

Whose Turning Point?

*A paper on the experiences of the San Francisco Youth
Commission's work to influence legislative action*

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Opening

San Francisco City and County has long been a hotspot for youth activism. From long faded images of 1960's protesters to the multi-cultural gathering of young people gathered in the late 1990's, attempting to stop the passage of a ballot initiative that would allow youth to be tried as adults, San Francisco community organizing has often been lead by the younger members of society. It was in such a spirit of determined activism that the San Francisco Youth Commission came into being in 1995.

In November of 1995 the citizens of San Francisco voted to establish the nation's first chartered Youth Commission. As a body of seventeen youth between the ages of 12 and 23, the San Francisco Youth Commission was created to serve as an advisor to the Mayor and the Board of Supervisors on legislative, program, budget and policy issues regarding children and youth. According to the San Francisco city charter, the Commission is to have twelve days to review a piece of legislation and submit a response before the Board of Supervisors votes.

Along with the charter stated activities, the Youth Commission engages in various community-based projects. Housed within the Commission are smaller member committees that focus on specific issues, such as housing/homelessness, education, public health, and youth justice. Committees hold hearings, townhall meetings, press conferences, and community events, as well as publish recommendation reports and engage in direct lobbying efforts with decision makers.

In California Governor Gray Davis' 2000 State of the State Address, the Governor introduced plans to establish a new bootcamp for certain zero-tolerance

offending youth throughout the state,¹ declaring that these particular, “offenders who put our children in jeopardy” would have a new option upon their one-year expulsion from school, they soon could attend a six-month bootcamp called Turning Point Academy (TPA).

In order for a zero-tolerance youth to be sent to TPA they would have to have had no prior criminal record or history of violence, and have a juvenile court judge deem them mentally and physically fit for the rigors of a bootcamp curriculum. In addition to the previously stated requirements, the youth would have to reside in a county in which the Board of Supervisors had adopted a resolution stating the intention of the county to comply with all the requirements of TPA, and to provide transportation for the minors to and from the academy.

This paper describes the process through which San Francisco City and County responded to the creation of TPA, and the Youth Commission’s role in the resulting governmental decision making process. I am writing this paper from the perspective of a Youth Commissioner. Appointed to the Youth Commission in the summer of 2000, I was a few months into my first Commission term when the TPA legislation was introduced.

Case Study

In January, when the Governor first publicly introduced TPA, it was still only in the stage of creation. Within months TPA was written into the state’s budget, and individual counties were taking up the task of passing the necessary resolutions of

¹ Minors residing in California who are 15 years of age or older and who have committed a firearms-related offense at school or a school activity off school ground.

support. On a Thursday night in December of 2000 the Executive Committee of the Youth Commission came together for a regular meeting. The Executive Committee consists of five Youth Commissioners who hold officer positions; at the time I served as the Community Affairs Officer. It is the Executive Committee that holds jurisdiction to act on items when a limited amount of time is presented for action. During this meeting the agenda included an unusual amount of legislation that the full Commission would not have time to review, being that the board had introduced pieces of legislation without reference to committee for discussion and review. Typically, in such cases, the referrals are commendations, and are more often not on issues of policy that will effect strong change within the City and County.

Among the pieces of legislation received that night was the resolution in support of sending applicable San Francisco youth to TPA. Having no background information on the establishment of TPA, nor knowledge as to the process by which each California county must approve of such a resolution, the Executive Committee members felt that we had too little information to establish an opinion; and that we also had too little time to form any sort of formal response, being that this resolution was to be voted on by the board the following Monday afternoon.

Not only does such action by the Board of Supervisors go against the city charter, it also plainly excludes the Youth Commission from fulfilling the purpose the voters established us for, to serve as advisors on exactly such issues. With the knowledge that the Executive Committee, as well as the full Commission, could not act in a formal manner, it became quite clear to the Executive Committee members that it was our duty to use our insider/outsider status within local government to become involved in the

matter with individual responses. We quickly came to the conclusion that we must first educate ourselves on the issue, and then use our power and access as Commissioners to get the resolution sent to committee so that all relevant parties could discuss the matter.

