Ben Eikey:

Welcome to Oversight Matters. A podcast that gives you a behind the scenes look at legislative investigations around the country and the people involved. This is Ben Eikey and I am your host. This podcast is brought to you by the Levin Center at Wayne Law in Detroit. On this episode of Oversight Matters my guests discuss the Youth and Government Oversight exercise program. The Levin Center offers this program to the YMCA and other high school level education programs across the nation. A scenario researched by team of Wayne Law volunteer students is prepared and then delivered to high school students who play the committee members and must work together to ask questions and gather facts on the scenario from the witnesses. This year's scenario involves school resource officers and social media algorithms.

Ben Eikey:

The Levin center has delivered the Oversight exercise as part of YMCA Youth and Government, a nationwide civic engagement in servant leadership program, providing high school students an active learning opportunity through model government leadership and professional development.

Ben Eikey:

We introduce this year scenario with a fake newspaper article last fall and gave the students a chance to reflect on the topic and as members of a legislative committee, how they might want to prepare for an investigation who and who might be an important witness for a committee hearing. Then in the spring, we hosted a two day program full of collaboration, deliberation and two hearings. After the hearing, a written product is generated by the students so they have a record of all the facts gathered during the exercise. We at the Levin center, are thankful to offer this engaging student Oversight program. And on this podcast, we will hear from state directors from two states where we recently did the program, as well as students who are excited to discuss how much they learned from the program and how the opportunity to collaborate with each other, to work together in the pursuit of finding facts was a highlight of their Youth and Government experience.

Ben Eikey:

Now, hear from the leaders of Michigan's YMCA Youth and Government program. Followed by Florida's YMCA Youth and Government program. Then hear from students who did the exercise earlier this year, followed by a Michigan student who was part of the YMCA Youth and Government exercise a few years ago. I hope this podcast provides some great information on an important part of the Levin Center's work and how we are helping to build engaging civil discourse on Oversight topics of critical importance in Michigan and all across the country.

Adam Cecil:

Hi, I'm Adam Cecil. I am the assistant director for Michigan Youth and Government. And I've been part of the program for five years.

Lydia Mitchell:

Hi, I'm Lydia Mitchell. I am the executive director of YMCA, Michigan Youth and Government here in, I said that it's Michigan. I've been around five and a half years, but I'm a program alumni. I've been doing Youth and Government since, I don't really want to admit,

Ben Eikey:

Thank you both so much for being here and helping us out. So, how many years has Michigan Youth and Government doing the Oversight program now?

Lydia Mitchell:

Well, I think we've been doing it three. Yeah. So, three years. So, our first year would have been 2018. Thanks Mary. So, we've been doing it for three years and we've done two full in-persons, right? 2018, 2019. And then, we did early conference in-person in 2020. And then, we had two virtual versions as well. So, it's been since 2018, but we've actually done it six times because we have two conferences.

Ben Eikey:

Great. And about how many students do you have, would you say, on average that take part in this program?

Adam Cecil:

So, it's grown over the years. Our first year we were struggling getting a couple of people. I think we basically had the bare minimum, but I know this last year we had around 14 students. It's just getting the word out and helping recruit more students to do the program. It's actually been really great for the students who've been doing Youth and Government since the sixth grade and kind of want to switch it up. So, reaching out to those kids and telling them about the program has been our most successful way of recruiting.

Lydia Mitchell:

Yeah. And so, in a traditional year, we would have had about 30 students do the Oversight program in the full program here.

Ben Eikey:

And then, from the students that have done it, what's been their feedback so far? What have they been able to say about this?

Lydia Mitchell:

Yeah. I know you're planning on hearing from the kids, too. But the students who do Oversight, the first thing they say is how much they learn, right? These are kids who, Adam already said it, right? These are kids who've done Youth and Government 5, 6, 7 years. And so, other parts of the conference, the legislature or the governor's administration, or even the judicial branch. They have a full understanding of how those things function, both because they're on Youth and Government and because they've finished all their government classes. But all of them say, "I didn't understand how legislative Oversight worked until I did it." And they really have an excitement about it when they're done with it.

