

Executive Summary

Chapter 9

Overview of the Illinois Evaluation of NYSP

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The first year of an intended three-year evaluation study of the National Youth Sports Program (NYSP) has been completed. In the report we have presented the results in depth, noting that, had data been collected two more years, many additional issues would have been considered, longitudinal data would have been analyzed, and many findings reached with greater assurance. Our purpose here is to summarize and integrate the findings and issues that have emerged from our work.

The Illinois evaluation was designed first, to recognize NYSP merit and shortcomings and second, to extend and enhance existing NYSP internal evaluation and monitoring systems. The study was conceptualized in three distinct, but interrelated strands:

- in-depth descriptions of local program features and analyses of the relationships between program features and student outcomes,
- an examination of student characteristics, attitudes, and perceptions of the program, and
- identification and explorations of national program and policy issues.

Retrospectively, these strands continue to be viable, realistic strategies for mapping a course of inquiry through the program in order to reach conclusions about program quality and effectiveness. In 1996, the first strand on student characteristics was the primary emphasis. Preliminary data were collected for the second and third strands.

In general, across the diversity of 170 programs and amid the complexity of multi-purpose missions, it is apparent that NYSP is a valuable and successful social program. Its altruistic ideals of providing new experiences and opportunities to youth from economically disadvantaged communities is widely appreciated. The published objectives of the program are worthy, yet realistic and obtainable. The program is operating at a large number of sites nationwide with high vitality, doing good things for the participating youth, the campus, and the local community. As implemented at these local sites, NYSP is doing far more than is outlined in its five goal statements. More specific findings related to each of the evaluation strands are summarized below.

Quality of the Local Projects

At sites across the country, five of them described in detail in our report, we examined the activities that make up local projects, investigated the relationships between program characteristics and student outcomes, and studied the roles these projects play within the university and the broader community. Primary data collection nationwide for this strand consisted of extended site visits to 11 campus sites and shorter visits to ten others. More would have been visited in 1997 and 1998 and additional issues probed. These site visits included observations of project activities, interviews with administrators, NYSP staff, participants, community members, and parents. Further insights into local project operations were gained by attending the 1996 National Workshop and through secondary analyses of existing project and public relations documents. Also, a survey was sent to all of the Activity Directors regarding their perspectives on their just-completed summer successes and needs, support from the national program, and the changing nature of the youth and the local institutions.

Local projects were heavily shaped by the directives of the national program, through its Guidelines, Evaluators, system of awards and sanctions for compliance and performance. Yet, there was considerable local diversity in emphasis on different program objectives. Most of the people to whom we talked recognized at least a dual purpose of improving sports skills while using sports as a magnet to draw students into life-skill activities. Across projects, however, the balance tipped one way or the other. We identified four types of local projects, based on the central focus of project activities, as:

- sports instruction and competition;
- sportsmanship and active participation;
- intervention against drug use, vandalism, and gang action; and
- encouragement to pursue higher education.

We were not surprised by the diversity in project emphases, given that the program is based on partnerships negotiated among NCAA, universities, and the local communities. And most Project Administrators felt that guidelines were roomy enough to allow these different emphases to operate under one national umbrella. Variations in project emphasis and the extent to which projects include components not covered by NYSP objectives are worthy aims for further study, as are relationships between the particular focus of a local project and student characteristics and outcomes.

All projects offered a non-sports "educational" component, with central directives determining some features of this component, such as specific content areas and amount of time given to each. There was variation across projects in how--and in how well--this component was carried out. At their best, the educational components served to draw sports and other aspects of the program together, to motivate students, provide them with role models and acquaint them with community resources. At their worse, education sessions were characterized by rote learning, didactic instruction, passive participants, and unconnected lessons or presentations by outside speakers. Local project people seeking to improve their programs expressed a need for exemplars of high quality drug and alcohol prevention education and of mathematics/science instruction. We did not have clear evidence that the NYSP internal Evaluators were recognizing the instances of weak instruction we encountered.