The Executive Committee consisted of a diverse representation of youth. With the unique dynamics of San Francisco's diversity, we had a mixed representation of Black, White, Native American, Latino/a, Filipino/a, Christian, Catholic, Muslim, private school, public school, high school and college attending youth within the five committee members. It is such diversity, and range of experiences that especially strengthens our collective ability to analyze legislation from all angles, and decide how best to act for the good of our constituents.

Myself and another Commissioner left that meeting, and immediately proceeded to research TPA, its process of creation, and the history of youth boot camps, particularly those residing in California. Using the tool of the Internet, we were able to find government reports and newspaper articles clearly detailing the steps of creation TPA had gone through. Within hours we had compiled information on past abuses in youth boot camps in the state, as well as several articles laying out how adamantly Governor Davis had fought for this boot camp, despite the strong bipartisan recommendations from California's Legislative Analyst that the "Legislature deny the request for \$9.2 million from the General Fund to support Turning Point Academy, a juvenile boot camp, because (1) juvenile boot camps have been found to be ineffective, (2) the proposal is costly on a per-student basis and not well defined, and (3) the department lacks experience working with a serious juvenile offender population."²

² Legislative Analyst's Office, Analysis of the 2000-01 Budget Bill, Department of Finance (8860)

By morning we felt that we had a fairly extensive case against supporting TPA, much more than enough to demand that the item be sent to committee. At City Hall, first thing in the morning, I pulled together informative packets to distribute to the Supervisors, while asking for voting to be delayed on the item. The Youth Commission has a full-time staff of three and an office inside City Hall. Often times the balance between youth and their adult allies can be challenging, especially in a structure of tradition such as the government that the Youth Commission operates within. Throughout this experience, the staff of the Youth Commission assisted in numerous, supportive ways, by giving technical support with the making of the packets, fending the phone calls we were starting to get in response to our advocacy efforts, and celebrating all the small victories that came along the way of our organizing.

At that time three Supervisors had included their names in support of the resolution. While walking from office to office I learned that they claimed to support the resolution - although holding no knowledge of TPA - because they either had received a phone call from the Governor's office, or were misinformed to believe TPA served as an alternative to a sentence of time in the local Juvenile Hall. (TPA actually serves as an alternative to participation in a community alternative day school, not incarceration.) The personalities of each legislator were visible in their office's response to our concern. In one office I had a senior aide sit down with me on the floor and go through the articles and reports in detail. This was the one office out of the three that had their names originally included in support of the legislation, which did not receive a phone call from the Governor's office requesting their support. This was also the only office to remove their name from the legislation after our meeting.

The other two offices that were leading the legislation were not so easy to persuade. Both claimed to hold no knowledge of TPA and stated that their pure reason for support had been the call received from the Governor's office urging their support. At the time I was serving as the appointment of one of the legislators who has signed their name on in support at the Governor's urging.³ Despite the fact that I was to serve, per the City Charter, as the advisor on such issues, the Supervisor was said to be unable to talk with me about the legislation before the vote. Previously we had often and held a casually conversed on such items.

The third of the three offices with their names on the legislation was equally difficult. From our first efforts of discussion, the staff openly stated that their pure reason for leading the legislation was the Governor's encouragement. Whereas the other two offices posed arguments as to potential benefits that may result from a youth's involvement in a program such as TPA, this office never touched upon the subject. San Francisco had just held elections for all Supervisorial office seats, and out of the three Supervisors who supported the resolution, only this legislator was not a lame duck. Political aspirations caused the legislative aides in this office to literally shrug their shoulders and state, "When the Governor calls, we respond."

In order to save a sense of optimism, after my visit to that office I headed over to the office of the Board's president. The President of the Board is notorious for political action that runs independent of the suggestive urging of the higher powers that be. As a result, this office had not been contacted regarding TPA, and none of the staff members were aware of its existence despite the fact that it was to be voted on during the next

³ Each Board Member appoints one Commissioner, and the Mayor appoints six.

business day. One staff member sat down with me and began made additional copies of the materials we had gathered. He clearly stated the office's opposition to TPA, and promised to support the sending of the resolution to committee for discussion.

Along with making stops at Supervisors' offices, another Commissioner and I made calls to the local school district, and individual Board of Education members. From those calls it became clear that no one in the community had been contacted about the legislation, not even the school district that would be expelling the students who would ultimately become potential "cadets" at TPA. Myself, two other Commissioners, and Youth Commission staff members continued making rounds of phone calls to make sure that all the parties that should be involved and informed were aware of the legislation.