Adam Cecil:

Yeah. I had one student that I've worked pretty closely with for the last couple of years. So, he did the ledge program, he's within our cone of delegation. So, he's done both those different debate styles. But in the last meeting I had with him, he told me his favorite part of Oversight was the collaboration aspect of it. It's just not a one-on-one. He likes to be able to talk to other people to help problem solve rather than it all being on him. And I thought that was really cool and a good point that you made for us.

Ben Eikey:

Awesome. I'm kind of curious, also, hear some feedback on the topics that we've chosen over the last couple of years. Has there been certain curriculums that we've had developed that were your favorites? Or certain topics that you'd like to see us pursue more in the future? Just kind of curious to get your thoughts on, when we go through and make those decisions, how that's been received.

Adam Cecil:

Yeah. I actually really like the process that you guys go through on doing that. This last year was using the student that got kicked out of school, wrongful searches and stuff like that. It's really relevant to the students. A lot of kids, when we were talking to them, they were like, "Oh, my gosh. I didn't realize this was a made up story. I could totally see this happening." I think that really brings it very positive, realistic approach to the program. And that makes it more beneficial for everyone involved.

Lydia Mitchell:

I think the other thing that I like about it is the work that goes into making it timely. Frankly, running Youth and Government every year, we tend to do all the same things, right? And it's hard to get us out of our rut. We rely on the kids and their bill topics to keep it interesting for the other delegates, right? But because the Levin Center's team is so plugged in and takes the time and puts in the energy to create those scenarios each year, they're timely, they're well done. And it helps having that infrastructure from the Levin Center is really, really valuable because it's just something that we on staff wouldn't have the capacity to do. We wouldn't have the capacity to research a new topic. We'd be recycling topics after a couple of years. Not to say we can't do that. We definitely can. But because we haven't had to recycle topics, it really brings fresh and exciting topics to the conferences. And that is a huge asset.

Ben Eikey:

And that kind of leads in perfectly into my next question, because I was kind of curious to talk a little more about, why this partnership? Why Youth and Government at the Levin center? Why does this kind of work when we combine it to be able to have this happen? Any broad thoughts about interacting with the Levin Center at Wayne law school. And why does this work? I guess. Is kind of my broadly base question for this.

Lydia Mitchell:

So, one of the things I'll say is that Senator Levin is close to Youth and Government in Michigan's heart, anyway. As a program alumni, we would visit the Senator in DC when we'd go to the conference on national affairs. And so, the initial connection was really just based on what we know to be true about Senator Levin, right? His passion, his interest in making sure that good governance is taught each generation over. And that's what we do, what you think of it, right?

Lydia Mitchell:

Democracy must be learned by each generation. We teach young people how to engage in their democracy and how to be active. And so, it was a natural partnership in that way. And I think, from an expansion standpoint, it's a logical next step. We have seen legislative oversight happening in real life and the teens have seen it more than they probably did 10, 15 years ago, right? So, whether it's Zuckerberg, questions in front of the Senate or now we're talking about, since we started this partnership, more relevant things happening in real life with legislative oversight. So, I think the need for it in real life means we should be focusing on it at Youth and Government, too.

Adam Cecil:

Yeah. And it also is the fact that the Levin Center can kind of take the program and run with it. Obviously, we have our input on what cases we want and stuff. The fact that they bring their staff and college volunteers to actually run the program. We have six or seven different programs that we're running in ourselves. So, adding another one on top of that for just the two of us would be darn near impossible. So, just the fact that they can kind of come in, they kind of understand our program, they plug it in and run with it makes it super easy on our end and a beneficial [inaudible 00:09:48].

Lydia Mitchell:

Yeah. I mean, I think Adam hits on it, right? The capacity of our programs, nationally, to design a whole new program area is limited, especially post COVID. And so, being able to say, "Hey, we're coming back in person and we're doing all their traditional things. But here's this new program area, here's this additional opportunity. And I don't have to come up with a staff capacity to actually implement it right off the bat." Is what I think is the biggest appeal to other states.

