
Youth 2000: Challenge of Changing Mentalities in Montreal, Quebec, Canada¹

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Background

In 1989 the city of Montreal's Recreation and Community Development Department began to evaluate the effectiveness of its youth programs. Three main factors led to this evaluation. First, over a period of approximately ten years there had been a successful campaign promoting the "taking charge" of recreational activities by local community groups in city neighborhoods. A consequence of this was that activities had evolved based on a "user-pays" philosophy. Further, activities were often selected because of the ease with which they could be organized and supervised by volunteers. One result of this philosophy was that fewer programs were available for spontaneous participation by teenagers at no charge. In addition, this group was often excluded from any significant access to municipal sponsored leisure programs.

Second, in those few instances where local groups or administrators attempted to offer activities for youth, there were consistent problems involving:

- inadequate resources for the acquisition of equipment;
- criticism and complaints from other clients, as well as from some municipal employees;
- lack of continuity of employees resulting from inadequate remuneration; and
- lack of coordination between community, social

service, and governmental agencies and programs, each with its own methods, mandates, and priorities.

Third, an increase in youth violence led municipal authorities to be concerned that significant numbers were not making constructive use of their free time. Many of the problematic youth seemed to be isolated from their peers and difficult to involve in current services.

The Department commissioned a study to address these concerns while simultaneously launching a brainstorming and concept development process among its senior managers. The consultants who did the study noted:

The majority of young people go through adolescence without venturing into delinquency or other antisocial behaviors. However, in public opinion, it appears that adolescence is related more closely to a pathology than to one of the most fertile phases in the life of an individual; adolescence and delinquency seem to be two terms which have become complementary.

The study noted, among other things:

- media present the most alarming situations of youth: gangs, drugs, violence, prostitution,

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dishonesty;

- after West Germany, Quebec ranks second in the world in suicide rate among young people;
- youth are portrayed in advertising as thoughtless and irresponsible consumers: fast food, heavy metal music, shocking clothes;
- youth are often associated only with problems within the educational system, such as dropping out and absenteeism; and
- recreation programs offered or supported by municipalities have been deserted by 13- to 17-year-olds, who are generally less interested in structured activities.

Following the study, an analysis indicated that lack of interest was only part of the reason why teenagers were not involved in recreation programs. They were often deliberately excluded from programs, because they were disruptive or because providing recreation activities which this age group would find interesting was relatively costly.

Since they were not politically organized enough to insist on services, nor economically able to support provision of their own programs, 13- to 17-year-old youth were generally excluded from services. Action was needed to reestablish the constructive involvement of these young people in their communities.

To this end, a working group composed of the superintendents of the nine recreation administrative districts of the city was set up to develop means for reaching nonparticipating teenagers. Recreation programs were viewed as important vehicles for working with teens. The working group cited the *Catalogue of Benefits of Parks and Recreation* (Balmer, 1991) published by the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association which concluded:

Impact studies done with individuals indicate that the practice of recreational activities promotes physical and mental well-being, creative expression, and the stimulation and the development of the person. More specifically, the practice of recreational activities by youth promotes the development of moral values and constitutes a valid alternative to counter self-destructive behaviors such as substance abuse and suicide.

The working group proposed that a multifaceted approach should be implemented over a five year period by:

- (1) adapting traditional programming;
- (2) maintaining existing teen clubs;
- (3) establishing specific agreements with school

- boards to establish after-school activities;
- (4) establishing intervention programs for young people in housing projects; and
- (5) developing the Youth 2000 program.

Youth 2000 Guidelines and Key Concepts

In 1989 and 1990 the working group produced basic specifications for a new type of intervention-Youth 2000. The objectives of this approach were to:

- (1) reach 13- to 17-year-old youth and provide them with permanence and continuity in their pursuit of recreational activities;
- (2) give young people control of and responsibility for their free-time recreation;
- (3) encourage development and personal fulfillment of participants through the quality of supervision and support, and through a program which respects young people's needs and supports them in making and carrying out decisions;
- (4) develop partnerships with other organizations to help carry out the program;
- (5) encourage access to other Recreation Department programs, such as indoor skating rinks, pools, cultural centers, and libraries; and
- (6) facilitate the intervention of social service organizations.

Key Concepts

Youth 2000 depends on a dynamic partnership of municipal government together with the voluntary and private sectors, to manage and carry out the Youth 2000 project in 24 different neighborhoods. Twenty-seven organizations were included such as: neighborhood recreation committees, youth centers, sports and cultural associations, community centers, and youth houses (known as *Maisons de Jeunes* in French, which are youth drop-in centers offering social services and leisure activities). Partners were selected by local implementation committees based on the following criteria:

- (1) a willingness to make a formal commitment to respect the objectives of the program,
- (2) an ability to ensure access to space exclusively available for the program,
- (3) the existence of activities which were available to 13- to 17-year-old youth, and
- (4) the capacity to involve additional clientele.

After evaluating needs, opportunities, available expertise and resources, each committee recommended a location for a Youth 2000 project

and identified the local organization which would be best suited to sponsor and manage the project. A key example of Youth 2000 was captured in the following observation:

Learning to be autonomous requires that young people take part in the decision-making process, particularly in the areas which concern them directly. It also requires that young people have a place, or are able to occupy a space where their behavior is not constantly questioned, and where they can deal on an equal basis with others. This is a precondition for them to identify with a neighborhood and to participate in its improvement.