The Youth Commission had been in existence for five years at the time of this action and had started to receive recognition as a strong decision-making body. Despite our increased efforts of legislation, community involvement, and activism, and despite the larger community's great respect for our work, it has been found it at times to be difficult to receive adequate respect from the Board of Supervisors, as can be witnessed by the manner in which the legislation was introduced in such a way that the Commission was not given proper time to act in response. This crucial lack of professional respect became quite evident in the lack of dialogue the two offices of the supporting Supervisors would engage in. Despite my personal relationship of advisor and friend to my appointing Supervisor, all efforts to hold discussion had been rejected.

Through old fashion forms of community organizing, it was while at church on the Sunday before the legislation was to be voted on that I got the ear of a local advocate and former lobbyist who had ran, and lost, in the most recent election for the Board of

Education. After a morning of gospel we engaged in an afternoon of politics where I shared with this woman our compiled information, and the time crunch we were working in. Within hours this adult ally was speaking with my appointing official about the issue. Despite the fact that I was a youth, and the designated advisor on related issues, it was an adult who had received a crammed overview education on TPA who was allotted the ability to actually speak with the legislator who had the power to send the resolution to committee.

By the time the meeting started on Monday afternoon, we had learned that the Governor had set a time limit as to when the resolution could be passed, and, as such, there was increased hesitancy around the option of sending it to committee. Members of the Commission, and concerned members of the community, including the lobbyist from my church community, sat in the audience of the meeting as the agenda item was reached. Through our discussions with the offices of the Supervisors, the Commission believed that we had enough support for one Supervisor to motion to send the item to committee, and another Supervisor to second it. As the item was announced, the Supervisor who had given their assurance that they would send the resolution to committee left the room. Another member made the motion, and a third (my appointing official, in a surprise move) supported it, giving the Commission the crucial time necessary to gain more information, and organize an effort around solid community involvement. The Governor reluctantly extended the deadline a month, in order for San Francisco to approve the legislation.

Having successfully used our insider status to halt the resolution, it was to be heard in a committee hearing where members of the community could make public

comment. The next step, as the Commission saw it, was to use our outsider status to organize community involvement in the matter. Having previously called several potential partners in action, we started sending out comprised packets of information to these groups. We included every possible ally in the community that we could find, from youth groups and individual youth, to community members concerned with the issue of juvenile justice, youth workers, teachers, counselors, artists and activists. Through our connections at the school district, and on the school board, we soon had their strong support backing our efforts as well. It quickly became clear that the community would not accept the silent manner in which the local legislators wished to deal with the decision-making process around TPA.

Along with hitting tradition means of power via these established figures and decision-making bodies, the Commission also took the matter to the streets, and straight to the youth who would potentially be effected by the legislation. Starting with the use of mass e-mail list serves, Commissioners began to notify the community as to what was at stake. We also formatted a teach-in style presentation on the topic, which was taught in workshops with youth activist and recreation groups in various parts of the community. The response was overwhelming, and soon the offices of the Supervisors who supported the measure⁴ were being bombarded by phone calls and e-mails.

Soon TPA was a hot topic, talked about in diverse groups across the city. The next necessary step became alerting the media to the legislative decision that was at hand. The Commission often works with the media, and has a Media Affairs and Public Relations Officer on the Executive Committee. Serving as the Community Affairs

⁴ After we had the item sent to committee, two more lame duck Supervisors had their names added to the resolution, despite the open claims of their office that they had not researched the issue.

Officer, I worked with the Media Affairs Officer to use our media contacts to inform both the mainstream and alternative media about the legislation. Within days the press was bombarding the legislators' offices and demanding an explanation behind why they supported TPA.

It was through a reporter who writes for a local weekly that the Commission learned that the TPA resolution had been dropped. The legislator who led the legislation announced the dropping of it in a phone call with an inquiring reporter. The Youth Commission never was officially informed that the legislation had been dropped. The leading legislator who withdrew the resolution stated that he did so because he was misinformed in the beginning, and came to wish that he had never led the resolution to begin with. Of course, once more, this was told directly to the press, and not to the Commission, who had to force our contact and involvement throughout the whole process, fighting against the exclusion of the system making decisions about our own age group.