The official Guidelines were relevant to local programming and appreciated as organizational structure, but some local staff members recognized that the Guidelines did not address some of their more complex programmatic challenges. Over the years, the students applying to attend NYSP have been changing and their needs are increasing. Local Project Administrators felt challenged to deal with these needs in light of current resources and staff development. At several projects, particularly those viewing themselves as offering alternatives to gangs or increasing access to college, we heard expressions of need for formal extension of the program beyond summer. Few projects included extended-year

programming and the staff members at those projects felt their efforts fell short of what was needed. It is reasonable to expect that staffs at highly successful projects will recognize the necessity of doing even more for youngsters--and that was what we found.

Discipline and rule-structure were viewed as important in all the projects we visited. A good illustration is found at Metro State in chapter 8. Projects differed, however, in the centrality of student discipline to their mission. For many, disciplinary and management systems were necessary to make the program operate efficiently and to provide instructors with the opportunity to teach and the participants with opportunity to learn. In other projects, discipline served as an organizing principle, with direct intent to supplement ethical structure and security believed not to be adequate in participants' homes, schools or community. Discipline was found to be an issue of concern across projects we observed, not because of extra-ordinary breaches in discipline but because there is uncertainty as to the role discipline should be playing and as to when enough discipline is enough. National program policy and directives probably do not adequately address the issue but perfect compliance, of course, would not eliminate disciplinary problems. Even if seen a local matter more than national, greater expectation is needed that a good informal justice system within local projects is as basic as the Guidelines for maintaining discipline at the sites.

One of the most striking things about NYSP local projects was the commitment and quality of their auxiliary and professional staffing. Many of the personnel have been with the local project for many years and know what it takes to run a project according to NYSP Guidelines and directives. Local staff development and supervision, however, appeared often to be weak, especially for project aides and instructors. The problem is perhaps exacerbated by a lack of communication from Project Administrators to the rest of the staff on expectations and exemplars conveyed at the National Workshop. NYSP leaders were working at this problem with "team building" and "communication" as themes for the 1997 Workshop. But, good as we heard it was (We were asked not to attend), that was still too casual an effort. A substantial upgrade of staff training, well beyond the circulation of more directives and increasing communication among peers, would be expensive and not necessarily a good investment for temporary staffing. Still, staff proficiency is one of the few real weaknesses across NYSP projects and more is needed to prepare staffs for working

effectively with a changing youth population and for understanding the sports purposes, content areas and lifetime skills specified in program directives.

In this limited visiting, relations between local projects and their communities were found to range from intensely supportive to uncomfortable. Community tension arose more in those projects that did not serve students from the immediate community, but transported participants from more distant areas meeting the criteria for economic disadvantage. But many local projects enjoyed close, productive community relationships. Regarding relations between local projects and the universities, most host institutions viewed NYSP as an important service to disadvantaged communities. In many sites, financial support from the university substantially exceeded the 20% required contribution.

Efforts were made to recognize within the program the racial and cultural diversity of the surrounding community. Local programs had the leeway they needed to serve children of diverse backgrounds but few went out of their way to assure that minorities within minorities were amply supported. Conformity with a national vision of the good program was more important than optimizing a fit between the local program and its local communities. Local initiatives occurred but were little encouraged. At many sites the concept of institutional partnering was well developed between college and NYSP but other real and potential partners were little sought and seldom treated as real partners. There was some fear that the basic idea of NYSP would be diluted if local initiatives or other values were encouraged. NYSP was effective in drawing upon corporate and other contributors but sometimes overly protective of its ownership. Still, it had valued services and community standing to protect.

Student Characteristics

Central to this strand of the evaluation study, over 4300 children from 19 different NYSP sites (representing rural and urban, large and small schools, and different regions of the country) provided survey data during the summer of 1996. The orally-administered surveys contained questions relating to motivational characteristics of the participants and their perceptions of sport experience at NYSP. We analyzed the survey data using conventional quantitative procedures. We added,

merged these findings with those from site visits by the Illinois team and by other qualitative data collected in other strands of the study. Chapter 5 of our report presents a picture of the participating students, what they feel they are gaining from NYSP, and the messages they perceive regarding sports competition and performance. These student responses also have yielded insights into the consistency with which national program objectives for content and quality of instruction are being met at local sites.