Lydia Mitchell:

So, that's the one thing I would say. And the other piece I would add is just, as we look at more and more states that have middle school programs and have juniors and seniors who've done Youth and Government 4, 5, 6, 7 years. It really is a valuable way to enrich their experience without having to recreate any systems, right? You don't have to create a national debate section. You don't have to create another Senate for upperclassmen or whatever it is. You can loop them into your traditional programming and have them do legislative oversight, or you can deliver this pre-packaged legislative oversight program area without having to rework everything else. Just need the space, the space and the time and the schedule.

Ben Eikey:

Well, thank you so much, Lydia and Adam. I really appreciate your thoughts and all of this and just all the really great words of encouragement. This has been really fun. Thank you so much.

Adam Cecil:

No problem.

Lydia Mitchell:

Absolutely.

Adam Cecil:

Thanks again, Lydia and Adam, for all the kind words. Next, hear from the directors of the Florida YMCA Youth and Government program and their thoughts on using the Oversight exercise within their program for the first time earlier this year.

Lily Tysinger:

Hi, I'm Lily Tysinger. I'm the state director of external affairs for the Florida state lines YMCAs and oversee our Youth and Government university software partnership.

Christina Wiley:

And I am Christina Wiley. I'm the state director of civic engagement and youth development for the Florida state Alliance of YMCAs. And I oversee our Florida Youth and Government program.

Christina Wiley:

We unfortunately had to go virtual with our conference this year. So, it was really a way for our really engaged in to have an experience with a new topic, being legislative oversight, and to get new exposure, a layer, an aspect of big government that they were unfamiliar with. I would say that probably the majority of our participants, maybe they've heard about congressional legislative oversight, but I'm not certain that they knew that it extended to state level of government. So, it was really interesting to see them engage with a first initial webinar, walking them through that aspect, then the introduction of legislative oversight and to kind of see the wheels turning in their brains and their eyes open to a new topic. And then, watch them really dig in and become effort throughout the process of our state assembly with a very-

Ben Eikey:

So, every year we have a new scenario. We are able to use scenarios from years past, for those that are interested. And the scenario that we did this past year was about school resource officers. And I thought that was a curriculum in particular that really resonated with the students this year. I think that it was a personal type of discussion. It was related to schools, it was related to education, and it was related to a lot of very timely issues that we're seeing in today's society. Any thoughts or feedback on that school resource officer scenario and just sort of the direction that we chose to take with the exercise this year?

Lily Tysinger:

I think it was very fitting in Florida. We have a lot of students who were really engaged after the Marjory Stoneman Douglas shooting. And that has always been a huge talking point in Florida. Actually, the last student class that was in high school was graduating that year from that time period. So, for our students it's a huge talking point all at the time and to really get bookstore from a different lens of how that can be addressed if the day and not just an aftermath. I think it was really empowering and a cool opportunity for them to take that on.

Ben Eikey:

You heard feedback from the students that participated in the program this past year. What did they have to say?

Christina Wiley:

Honestly, I heard great reviews. Our students tend to do well with programs that are built around a small cohort group of students. I think that this program really falls into that category in a way that I appreciate, because it gives students an opportunity to kind of go on a learning journey together, right? That they're making up the committee, they have that community where they're interacting and following the process from start to finish altogether, which gives them the opportunity to reflect and, I think, engage with the material in a way that they wouldn't if they were in a bigger group.

Christina Wiley:

So, it's really interesting to hear those students connect with each other, make friends, connect over the material. And it almost creates this opportunity where they might be talking about that over lunch or over chat in the context of a virtual conference and even extending their learning further, even outside of the time that they're spending on Zoom or the time that they're spending in this simulation. So, I think that that's really neat. It gives students an opportunity to connect over a learning and then to continue that learning outside of the classroom.