Discussion

The experience of fighting TPA gave great insight into the inner workings of politics. Through the experience the Youth Commission lost any remaining naïveté surrounding the legislative process. Here, before our eyes, emerged a process of legislation gone through in a total state of supposed blindness. Every step was acted out and followed accordingly without one person stopping to ask what was the actual issue at hand; and when the issue at hand was called out and questioned, every action was taken to silence what was viewed as dissent.

Time and again I have heard members of my generation speak with great cynicism about the legislative process and government in general. With corporate scandals dominating the headlines, and fundraising donations directly linked, it is hard not to feel that those who represent us do not represent our interests unless we have some strong form of power backing those interests. Prior to this experience I found it to be much easier to draw a line between what I viewed as well-intended and consciously decided acts, and those that are acted out with ulterior motives and harmful consequences. Now I find that there is a much more frightening form of legislative action that comes in a neutral or banal force of perpetrated thoughtlessness. The Commission bore witness to harmful and wasteful legislation without necessarily evil intentions held by those who supported and pushed for the measure. I find this form of legislating to be almost as frightening and angering as the purposeful enactment of legislation that can be interpreted as harmful.

Coming out of the experience, the Youth Commission began to embody its own definition of power. Power, particularly that which drives the political world, takes form and is used by only those who claim it. Our support of a majority of the voters, safety in the City Charter, office in City Hall, and staff of three was not enough to give us the necessary power to fight this legislation - we had to create such power ourselves. Yes, we did find power in our ability to receive word (however delayed) of the legislation, and in being able to so easily walk down a flight of stairs and through the doors of our legislating officials' offices, but it is my belief that we found even more power in our ability to make decisions free of political restraints, such as the Governor's wishes. We had the power of our youth, which opened certain doors because of our perceived non-

threatening (read: powerless) position in society. We then had to establish other powers to overcome that perception and demand that our opinions be heard and respected once those doors were stepped through. And, when we learned that such action alone was not enough to call into being our desired outcome, we discovered strong power in the coalition building abilities between youth, and with numerous community groups and organizations.

The Youth Commission was discovered to hold insider access that allows us to bring in outsider viewpoints and opinions. It was through this process that we discovered our true power to not be in a bylaw explaining our detailed role as advisors, but rather an unconventional form of power in the access we hold, and the status we can create through bringing together multiple parties. The Commission was not approached about the issue, nor listened to as youth alone; it was once we used our collective experiences as youth, determined resolve to repeatedly approach the legislators with the facts and our opinions, and once we used our status as trusted change makers within the community to pull fully collective involvement, that we got the attention necessary to stop the passing of the resolution.

It has become a much-needed trend throughout our nation and the world to support youth development and involvement in decision making processes, particularly those related to government. Through this experience it became increasingly clear that not only do we need to increase the number of such roles, and set structured forms of involvement so that tokenism does not serve as an adequate means of representation, but that a form of cultural training or reconditioning must take place on the side of the involved adults.

No matter how popular the concept of youth involvement, even advisors, may be, it is quite a different reality when those youth dare to disagree with an opinion, and expect to be heard and respected. As this movement of youth involvement moves forth, we must be adamant about creating systems and structures where youth have a true voice. Had the Youth Commission not demanded and defined innovative forms of power, our mere legislative and voting abilities would not have been enough to stop, or even halt, the TPA legislation.

A brighter note of reality that also became apparent through the process was the strong support and encouragement of the larger community. Not only did the Youth Commission find unwavering support in those same community members who rallied for our creation, we found a political powerhouse in the gathering of such supporters as a collective whole. In relation to our work with the community, the Youth Commission was also more able to grow in our roles as community representatives and legislative watchdogs. The community did not rally together behind us merely because we were youth speaking up; the community supported our efforts because, without our efforts, the TPA legislation would have passed through silently and the larger community never would have had the opportunity to enter into the discussion, or fight for what they believed. We were the ears, eyes and voice of the community's concern inside City Hall, and we represented in a manner that brought the results desired by that larger community.

As an individual Commission who was involved in the process from start to end, I learned that a concerned citizen can never give up watch. Part of the system of democracy, which can push aside and even ostracize the public, is the necessary, and often forced, involvement of that exact public. Power held by the government is a reality,

and we either can sit by and let others in that power dictate our life's situation, or we can step up to claim the power of definition ourselves.