Our data indicate that the most typical student was a twelve year old boy in the 7th grade, at NYSP for the first time. But the range was broad and the dangers of stereotyping were real. In this analysis, we paid major attention to central tendency and correlation, with regression over time to have come with data in subsequent years. As local staff members knew from personal experience, the analyses confirmed the joy that participants felt in their experience at NYSP and the work expended, in a healthy frame of mind, to improve their sports skills. The students reported high levels of interest, minimal levels of anxiety, high effort and high (self-perceived) competence during their participation in NYSP.

On average, student participants perceived the motivational climate in their local sites to be that of a “caring community” with support for “personal relationships.” On items about perceptions of teamwork, the students scored high. We interpreted their responses as appreciating and seeking out aspects of a caring community such as teamwork, family love, and respect. They approved of emphasis on personal skill development more than on “winning.” According to their perceptions, NYSP instructors rewarded effort and hard work, focused on continued improvement and personal progress, and, for the most part, avoided negative behaviors such as yelling at children for messing up and intimidating an opponent. This climate of skill development extended throughout the sports activities and into the education and enrichment components. It is a highly desirable motivational climate, well suited for further staff orientation for sports instructors and the education staff.

Students reported that sports skill experiences at NYSP taught them to be responsible, follow rules, demonstrate good behavior, and to adopt lifetime skills such as body control and self-discipline. Most attributed athletic success in NYSP to effort, motivation, hard work and cooperation. They did not over-emphasize ability or view luck or deceptive tactics as the route to

success at NYSP. We see these perceptions as a basis for developing an even stronger ethic of interpersonal respect within NYSP.

In describing their own behaviors and attitudes, the vast majority of student respondents claimed they had never had a smoke or drink and that they were very much aware of the dangers these behaviors posed to one's health. Approximately 95% of the respondents rated themselves average or above average students or athletes. Most had participated in more than a year of competitive sports. In general, the participants reported fairly high levels of self-esteem, high motivation for learning, and moderate competitive orientation. Since most of the students had been in NYSP less than three weeks, it is difficult to credit the program with creating those attitudes but it is reasonable to conclude that the students found NYSP a hospitable place for expressing the belief that cultivation of skills is more important than becoming champions and professional athletes.

In our concentrated look at students, we found that the perceived benefit of sports at NYSP is conceptually related to goal orientation in the following way. In general, students reported high "task" orientation and only moderate "ego" orientation. From this and previous research, we know that students with high "task" orientation believe that sports develop lifetime skills such as health consciousness and lifetime interest in physical activity. The fact that the students reported high levels of "task" oriented behavior is a strong foundation for future programming. "Task" oriented goals draw youngsters toward focus on learning and improvement as a worthy end in itself.

The National Program and NYSP Policy Issues

The third strand of the evaluation study was interwoven in data collection with the other two strands, with expectation that it would dominate inquiry in the final (but now cancelled) year. Although incomplete, much still can be said about management and policy issues from the observations made.

NYSP policy issues were seen as including the management and leadership role of NCAA, costs and opportunity costs associated with the program, collective sponsorship, and future directions for the NYSP. During this past year, we gave special focus to the NYSP Evaluators and the internal monitoring system

already in place. In a way that would have been amplified later, we shadowed Evaluators, conducted interviews, and observed national meetings. We also interviewed program and government officials and reviewed historical and federal documents in our efforts to understand the history, purpose, and procedures of the national program.

At both the local levels and the national level the National Youth Sports Program is essentially sound. It provides services to the children of low income and underprivileged families that they would not get from the schools, park programs, clubs, police programs, coaching camps and other community activities. Efforts to maintain NYSP activities and resources in a politically complex and economically tight world are well thought out and vigorously pursued, yet there is room for doing even better.

