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UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA

SCHOOL-BASED 4-H PROGRAMMING SERIES

Middle and High School–Age Youth Programs

Why do we need middle and high school programs in school-based settings?

Why and how we address middle and high school programs is best summed up by the research done by Deschenes et al. (2010) for the Harvard Family Research Project and Public/Private Ventures Wallace Foundation:

Middle school students need OST (out of school time) experiences that focus on choice, leadership opportunities, cultural enrichment, health and wellness and a chance to give back to their communities. High school students need college preparation, access to higher education opportunities and exposure to careers and workforce training. Older youth, particularly high school aged youth, are often better served by more targeted, in-depth curricula that address a specific area of interest. Additionally, out of school time (OST) programs can address a number of demands that are unique to these age groups, including high school completion, credit attainment and recovery, violence prevention, and workforce and postsecondary readiness.

In considering why to embark on a middle or high school program, consider that most OST programs focus on elementary-age youth because they need a place to go after school to be taken care of. In addition, homework and curriculum assistance programs are offered in abundance to elementary-age youth, while middle and high school youth have little access to these programs. All youth, regardless of age, are at risk for engaging in negative behaviors that can get them into trouble during the afterschool hours when parents and other family members are at work.

Middle and high school–age youth are at an age where they can most benefit from increasing opportunities to participate in programs with a positive adult role model, gain necessary life skills, and increase their knowledge of accessible opportunities. Middle and high school programs have the potential to support graduation rates and increase post-secondary school success.

What works for elementary school–age youth may not work for middle and high school–age youth. As youth age, they deal with new societal and peer pressures, have different needs that need to be addressed, and have an increase in the demands that may be placed on them academically and at home. Ever-increasing areas of concern are the effects of exposure to bullying, adverse childhood experiences, and mental health.

What to Focus On

Middle and high school programs should include the following features:

- Middle school: peer interaction programs are key as they create routines for youth to feel safer, provide opportunities for them to try new things, and promote awareness of diversity and differences.
- High school: giving youth more responsibility, offering more variety of programming, creating a menu of choices, and offering more specialized programming help engage this age group.

The list of possible topics is exhaustive as to what may benefit middle and high school students, with some of the more easily identifiable ideas listed below. Refer to the UF/IFAS *Florida 4-H Curriculum Clearinghouse* for assistance in locating appropriate resources: http://florida4h.org/programs/Florida_4-H_Curriculum-Clearing-House.pdf

- **Bullying:** programs addressing peer and societal pressures, social media, and other avenues where youth come into contact with bullying as well as solutions to address bullying.

- **Career exploration:** programs providing exposure to careers, inclusive of those requiring a college degree, technical school degree, and/or trade school certification.

- **Workplace skills (High School):** programs targeting résumé building, dressing appropriately for the workforce, going on an interview, etc.

- **Real-world skills (High School):** programs teaching youth about money management, how to cook for themselves, how to maintain a car, etc.

- **Health and wellness:** programs targeting youth in the areas of nutrition, physical activity (sports and recreation), mental health, substance abuse, tobacco, etc.

- **Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics programs (STEM):** programs promoting mentorship, internships, and apprenticeships in the areas of STEM.

Program Barriers and Solutions

As with all programming, assessing the barriers and considering the solutions to increase participation of middle and high school youth need to be identified. Below is a table of common barriers and the possible solutions. Before you assume you know these barriers exist, the partnership you maintain with a school or community site will be a valuable tool to pinpoint next steps. Refer to Spero (2019), *School-Based 4-H Programming Series: Working with Partners Effectively* (http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/4h399) for more information.

Ensuring Success through Participation and Retention

Ideally you want your program to increase participation and attendance numbers while retaining youth. These attributes contribute to a more impactful positive youth development program. Overall, high-retention programs have the characteristics of strong organizational capacity and sound program management, which contribute to positive youth development. Important characteristics that include these features as referenced by Deschenes et al. (2010) are listed below:

- **Leadership:** Make sure to provide leadership and volunteer positions, field trips, community service opportunities, mentorship opportunities, opportunities to design/lead activities for peers and younger youth, and youth governance committees through a youth council to foster independence in youth (one of the most important characteristics youth need at this age level).