Being someone who is naturally drawn to the energy of the political world, I often run into a conflict with the side of my personality that longs to deal in a just and fair system where power plays and games are not necessary in order to reach eventually just and fair goals. As a young woman who has come to accept the likely fact that throughout my life political involvement will quite possibly be a constant, I search for ways in which negotiations and actions can be come about without compromise of ideals or core values. The experience of being a Youth Commissioner has often provided an insider look into the study of whether elected politicians can really be successful without also being corrupt. The elected officials who supported this measure range far in terms of their public characters. The gentleman leading the legislation at the will of the Governor, and ignoring the Commission, is rumored to hold a high chance of becoming the next Mayor. The legislator who was my appointing official at the time, and moved the item to committee for discussion, has been on a two-year political hiatus, unable to successfully win re-election she has nearly disappeared from the local political scene. To what extent does the degree to which they bent to higher powers play a role in where their current positions are? These are questions come across daily when you are a young person trying to make sense of the political system in such an up close an personal manner as the Youth Commission operates. I still do not have any full answers to any of my questions on the topic. I believe strongly enough in my ideal working structure of the political system, where *all* are included, that I am willing to fight tirelessly for it, whether it presently exists or not. Perhaps I, and my peers, embody the age-old idealism of youth in our

aspirations for justice in the political system. That may be so, but before categorizing this generation of youth so easily I think it should be duly noted that such idealism has found a way to exist despite international crisis, domestic terrorism and the completely unpredictable future of this home called America. The fact that seventeen youth meet on a regular basis inside majestically appearing legislative chambers and operate within a true sense of democracy is testimony enough to the changes emerging from such political idealism. One fact repeatedly learned through my experience as a Commissioner, and particularly highlighted in the ordeal around TPA, is that, if America is ever to embody her full promise of democracy it will only be through increased involvement of all her concerned citizens, importantly including those who do not typically rest in seats of power, of particular note here - youth.

Closing

TPA opened without the support of San Francisco City and County. Within months it became clear that the target numbers for youth participation were far from realistic. Having expected 180 youth per six-month period, the establishment hosted only one youth in the first six months. Having now been opened a year and a half, TPA has only graduated eleven youth. Calculations by the media state that California's spending is over one million dollars per graduate at TPA.⁵

Post September 11th, the state of California, as the rest of the nation, faced severe budget cuts. With a combination of the dot-com bust, the energy crisis, and the nation's shaky economy, California found itself scrambling to distribute the funds that remained.

⁵ As of the time of publishing the academy had served just 34 students, and graduated 11.

Despite bipartisan agreement that TPA was a waste of money, the office of the Governor had kept TPA in the state's budget, and was proposing an increase in the amount of youth who could attend.

A local reporter from the San Francisco Chronicle who wanted to report on a TPA update contacted me at the Youth Commission and I forwarded along the collected documents on TPA that the Commission had previously gathered. The day before the article ran in the San Francisco Chronicle, I had a meeting with staff of a local state Senator's office. While discussing options of cuts in order to increase potential funding for youth health services, TPA was brought into the discussion as a possibility. I also forwarded along to the Senator's staff relevant information to persuade the other legislators in Sacramento as to why TPA should be cut from the budget.

The Chronicle Article ran on the front page, giving increased spotlight to the actions of the legislators who were debating the issue in Sacramento. Days later the LA Times ran a negative article on TPA as well. The day following the second article, the Senator's office contacted the Youth Commission to announce that TPA had been cut from the budget, ending the short life of the unsuccessful venture.

It is doubtful that when the Governor announced the defunding of TPA, he envisioned seventeen youth in the City and County of San Francisco in a state of celebration. It was the successful end to a battle that a small number of youth had decided to wage a year and a half earlier. From late night investigations to pounding the hallways inside City Hall, and the pavement outside where the individuals who could be directly affected by this legislation were, the San Francisco Youth Commission forced our presence throughout the decision making process.

The situation surrounding TPA stands as a great example of the true power such a Commission can hold. A group of seventeen youth between the ages of twelve and twenty-three made a decision, a year and a half ago, that the entire legislature of the state of California took long deliberations to recently decide; and within that statement lies a strong argument, via example, for youth involvement in government procedures and decision making processes.