Program management and operation at the national level are perceived within the NYSP community, we clearly heard, as efficient and effective. Local project administrators feel well-supported by the National Office and well-guided by operating procedures and standards. Our observation data confirmed the high ratings by local staff people. When these project staff members or other informants offered suggestions for improving national program procedures, such appeared to us to be offered in the spirit of further enhancements, seldom as needed repairs.

The longevity of leadership, at both the national and local levels, is highly commendable and a strength of the program. Evaluators, the National Office staff, and Advisory Committee members have worked with the program for many years, in different capacities, and have drawn from their understanding of program history and procedures in their recommendations for program improvement.

Federal funding for the program seems stable and secure. NCAA maintains its commitment for administrative support and services. Expenditures are restrained and closely monitored. Many local projects exceed their requirements for raising cash and in-kind services. Use of seconded police officers has been found by some projects to have merit at low cost, and could be expanded. Program and local projects are accomplishing a great deal on a relatively small budget. Our field observations were beginning to show how much is accomplished, locally and nationally, with the funds available. This is a highly cost-effective program.

The internal monitoring system of Evaluators checking each local project for compliance with Guidelines is well-established and is valued by government agencies and others as an indication of accountability. There have been changes in relationship between Evaluators and local project staffs, and more changes are afoot. Evaluators currently focus predominately on compliance ("yes/no") with the literal requirements of the Guidelines. The system appears to work well for identifying projects with problems but is less effective in differentiating among levels of quality of fully compliant projects. Some mature projects would like to take advantage of the Evaluators' experience and expertise in different ways. Evaluators will be interacting with project staffs in some new ways, as their roles as technical advisors continue to be expanded and as they assume more responsibility for communicating national program expectations and standards to local project staffs. For example, they have begun meeting with Project Administrators at the National Workshop to discuss expectations, to review procedures for achieving compliance, and to establish more of a collegial, help-oriented relationship.

Even though the essential features of the program appear to have changed little over the years, the program is changing--partly to meet the needs of the youths and the communities, partly to reflect more sophisticated ideas of dealing with youth with limited life chances, and partly in response to diminishing federal support for social programs. Changes for the students include more emphasis on life skills and social experience, more emphasis on avoiding substance abuse, less emphasis on competitive sports skills, more emphasis on personal involvement, greater expectation that most will go to college. Changes at the national program level include experimenting with enhancements, such as the mathematics and science component now and the older youths program to be pilot-tested next summer. There is also change in the role of Evaluators with explicit effort to expand and enhance their role as technical advisors and (this part is not so clear) to diminish their roles as auditors of compliance.

Questions have been raised about the value of the National Workshop, particularly as to cost and its utility for disseminating information from the National Office to local Auxiliary staff members. With our own data collection, we encountered isolated instances in which a Project Administrator had not communicated effectively with other staff members. The issues of discipline and the needs for staff development, discussed at length in this final

report, are among the problem areas having serious implication for national program operation and policy.

Operational management of the national program was effectively conducted by the director and his staff and by the chief evaluator and his colleagues. Relationships between the National Office and the Evaluators on the one hand and the Advisory Committee on the other were hierarchial, with too little healthy interactive management. The Advisory Committee showed a deep concern for the well being of the local programs and particularly for the well being of the youth but showed less concern for the well being of NCAA. They appeared not to recognize the need for patronizing those people within NCAA who have serious doubts about continuing NYSP sponsorship. Losing NCAA would be a momumental loss to these youth services. Our observations were not extensive but we concluded that there was insufficient interrelationship between NYSP and NCAA.

