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Keeping Teens Involved Through State 4-H Exchanges

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Keeping Teens Involved Through State 4-H Exchanges

Abstract

A University of Idaho study shows youth who participated in 4-H are significantly better at avoiding risky life style choices. Creative programs that keep teens involved in 4-H encourage individuals to have a positive self-identity and give them the confidence to become positive role models for younger children. Teen exchange programs in 4-H are a great opportunity to experience life in a different part of the nation or even the world and keep teens involved in 4-H. Teens who become involved in the Minidoka County 4-H Teen Association continue to be active members until they graduate from high school.

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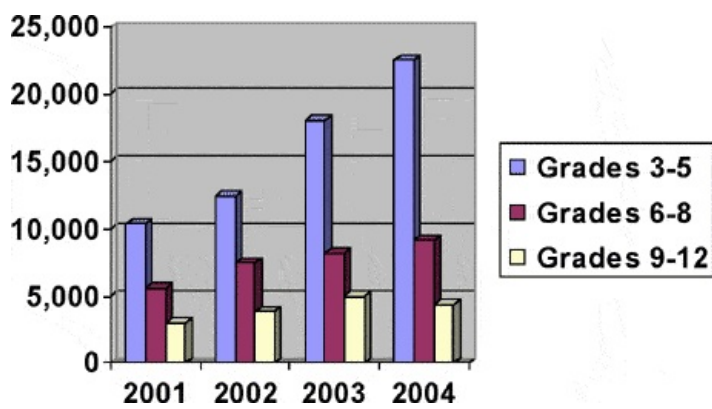
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Situation

A University of Idaho study of Idaho youth (Goodwin, Barnett, Pike, Peutz, Lanting, & Ward, 2005) indicates how important 4-H is to the positive development of young people. The research indicated that youth who participated in 4-H for 2 or more years are significantly better at avoiding risky life style choices than youth who did not participate in the program. Teens involved in 4-H are also more likely to take on leadership roles in their clubs, schools and community. The study also showed that 4-H members in Idaho are more likely to have a positive view of their role in the community and the future. These youth are more likely to have better relationships with adults and report that adults look at them as valuable assets to the community,

Idaho 4-H Enrollment, A 5-Year View 2000-2004, (Idaho State 4-H Office, November 2004), reports a decline in teenage 4-H members by grade. Figure one shows the number of youth by grade participating in 4-H. In 2004, there were 22,560 members in grades third to fifth, 9,115 members in grades sixth through eighth, and 4,378 members enrolled in grades ninth through twelfth. Traditionally, youth development programs like 4-H have lost participation from older teens due to school activities, work requirements, and family responsibilities. Creative programs that keep teens involved in 4-H are especially important because they encourage individuals to have a positive self-identity and give them the confidence to become positive role models for younger children.

Figure1.
Idaho 4-H Youth by Grade Distribution



The Exchanges

State-to-state 4-H teen exchange programs provide an opportunity to visit different regions of the United States. While on an exchange, teens experience different cultures, participate in educational and fun activities, share in leadership opportunities, and learn to be involved and active in community programs.

Exchange programs are a great opportunity to experience life in a different part of the nation or even the world. Since 1997, 4-H teens, adult volunteers, and University of Idaho Extension faculty from Minidoka County have traveled to visit other places as well as host youth and adults from Kansas, Montana, Indiana, and Minnesota. Plans are underway to visit Texas, Pennsylvania, or New Hampshire in 2006.

Minidoka County 4-H Teen Association members and advisors coordinate, raise funds, and participate in the exchanges. The first exchange involved six Minidoka County teens and one adult who traveled to Kansas by passenger train in 1997. The following year teens and adults from Kansas visited Idaho and learned about the culture and community. The 2005 Idaho exchange involved 15 teens and six adults from Minnesota. Many of the Minidoka County teens hosting the group were part of the exchange that traveled to Minnesota the previous summer.

Youth and adults from both states enjoyed becoming reacquainted and sharing their respective states customs and cultures. While in Idaho for 7 days, the group of Idaho and Minnesota 4-Hers visited the state capitol in Boise, toured the Minidoka Irrigation District, visited historical buildings, learned how to cook in Dutch ovens, participated in a local radio program, and shopped for souvenirs. The group also toured area sites of interest, including the University of Idaho Fish Culture Experiment Station, an alligator farm, Shoshone Falls Dam and power plant, a planetarium, and the Pomerelle Ski Resort. Youth enjoyed spending time with their host families, attended a melodrama, went cosmic bowling, made pottery, floated the Snake River, and had lots of opportunity for good food and new friends.

Fundraising

Fund raising is an important part of state-to-state exchanges. The Minidoka County 4-H Teen Association maintains individual accounts for the teens who are active participants in fundraising activities. Thirty percent of the net profit from each fundraiser is deposited into the general account, with the remaining 70% divided among the teens who helped with the event. Fund raisers include:

- "Get Your Goat" activity
- Pie sales
- July 4th rodeo food booth
- Silent auctions
- Livestock jackpot shows
- County fair community dance

Many committee leadership opportunities are available, enabling more teens to build organizational and leadership skills. Teens also receive additional funds in their accounts if they are association officers, serve on committees, teach workshops, or volunteer to help at the county fair. Teens can use the money in their account to fund any 4-H activity, including state-to-state exchanges, State Ambassador Conference, National Congress, and camp. Successful fund raising allows many teens to participate who otherwise could not afford to and creates less of a burden on individual family budgets.

Developing Life Skills

Exchange programs are not limited to developing new friendships and enjoying sightseeing opportunities. Fund raising, promotion, and planning create many opportunities for teens to sharpen their leadership, communication, and organizational skills. As a result, teens who participate in exchanges have also become active in state and national leadership positions and have been awarded national scholarships and trips. Exchanges are fun and an effective tool to

develop strong life skills such as accepting differences, problem solving, and teamwork.

Minidoka County 4-H Teen Association members are active in their project clubs, in schools, and in their communities. The state-to-state 4-H teen exchange program has created interest in 4-H programs for older youth and strengthened the entire county program. As a result, there are more experienced teen youth able to mentor younger members. Involvement in 4-H by older members has encouraged more youth to participate in 4-H club work and non-traditional 4-H activities.

The Minidoka County 4-H Teen Association currently has 44 active members, or 28% of 4-Hers 13 and older. Sixty percent of these teens have participated in activities beyond the county level, including state-to-state exchanges, leadership activities, state teen conference, 4-H State Ambassadors, and national trips. Approximately 90% of the teens who become involved in the Minidoka County 4-H Teen Association continue to be active 4-H members until they graduate from high school. The Idaho study reports that youth like these continue to receive what they need to succeed in life: the confidence, compassion, and connections with caring adults to make contributions to their communities.

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