Ben Eikey:

Thanks again, Lydia, Adam, Lily and Christina, for all of your kind words. Next, hear from students who have participated in the program, sharing their favorite parts of the exercise, what it was like to work together to ensure a successful hearing and what they learned about legislative oversight.

Ben Eikey:

So, I'm here now with several students from the Florida Youth and Government program who all just recently participated in the Oversight exercise with the Florida Youth and Government. And we have five in total that we're all here to discuss a little bit about the program and what they were able to experience. We might as well just kind of go around the virtual table here and just do introductions and go right ahead. I guess we'll start off with James.

James Williams:

Hi, my name is James Williams. I'm from the Florida Youth and Government program.

Apoorva:

Hi, my name is Apoorva and I'm also from Florida Youth and Government.

Neera Goyle:

Hi, my name is Neera Goyle and I'm also from the Florida Youth and Government.

Alexander Rodriguez:

Hi, I'm Alexander Rodriguez. And I am also from the Florida Youth and Government.

Alexis Anastasia:

Hi, my name is Alexis Anastasia, and I'm also from the Florida Youth and Government program.

Ben Eikey:

Thank you all so much for being here this afternoon, this evening, I suppose. So, I have just a series of questions. I'll start off with what made you initially interested in this Oversight exercise? What about it kind of initially appealed to you

James Williams:

For myself, I was a legislative presiding officer. So, I felt like I had to, a little bit, but it was honestly something I was very ecstatic to get a part of because it was the first time Florida had launched this program. So, it's always fun to be a part of something new.

Apoorva:

I used to be part of the legislative side of things. And this year I switched over to the judicial. So, initially, when everyone was talking about this new program, I was really interested in seeing how these two program areas kind of coincide, especially in real-world I guess. Especially since these are real world issues and all of that. So, that's initially why I was interested in joining this program.

Alexander Rodriguez:

I got into the legislative Oversight program somewhat to the way James did, because it was partially also because, "Hey, I'm running to be a legislative presiding officer. I should probably know something more about the legislative branch and what it does." And I also wanted to know what's the legislative oversight and how does it work?

Ben Eikey:

We at the Levin center, with the help of volunteers, conduct the research and go through a comprehensive annual process to prepare a new Oversight scenario. What did you think of this year's school resource officers topic and what might we want to look into further for the future?

James Williams:

I really appreciated how this year's topic had so many issues to it. There were about eight or nine different topics that you could have tackled or asked questions about within the school resource officer. And I appreciated how many witnesses we had. And I think broadening that to a wider view, it's really representative of the real world because in real-world problems, issues that are heard before committees are complex in the first place. So, it was challenging to come up with ideas and what to talk about and try to manage everything and try to not manipulate the system, but work the system to our advantage, to get the answers we wanted by partnering with each other, asking questions. And it was a big buildup. So, I really appreciated how it was so complex because it really was. It gave us a good idea of what the real world is like.

Apoorva:

Yeah. I was going to say, along those lines, I really appreciated because when we think of real issues in our own community, just in general, we often find that it's really in cricket and all of that, and you can't really point to one specific solution or one specific piece of legislation to change. And it's often several different components that come together to create such an issue. And so, it takes a lot of intricate parts to solve that issue. So, I really appreciated how we were able to utilize all these different resources and witnesses and all of that. Because even during the hearings and stuff, I found that I didn't exactly get answers I expected. So, I think a big part of it, it's also working with what you gave in and all of that.

Neera Goyle:

I thought the situation this year was really good because again, like others have said it really related to high school students since it was about how much social media monitors what we do, the role of school resource officers in schools, the role of the algorithms on our social media, racism among students. So, it dealt with a lot of issues that were really prevalent today, which I thought was very interesting.

Neera Goyle:

And also, it was interesting to see how the situation wasn't so black and white. There was a lot of gray areas and it wasn't just one person made a mistake. There were multiple errors made among multiple people. So, it was interesting to have to navigate that and have to basically come up with concrete solutions on how that could be fixed and what was wrong and what we had to do in order to fix the system. So, it was difficult and complicated, but it was really fun to do and navigate a real life situation where there's no one bad guy, it's multiple errors among multiple people.