The personal needs of youth were being well addressed at the local level but the concept of need was not articulated well as national policy. Although needy youth were carefully targeted, programs had been placed as much for the quality of the college offerings and for political distribution across the country as for the areas of maximum need. We found almost an aversion to talk about where the needs are greatest. Many of the youth in the program were not particularly needy but were eligible because they lived in a neighborhood designated federally as "low income." Leaders at both the local level and national level cannot be expected to create good working definitions of poverty when econometric specialists have been so little able to, but there could and should be a greater sense of eligibility and targeting. It could be expected that there would be a waiting list of more eligible sites to replace any programs that were found by the Evaluators to be doing a poor job of providing services--although it can be expected that some of the least effective programs are already in the most needy areas.

Recommendations

People responsible for administering NYSP are currently engaged in strategic planning for future operations. This activity is an important step in preserving and enhancing the high quality activities of the program. The deliberations should strive to find the threats to program integrity. The following recommendations,

based upon the findings of this evaluation study, are submitted to further that strategic planning.

1. Given the essential soundness of the national NYSP program and its greatly needed service to the children of low income and underprivileged families, we recommend that efforts be redoubled to protect NYSP from demise and even from major change in purpose, funding, sponsorship or access to campus facilities.

2. Noting that competitive sports have failed to free itself from meanness, greed, intimidation and hooliganism; and based on our findings that the youth attending NYSP are favorably disposed toward personal skill development and teamplay over intimidation and winning, we recommend that instruction and supervision be even more overtly structured to develop respect for opponents, officials, teammates and self.

3. Recognizing the importance of supporting diversity in communities and subpopulations, and knowing that this can sometimes better be the responsibility of local leadership and support groups, we recommend that, after thorough deliberation, the concept of institutional partnering for sponsorship and governance of local NYSP programs be further developed, such that local departures from the Guidelines more often will be proposed and allowed, and that community joint ownership of NYSP becomes a reality, and that greater encouragement for local leadership occurs.

4. To provide maximum access and effect for American youth, we recommend that rules be established, after proper debate and revision, to the effect that programs, recruiting, and admissions be arranged to accommodate the maximum number of most needy youth, so that, for example, other things being equal, new programs are located where children are least privileged and, other things being equal, a youth who has not attended NYSP before will be given priority over one who has.

5. To upgrade the work of all who provide youth services through NYSP and particularly those who are newly assigned and those who come with the lowest levels of preparation for such work, we recommend that there be substantial investment, of course as economically feasible, in professional development organized by experts of the caliber to be found at the highest levels of educational leadership in NCAA.

6. To assure that NYSP gains all it can from NCAA and that the well-being of NCAA is not put at risk by independent actions of the NYSP Advisory Committee, we recommend that governance be more closely interrelated, possibly by requiring the chair of the Advisory Committee to be a member of the NCAA Council and having the limits of action that can be taken without Council review more fully specified.

The Evaluation Study

During the year ending in January, 1997, the Illinois evaluators went to selected campuses and NYSP meetings--charting, data gathering and interpreting in the three evaluation strands. The lion's share of resources and the primary focus of the year's work were on student characteristics, in an attempt to understand and give voice to the perceptions, attitudes, and intents of the youth attending the summer program. Large amounts of descriptive data were collected, in the other two strands as well, to develop an understanding of the program, to build a foundation of data, and to begin interpretation of key policy issues. Even with data gathering cut short, we observed linkages and relationships among local programs, students and the national office which we tested for accuracy, usefulness, and viability, and analyzed for what they could tell us about program quality. As an example, we were well along in studying the relationship between local project features and student outcomes such as retention, self-concept, and attitudes toward the program.

One NYSP "insider" who reviewed an earlier draft of this report said there were no surprises. We took this comment as an encouraging sign that we have indeed come to understand the program as it is seen by the national and local project staff who run the program year after year after year. Our findings are based on data collected on a limited sample of local projects and we are not attempting to speak with certainty about the full NYSP community. For such a mature, complex, and expansive program as NYSP, gaining familiarity with the program has been a challenging responsibility. We did not have full opportunity to confirm our descriptions, interpretations and judgments, but we are confident that a careful reading of the full report will assist the strategic planning team and others think of new ways of making NYSP an even better program.