youth participated in surveying the community with regard to their interest in and the degree to which they appeared willing to support a youth center. Through the journalism classes in the high school, news articles were prepared describing purposes and function of the proposed youth center. In setting up policy for some of the centers, youth are active participants in the board of control. This is true, for example, at Kalamazoo and at

⁴ Adult Education Program, "Michigan Youth Centers," *Community Action*, No. 3, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mich., March 1944.



Courtesy of Burt Upjohn

... the gang gathers

Belding. In many of the centers, youth have defined the basic rules to be used by participants. A more extensive list of ways in which students participate in youth centers—other than in assisting the boards through activities and maintenance committees—includes locating, renovating, and redecorating rooms, making or repairing furniture, building orchestra stands, organizing themselves to supervise their own programs, and providing their own orchestras in addition to the perennial jukebox.⁵ Through their centers, they have participated directly in war drives.

Youth have had a part in raising and controlling the funds for the youth centers. Most centers are financed by volunteer contributions and donations. However, a close second to this source of finance has been through membership fees. Youth have had an active part in centers

⁵ See "The Younger Set" by Eleanor Lake in August *Survey Graphic*, pp. 348-349, or "You Can Get Them off the Street Corners" by Miss Lake in September *Reader's Digest* for a more extended report of activities of youth in youth centers.

in which fees are used as a source of finance by canvassing both students and adults to obtain memberships. The desirability of maintaining financial identification with their centers gives much support to the idea that youth have opportunity to participate through the payment of fees toward centers. In contrast to this principle, however, there is some increasing endorsement of financing these youth centers through stable sources of income such as appropriations from city funds or from the community chests in order to insure on-going planning. In several communities the student board of directors or finance committee is responsible for managing financial aspects of the centers. For example, at Kalamazoo a student committee controls the funds with the aid of a sponsor; their books were audited by a member of the community fund.

In only a few centers has there been evidence that efforts are being made to include activities of continuing social significance beyond recreation. In one of these a factory has been set up in which it will be possible to make and repair toys and furniture, to repair radios, and to carry on other construction work. However, analysis of the activities of youth centers indicates a considerably higher frequency of recreational provisions than any other activities. This raises a question with regard to the enduring nature of youth centers, since youth may find other types of recreational activity more important to them when transportation is made more available.

Some Problems Still Unsolved

Several problems confront those concerned with extending youth participation in community planning. One of the most important of these is that of how to include the interests of all youth within the

scope of the programs. In order to achieve this, wide representation by students in planning is essential. This is particularly true in communities in which there are minorities of different religious groups, of different racial or national groups, or of rural youth who should be served by the same agencies as urban youth.

A second knotty problem is that of integrating the school and the community through the activities of youth. Is the youth center to be conceived as something apart from the program of the school? Can the school give, not only financial aid and leadership, but also an opportunity for youth further to relate school experiences with those of the youth center and of the community as a whole? Rarely has it been reported that the school uses the youth center for school activities. Can this be extended without injecting elements of supervision and control which may kill youth's interest in their center?

A third very significant problem is that of developing the program of youth activity in the community in such a way that it will continue in periods when there is little popular concern for the fate of youth. The widely publicized, so-called wave of delinquency was a source for much stimulation of activity with regard to youth guidance through the youth centers. Can the programs be so established that each generation of youth will find new and pressing social service to render to themselves and the communities, or is the current concern for youth planning a fad which will pass? Such problems as these are in the minds of social workers and school people as they work with youth during the coming year. They can only be satisfactorily met through extending the interaction between school and community group planning, including the active role of youth in such planning.

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