- **Caring Adult Volunteer:** The importance of the relationship of positive youth development and having a staff member provide that mentorship cannot be understated. Youth need to feel connected to the adults in the program on a more personal level. Staff should take an interest in the youth and follow up with them on a regular basis (collect report cards, meet regularly one on one, contact parents regularly, recognize accomplishments, and make school visits if needed).

- **Increasing Participation and Retention:** Structural capacity of the program will affect participation and retention. Community-based sites for your program may be the best solution so youth don't have to go back to school again once they have already been dismissed. Programs that enroll a larger number of youth are sometimes more appealing since peers that youth don't want to engage with can be avoided. Larger programs may also offer more program choices. Holding regular staff meetings with an intentional focus on program structure and informing all staff and employees about any issues with the youth can increase success.

Middle and high school–age youth benefit from opportunities that meet their developmental and continuing education needs. An investment in working with this age group can foster new partnerships, develop leaders, and create awareness for youth when they may need it most. Middle and high school youth experience personal growth during this time period, and 4-H can benefit them tremendously.

Barriers for Middle and High School Youth	Solution
Developmental Needs: In this age group, the developmental needs of youth are different from those of elementary-age youth. The peer and societal pressures, increasing need for independence, and other characteristics make programming needs different.	• Acknowledge the development differences in age groups. • Tailor programs to meet the needs of this age group. • Tie in opportunities for leadership development where applicable and offer scholarships to outside school events on the statewide and national level when possible. • Provide mentorships and apprenticeships where applicable.
Overabundance and Overcommitment: Youth have more options with regard to how to spend their time, so if the topic is not of interest, they won't join your program. Additionally, youth may have an interest to attend, but their involvement in other activities may hinder their participation.	• Don't have your program based on attendance, but consider the quality of the experience they are getting vs. the quantity. • Provide short-term programming that may fit between other extracurricular activity season schedules. • Identify the times that youth are available—morning or lunchtime may be the most appropriate time to engage these age groups. • Consider summer programming because there may be fewer conflicts with scheduling.
Disengagement from and Disinterest in School: At this age youth are already starting to disconnect from school and don't want to spend more time there. Whether they had a bad experience, they are not considered a high achiever academically, or they were bullied, it may be hard to engage youth before they have already disengaged. Some youth may just want "downtime" after school to hang out with friends and relax rather than participate in another structured activity.	• Catch youth before they disengage from school by utilizing elementary school programs as feeder programs for middle and high school. A child at a club in elementary school may be more likely to join in middle school and high school if they already know what 4-H has to offer. • Use incentives to attract and retain youth: gift cards, hot meals, field trips, formal recognition, scholarships, volunteer hours, access to resources they can't get in school, etc. • Actively engage peers and teachers/staff to assist in recruiting additional youth. • Consider matching the needs and attributes of the disengaged youth with what your program can offer them. • Make the program environment distinctive from the school environment, including creating a welcoming, inviting environment.
Access and Accessibility: Access and accessibility to middle and high school programs can be an issue, which can be related to location and transportation.	• Assess the best location for the program— is that at the school site, a community center, or your site? • Look for resources to assist with transportation needs through grants or citywide initiatives that may be targeting these age groups. • Offer programs during school hours when youth are already at the site.
Familial Obligations and Awareness: Familial obligations may make it hard for this age group to participate. These may include providing childcare for younger siblings, holding a job to contribute to the family income, etc. Family may also be unaware of the importance of programs targeting their children and may not value their relevance.	• Engage families in the program you are offering by sending information home, holding events for parents (that younger siblings can attend), providing communication on the value of the program, and engaging parents (refer to Spero [2019], *School-Based 4-H Programming Series: Incorporating Family Engagement*, http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/4h401). • The location of the program may be better suited to a community site so all age groups can participate for those that provide afterschool care for younger siblings. • Market and advertise to the youth AND the parents/family.
Financial Constraints: Is there a fee associated with the program?	• Use grants, local resources, and other avenues to help offset costs so youth who want to participate are able to do so.

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