Alexis Anastasia:

Kind of going off on what Neera just said, I think it was also cool that with this particular scenario, we were able to kind of point out flaws in both the individuals involved with this specific case and then also falls within the system itself that allowed it to happen. So, I thought that was a really cool takeaway that we got from this particular scenario.

James Williams:

My favorite part of the legislative oversight was chairing, first of all, because I kind of got to take a step back and see how the conversation was going, where I think everyone else was personally geared in at what they were going to ask and focusing on their questions rightfully so. But as the chair, I got to take a step back and follow the conversation and to say it was zigzagging is an understatement. I really absolutely would recommend legislative oversight to anyone, even if they weren't interested in government, just because not only does it help with your public speaking skills, but it really just shows you and opens your eyes to just a broader topic that I might not always be right. And there may always be more to the story that is always there and I can find out. So, absolutely I would recommend.

Apoorva:

I think my favorite part was, like James, being able to see how everyone else kind of takes out these witnesses and kind of their own interpretation of how to pick out information and all of that. And I would, 100%, recommended it to my friends, both who are anything government and who are not. By nature, I'm not someone who's very good at on the spot and public speaking in general. And generally someone has to plan every little bit out. So, I think I definitely gained a lot from this just in my own personal life. Just from being able to kind of come up with these things on the spot and under pressure and all of that, while still being in this kind of judgment free zone. Because it's obviously not real life. These are real world issues, but this is not a real hearing where people get affected. So, I think it was really important for me. And I think even if you are someone who's good at being on the spot, it's definitely a really good experience and we had lots of fun doing it.

Alexander Rodriguez:

Yeah. I have similar stuff with how I like legislative oversight. One thing I did like was how it was really just a new experience and how it taught me more and it was more realistic. Not to say Youth and Government isn't realistic. Our Youth and Government, I know is one of the closest to how the state actually runs it. But one of the aspects that I like about the Oversight was that it was realistic. And I like being able to learn about how the Oversight does and how it would react in that situation, which is a very realistic situation. How I would recommend it to others is I'd specifically recommend it to those who want to do Youth and Government type stuff.

Alexander Rodriguez:

But were a little bit scared because it seems like a bit too much work and competitive, because legislative oversight, to me at least, seems it's a lot less competitive. Because in standard Youth and Government there're awards and in judicial there're cases you're directly going against someone. And then, legislative pro and con speeches for your bill. And then, you feel like you're kind of under criticism. But with legislative oversight there isn't really that kind of competition of you either have to disprove someone or you have to really cruise someone. It's really just asking questions, finding answers and coming up with solutions collaboratively.

Apoorva:

I think that's part of the reasons why I liked this type of environment more, just because it doesn't feel like all of the other delegates are trying to go out you and see you fail and all of that. It's not like that in other program areas, but it sometimes feels like that when you're on the floor and everyone's looking at you and debating your ideas and stuff. So, I think that's definitely something I'd also recommend, like Alexander said.

Neera Goyle:

I think my favorite part of legislative oversight was definitely the questioning because it was really fun to try to come up with the right questions, to try to get deeper into the situation and figure out what really happened and what really is wrong. So, I thought that was very interesting, especially when you get the answer you want or were expecting, or you get a really good answer that reveals something, it makes you just so happy.

Neera Goyle:

So, I think that was definitely one of my favorite parts and I would 100% recommend this to someone even outside anything government and Youth and Government. Because I feel like this program is really unique because you kind of get to act like the interrogator and go out and try to figure out what's wrong here in this situation or scenario. So, I thought that was really fun and I definitely recommend it, especially since, like others have said, it's a less competitive environment and it's a lot of fun to try to interact with real people who are playing these parts and try to figure out what went wrong and who made what errors and what needs to be changed in order to prevent situations like this from happening in the future.

Ben Eikey:

Thank you. I really appreciate it.

