



## Making the Best Better: Creating 4-H Synergy in Extension Districts

Combining the strengths of the long and dynamic history of K-State Research and Extension with a fresh perspective, district 4-H Youth Development programs create synergy. Synergy occurs when two or more counties combine to create a new organization where the outcomes are greater than the individual efforts of each. The reinvigorated professional team produces enriched educational opportunities and greater volunteer engagement, resulting in membership growth.

Synergy expands 4-H program opportunities. Youth and families discover a richer, more encompassing experience when extension agent time is focused on youth programs. Extension agents develop, expand, and manage the volunteer workforce, providing new roles, responsibilities, and opportunities for volunteers. Agents serve both as facilitators for the volunteer force and directly as youth workers, allowing involvement of a wider array of youth and families representing various ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic groups. The district structure can expand educational opportunities, delivery methods, and community service learning.

### **Opportunities exist within districts to expand volunteerism among caring adults and older youth to support positive youth development:**

- Young people learn, practice, and apply life skills with developmentally appropriate activities.
- Comprehensive project skill-building occurs through hands-on learning.
- Practical, in-depth leadership opportunities strengthen abilities and increase capacity to lead.
- Meaningful community connections and contributions fulfill the “hands to larger service” portion of the 4-H pledge.

In districts, dedicated extension agent time focuses energy on 4-H Youth Development. Agents work with the 4-H program development committee to form a plan based on the district’s needs. Volunteers, program assistants, and other staff are empowered to make it happen.

## 4-H Synergy in Districts

### **1) Increased opportunities in project work, project support, and volunteer 4-H leaders working with young people across county lines.**

Additional volunteers from across the district enrich the program by sharing their experiences and resources. As more young people form relationships with caring adults, they develop greater connections to the community, and relationships between generations grow stronger and more meaningful. Additional project work provides 4-H members with more opportunities to master skills and participate in service learning. Their communities benefit from more involved and connected youth. *Districting provides greater access to specialized expertise.*

### **2) Expanded 4-H educational activities and events.**

Educational events provide youth with opportunities to learn and master a skill. Youth need opportunities to achieve goals physically, intellectually, and socially. Through practice they develop skills for living and learning, as well as better problem-solving and decision-making abilities. By developing competency and mastering skills, they increase their self-confidence and enthusiasm for learning. *Districting provides more in-depth learning opportunities with enhanced local and regional events.*

### **3) Expanded leadership learning opportunities.**

Youth need opportunities to develop and practice leadership skills. They learn and grow from successes and failures. The more experiences they have, the better they will be able to see themselves as active leaders in the future. By serving as a club officer, on committees or councils, speaking in front of groups, and networking with members of other organizations, youth are able to practice and apply what they’ve learned in a safe environment. *Youth in district 4-H programs have enhanced leadership learning opportunities.*

### **4) District-wide teen groups increase opportunities.**

Junior leader groups provide young people with self-directed learning experiences, positive interaction with other youth and adults, and an

opportunity to practice decision-making. If given opportunities for independent thinking and assuming personal responsibility, youth will develop a sense of who they are. They need opportunities to experiment with different choices, evaluate what happens, and ultimately learn to improve the quality of their decisions. *Districting provides teens with more leadership opportunities to work beyond their local club or community.*

#### **5) Youth work together across boundaries.**

Working together across wider geographic, ethnic, and social diversity will better prepare young people for the global experiences of tomorrow. This includes understanding and appreciating diversity, and the ability to live in and relate to our complex and changing world. All youth want and need to feel they belong — whether at home, at school, or in other groups. 4-H Youth Development gives them opportunities to fit in and engage in activities that stress cooperation and shared goals. When youth feel they fit in, they are more likely to contribute to the group and to form positive peer relationships that benefit themselves, 4-H, and the community. *Districting provides broader opportunities across boundaries.*

#### **6) Learned communication and marketing skills.**

Young people benefit as participants in a district 4-H ambassador or media team. They learn communication and marketing skills and then apply those skills to share a greater understanding and awareness of the 4-H program in the community. They will use communication skills throughout their lives in a variety of settings. *Districting provides additional opportunities for building communication skills.*

#### **7) A centralized Volunteer Information Profile (VIP) process.**

In a centralized VIP process, one agent implements and administers the program, coordinates orientation, and oversees the process. The VIP process provides a safer environment for 4-H programs so youth can express their thoughts and ideas without fear of harm or danger. Youth and adults feel emotionally safe with positive and respectful behavior. Learning, consistency, and structure in youth activities help youth feel included and learn what is expected. *Districting helps create safe environments.*

#### **8) Greater extension agent time devoted to volunteer development and management.**

Research has shown devoting a greater amount of professional time to volunteer development and management results in volunteers who feel more engaged and satisfied with the experience. Volunteers who work across the district enhance opportunities for youth by increasing the number and variety of volunteer-led educational experiences. An increase in the number of volunteers creates greater opportunities for subject matter and specific volunteer training. Trained volunteers increase the quality of the learning experience. *District project volunteers provide enriched experiences.*

#### **9) Collaborations and partnerships with youth-serving agencies and other organizations.**

Extension agents establish, build, and nurture internal and external relationships that strengthen and advance the 4-H Youth Development program. Relationships and communication with collaborators, partners, decision-makers, and other youth development staff can support expanded opportunities for youth. *Districting allows for greater partnership development.*

When districts hire extension agents dedicated to 4-H Youth Development, it allows for increased synergy and a focus on positive youth development outcomes.

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