

strengthening 4-H in schools

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Dilemma for the 80s—Extension 4-H agents are faced with limited travel budgets, high costs for families commuting to 4-H meetings, and shrinking numbers of “full-time” volunteers. Any of these factors could strain the backbone of the 4-H program—traditional 4-H Clubs. But what to do?

“4-H in the Schools” can be a cost-effective alternative for reaching youth at a time and place where their numbers are significant. Schools offer opportunities to reach a wide variety of youth or to target specific groups.

One of the original reasons for establishing 4-H as a federally funded youth development program was to give youth extra educational opportunities not realized in rural schools. Today, that philosophy extends to complementing or enriching the curriculum in *all* schools.

School Delivery Methods

Fry, in her 1978 study,¹ found that Extension professionals are expanding 4-H through increased use of school delivery methods. Of the 12 methods identified, the top 3 were:

1. Volunteer teacher/leaders in charge of 4-H Clubs.
2. Using school facilities, such as buildings and equipment.
3. Community leaders, such as firemen, conducting special interest groups.

According to 1982 Extension Service/USDA guidelines, participants in school enrichment programs and special interest groups are counted separately from traditional 4-H Club members.

In Connecticut, there's both a strong, traditional community-based 4-H Club structure and a solid outreach effort

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in the schools. But these two components have been operated separately and support materials have varied from county to county, project to project. A major effort was undertaken in 1980 to refine the 4-H school enrichment curriculum and draw the 2 components closer together.

The goals were:

1. To develop a statewide packet called "4-H in the Schools," describing 12 topics geared for various levels, from kindergarten through 12th grade.
2. To introduce the concept of volunteer "teacher/leaders" and to offer the same publications and teaching materials to both clubs and schools.
3. To offer a system for school enrichment groups to enroll as 4-H Clubs.
4. To provide a vehicle for each child reached through school 4-H programs to enroll as a continuing 4-H member.
5. To maintain the visibility of 4-H in school enrichment programs.
6. To add skill-building activities to the regular academic curriculum.
7. To increase total 4-H enrollment and broaden 4-H involvement.

Participating teachers surveyed in Connecticut appreciated the value of 4-H projects and activities in their classrooms. 4-H can give teacher/leaders:

- Practical teaching guides.
- Orientation and training by university Extension specialists or county Extension professionals.
- Free loan of hardware and resources from the local Extension office or through the state's land-grant university.
- Access to resources from Extension Services in other states—for example, bi-lingual publications.
- "Hands-on" educational activities that reinforce basic math and language skills (such as math skills in calculating household energy use or doubling a recipe, vocabulary development in incubation and embryology).
- Help in finding community volunteers to work with students.

Appropriateness

To effectively recruit teacher/leaders for school 4-H programs, the materials must be appropriate and the presentation must be polished. A school superintendent, writing

for National 4-H News, cautions that there's great competition for classroom time and that schools are flooded with offers of programs to teach economics, nutrition, and energy.²

In addition, teachers are finely tuned to the reading level of printed material and grade-level appropriateness of resources. Studies have shown that many 4-H publications are written well above the grade level of the intended audience. Reyburn found that three-quarters of publications sampled were above the reading level of 68% of the audience who might use them.³ We found similar results of 4-H publications evaluated in *Expanding 4-H to Multi-Cultural Audiences*⁴ and in applying the Dale-Chall readability formula to some resources in Connecticut's "4-H in the Schools" programs.⁵

However, evaluation forms returned by Connecticut school personnel show ratings of good to excellent for grade-level appropriateness for plant science, bus safety, bike safety, and embryology.

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Approach

To strengthen 4-H programming in schools, a well-planned approach is necessary:

1. *An organized system for recruiting and training teacher/leaders.* Extension 4-H agents in Connecticut and other states have found that initial support from superintendents, curriculum coordinators, and/or school principals is necessary for successful teacher/leader training.
2. *High quality materials at low cost to compete favorably with other resources.* Teaching kits, audio-visual media, and hardware (model busses, bikes, and incubators) available for loan stretches a small investment by Extension into big returns for youth.
3. *Reading level must be appropriate.* It's critical that Extension professionals write effectively for various grade levels. For students, simple diagrams help explain difficult text, word games can be used as pretests and posttests or to introduce new vocabulary, and outlines help students understand new concepts. For Connecticut teachers, important aspects were: a variety of materials, practical ideas, form that is ready

to reproduce for classroom use, suggestions for follow-up activities and room setup, and a list of other available resources (such as reference publications, media, and field trip ideas).

4. *Emphasis on 4-H visibility and accountability.* Certificates of completion, class registration forms, eligibility for ongoing 4-H events, recruitment brochures for each child all help keep teacher/leaders, school administrators, youth, and their families aware of 4-H sponsorship of school 4-H programs. Enrollment forms for school classes and orders for certificates of completion gave 4-H professionals the documentation necessary for state and federal reports.
5. *Focus on subject areas outside the regular school curriculum in which Extension has the land-grant university research base, specialist, and publication support.* Connecticut's evaluation showed that those programs rated highest were incubation and embryology, plant science, and nutrition—the same areas in which Extension professionals have spent years developing and refining information for the traditional 4-H program.

Summary

The potential of "4-H in the Schools" is unlimited. A gap exists between the world as experienced by students in classrooms and the rest of the world. If schools encourage students to take advantage of community opportunities outside the instructional program, then students may be better able to relate school studies to the rest of their lives. "4-H in the Schools" can provide instructional resources, things and places to explore, and hands-on experiences. 4-H and schools can become partners in education, each building on the other's strengths.

Accordingly, Fry recommends that 4-H change its identification from an informal "out-of-school" educational program to a "nonformal, educational, character and skills-building youth program."⁶

Footnotes

1. Susan Fry, *The Relationship of 4-H and Schools—Where Are We?* (Washington, D.C.: SEA-Extension, USDA, 1979), p. 10.
2. Virgil Boatwright, "Big Steer Syndrome," *National 4-H News*, LVII (November, 1979), 14.
3. Jerry H. Reyburn, "4-H Project Guides Examined for Grade-Level Readability," *Science in Agriculture*, XXVII (Spring, 1980), 14.

4. Carmen Burrows, *Expanding 4-H to Multi-Cultural Audiences* (Washington, D.C.: SEA-Extension, USDA, 1980).
5. Stan Zaremba, "4-H in the Schools" (Unpublished report, University of Connecticut, Storrs, 1981).
6. Fry, *The Relationship of 4-H and Schools*, p. 30.

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