James Williams:

Thank you. I think on behalf of everyone, even the people that aren't here right now, thank you for everything you and Mary and everyone at Wayne Law has done. We really appreciate it. And we had a blast.

Ben Eikey:

Thanks again to the students from the Florida YMCA Youth and Government program for your feedback and words of encouragement. I am thankful we were able to provide such an educational and enjoyable program this year and in particularly happy to hear from the students about how the collaboration to gather facts together was a highlight for them. Next, hear from a former Michigan Youth and Government student about her experiences with the Oversight program.

Ben Eikey:

Joining us now on Oversight Matters. We have Montgomery Barrow, who, back in 2019, took part in the Oversight exercise for the oil spill. Montgomery, I'm really thankful that you're here with me. I'm really curious to hear a little bit more about your time and your experiences with the legislative Oversight exercise as part of Youth and Government. Thanks for joining me.

Montgomery Barrow:

Yeah. Of course. So, Oversight was kind of thrown at me my senior year. I was on my second conference and I was head lobbyist, senior lobbyist position. Every year I did Youth and Government in high school, basically. It was [inaudible 00:28:23] that position, kept applying, finally got it. So, I was excited to do the conference senior lobbyist. And then, next thing you know, Marianne came up to me, she's like, "I think you'd be perfect for this new program. You've done lobbying, you know what you're doing, you've done every other program. You should try it out." I was like, "Marianne, finally senior lobbyist. I want to do this." And she's like, "No, just give it a shot." So, I was like, "All right. Will try it." And then, next thing you know, I was head co-chair of it and fell in love with the program.

Ben Eikey:

So, during your time in it, would you say that it had any sort of an impact in the way you think about civic participation or legislatures and their role in our process? Was there anything that you kind of really took away from your experiences regarding that?

Montgomery Barrow:

Definitely. I came to the realization there's going to be a lot more, if something big that happens. Mine was the oil spill and you don't realize the impending things that could happen with it. How much would truly be affected with it. You have these people who out here who say they do the research on it and they put it out there. But most of the time you don't see it as government officials. You don't hear these people who've done all the research. It's just fellow people who don't pull the title, trying to say these things.

Montgomery Barrow:

And then, actually looking at something that could be a real case scenario and what it would take and who would pay for it. It was really hard when it came down to it of, "Okay. Is the government going to pay for this? Or the company that put the line in? Or the company that hit it?" I think a lot of people don't realize, if something big happens, they expect immediate action, but there's so many different players in the game that sometimes immediate action can't happen because at that point you could blame the wrong person and they could be liable or maybe even blame the right person. But at the same time, it takes that research and knowledge to be able to do that.

Ben Eikey:

Now, throughout this, and I know it's been a couple of years now, but was there any real highlights or your favorite part about the exercise? Anything that you kind of remember you look back on and just kind of, "Wow. That was a really great moment."

Montgomery Barrow:

I think came more as an alumni watching this and participating in it. When I was doing it, I thought it was super fun to get with the people and see that diversified thoughts. However, as an alumni, it's so fun watching where they decide to take everything. Because as an alumni, I got to sit in on all the group meetings. I got to hear the ideas coming from every angle and every person, where when I was the co-chair of it I had to hear my group, before I split off into the chair.

Montgomery Barrow:

So, at that point I had no idea what angle anybody was coming at this with. No idea what questions. So, as an alumni, it was kind of really fun hearing like, "Would they ask the questions that I would ask?" Or, "Did they come up with questions all on their own?" And it was kind of cool, as an alumni personally, looking, I had the case in front of me and what they were talking about. I would've taken a whole different route than what they would have and then they took it around that. I was like, "Yeah. I could see that working." And it did work in their favor in the end.

Ben Eikey:

Thanks again. I really appreciate it.

Montgomery Barrow:

Thank you.

Ben Eikey:

Thanks again to everyone for the fun interviews on an important part of the Levin Center. Until next time. My name is Ben Eikey and Oversight Matters is brought to you by the Levin Center at Wayne Law in Detroit.