Rather than proposing a schedule of activities based on a conventional program, teenagers are assisted in their efforts to develop and carry out activities which they have proposed. Youth 2000 is based on the principle that programming is by and for youth:

BY: implies direct involvement of young people between 13 and 17 years of age in the organization of their recreation and in the decision-making process; and

FOR: implies encouraging the acquisition of skills which promote personal development and which lead participants to become increasingly responsible.

Emphasis is placed on the capacity of young people to take initiative, be creative, and display organizational and managerial abilities. The process is facilitated through the involvement of adult “animators” who make participants feel welcome and facilitate participant involvement, while also encouraging youth to be in charge of their own activities. The animator becomes a significant role model, a resource person, and a source of expertise and counseling.

Operating Procedures

Exclusive Access to Facilities: Each of the 24 Youth 2000 projects in Montreal occupies exclusive facilities. The projects are situated in places such as recreation centers, church basements, and park chalets.

Accessibility: Most activities are offered free of charge, with a few special projects sponsored on a self-financing basis.

Schedule: Facilities are accessible and activities are offered at least five days per week; a minimum of three hours per day; a minimum of 30 hours a week

for a minimum of 48 weeks per year.

Supervision and Support: For participants there is an average of two animators per project with a ratio of one animator per 15 teenagers. Each of the nine administrative districts of the city has a youth coordinator whose efforts are further supported by the district management team, and by a resource person in the Department who coordinates planning, development of guidelines, and consultation and evaluation processes.

Since 1990, 15,000 teenagers (67% male; 55% ages 15-17) have participated in the program. Seventy-five percent of projects have a multicultural character, thus reflecting the demographics of their neighborhoods.

Changing Mentalities: The Challenges of Youth 2000

Youth 2000 presents a number of important challenges.

(1) Young people who are users of recreational services resist an approach which requires them to make personal commitments and sacrifices.

It is important to accept young people as they are and then gradually help them learn to fit in, get involved, and take charge of their own activities. Because this process can take a long time, a high degree of competence and the stability of the animator is key to the program’s success.

(2) Some parents are concerned about sending their teenagers to a program where the supervision is unconventional.

Unconventional supervision and support enables teenagers to have a variety of experiences and promotes increased levels of self-discovery and personal development. At the same time, the teenagers are also looking for role models whom they feel may be appropriate to follow.

(3) Some adults in the neighborhood feel that the local troublemakers have taken over.

Although not always successful, in many situations setting up open house activities and developing communication with neighborhood residents has helped to modify the negative perception held about youth programs. Coordination and collaboration with other organizations in the neighborhood has also played an important role in alleviating concerns.

(4) Skepticism from organizations that are introduced to new ways of working in partnership with the city may result.

Innovation is required of the partner organizations. Selection of sponsor organizations, negotiation of contractual agreements, and clear definitions of objectives have helped change the role of the city from “paternalism” to “partnership.”

(5) Some partners believe that working with a protocol is too formal an approach.

Evaluation of each project is done by measuring outcomes against goals. Goals are developed in collaboration with the Youth Coordinator of each district, and reflect the realities of each neighborhood while respecting the general guidelines and objectives of the program.

(6) Often civil servants and bureaucrats resist change.

Acceptance of new methods requiring significant modifications to established organizational behavior and procedures has been achieved, but not without some conflict. The program has provoked change in certain fundamental values held by some employees in their work situations. Some placed a negative interpretation on the arrival of so called “youth specialists,” and the assumption of responsibilities by partners which had traditionally been the employees’ domain.

Although the program is intended to support and improve youth intervention, certain interests saw it as representing a loss of their personal power, since they were no longer the sole frontline experts. They resented their loss of hierarchical control. However, after five years of experience with the program in many local areas, the approach is largely, though not completely, accepted.

(7) Sometimes a municipal structure can cause excessive administrative delays.

In the first phases of the program, the municipal structure demonstrated a clear commitment to change. For example, in the first months of operation, over \$250,000 worth of equipment was acquired through an adapted purchasing procedure. In spite of this, habitual tendencies predominated which caused delays in the acquisition of equipment, as well as in hiring animators and activity specialists. Since the

expression of needs by teenagers is often spontaneous, unnecessary delays lead to a loss of motivation or interest and frustration. To resolve these problems the partner organizations and the city developed improved operating procedures.

Conclusions

Many of the participants have become youth “animators” in their own neighborhoods. In addition, many participants sit on the boards of directors of their own group or of other community organizations. Some projects have had an important impact in reducing interracial gang fights or in decreasing criminal acts committed by youth. In 1992 the city of Montreal received the Willis Award for Excellence from the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators in recognition of its “exceptional initiative and creativity in municipal programming.”

Youth 2000 has had a significant impact on a large number of young Montrealers and on the perception which young people have of municipal services. Nevertheless, two important challenges remain. The first lies in evaluating the precise impacts of this type of program. Aside from the participation statistics, and the number of activities or hours of service, better information needs to be provided on the positive impact of the program. The second challenge lies in further involvement of partners (e.g., municipal, community, educational, and institutional) in developing additional intervention strategies for, with, and adapted to youth.

References

Balmer, K. (1991). *Catalogue of the benefits of parks and recreation*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Parks and Recreation Association.