Making the Best Better: An Action Plan to Strengthen Pershing County 4-H

Loretta Singletary, Extension Educator, Central/Northeast Area
Marilyn Smith, Central/Northeast Area Youth Development Specialist
Marianne Papa, 4-H Program Assistant, Pershing County

Introduction

In continued efforts to assess 4-H program impacts, in 2003, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension surveyed all 4-H parents and leaders statewide. The results were analyzed statewide and by county (Singletary & Smith, 2004). Understanding impacts at the county level is important because 4-H programs in Nevada are managed at the county level. This fact sheet reports the impact assessment results statewide, highlighting Pershing County. The purpose of this report is to inform 4-H parents, leaders and youth members about how 4-H impacts their lives, and also assist 4-H professionals to develop an action plan to further strengthen Pershing County 4-H.

Designing and Conducting the Assessment

In designing a tool to assess 4-H program impacts, two models for youth development were used. The first model is based upon six outcomes to expect from successful youth development. These outcomes are confidence, competence, caring, connection, contributing and character (Blyth, 2000).

Successful youth development helps children become: confident they can make a difference; competent through their ability, skills, and knowledge, and; able to work with people in a way that develops and promotes caring relationships. These youth connect beneficially with people and organizations, contribute their services to make a difference in their personal development as well as in their community, and demonstrate responsible and honest character, or a sense of who they are.

The second youth development model used to develop the assessment questions focuses on “core concepts” and provides a basis for successful youth development programs in Nevada (UNCE, 1993). Such programs produce youth who:

- learn and practice self-responsibility and social responsibility to feel accountable and in control of their lives;
- recognize when and how to make informed decisions and implement decisions to solve a problem or achieve goals;
- communicate effectively in both verbal and written form, to share thoughts and feelings which increase social competence, and;
- obtain career and occupational information to help prepare for the world of work.
Questions developed for this assessment were based upon the six desired outcomes of positive youth development and Nevada’s core concepts for teaching life skills. Combining the two models resulted in a suite of questions that assess the effectiveness of 4-H: to teach youth life skills and social skills; traditional 4-H teaching tools; program management goals; parent and volunteer leader skills to teach youth, manage programs and prevent negative or high-risk behavior among 4-H youth. These questions were based on skills established by the National Committee on Community Programs to Promote Youth Development (Eccles and Appleton-Gootman, 2002). Questions were designed to assess the indirect impacts of Nevada 4-H on parents and volunteer leaders.

Participants in the assessment included all parents and adult volunteer 4-H leaders currently enrolled statewide and in Pershing County. These participants were selected based on the rationale that 4-H leaders and parents of 4-Hers have the most frequent opportunity to observe any changes that occur among youth participating in 4-H programs.

Each individual was mailed a two-page questionnaire with instructions along with a self-addressed and stamped return envelope. Also included was a cover letter that explained the purpose of the survey, ensured confidentiality to participants, and thanked them for their participation. Of the 3,074 survey recipients, 576 returned completed questionnaires resulting in a 19 percent response rate statewide. Pershing’s response rate was 14 percent countywide and represented 2 percent of the statewide response.

County Impacts Compared with Statewide Impacts

On a scale of 1 to 5 with “1” being “very low” and “5” being “very high,” respondents were asked to circle the number that best indicates how effectively 4-H is developing youth and impacting the adults involved. The results are presented by highest and lowest ratings. Results from Pershing County are presented alongside statewide impacts for comparison purposes.

The highest rated statewide impacts are shown in Figure 1 along with Pershing County impacts. Individual question labels below each bar set specify the abbreviated survey questions. Similarly, Figure 2 illustrates lowest rated impacts statewide along with Pershing County results. Pershing County, in general, tended to rate most program impacts higher than the state.

Figure 3 illustrates the highest rated impacts for Pershing County that differ from the statewide results. For example, Pershing County rated the highest life skill 4-H youth learn to set and reach goals (93% countywide and 82% statewide). The highest rated social skill Pershing County youth learn is to trust others and be trustworthy (83% countywide and 72% statewide). Countywide highest rated parent/leader skills differed from state with, for example, the highest rated teaching skill being understand a youth point of view (92% countywide and 77% statewide). The highest rated program management skills countywide included help youth feel they are part of a special group (92% countywide and 83% statewide) and keep youth occupied during events (92% countywide and 75% statewide). Highest rated prevention skills was prevent bullying tied with prevent hurt feelings (92% countywide and 79% and 69% statewide, respectively).

Finally, Figure 4 illustrates the lowest rated impacts that differ between the state and Pershing County. For example, lowest rated life skill youth learn in Pershing County 4-H is improved organizational skills (54% countywide and 72% statewide). The lowest rated parent/leader teaching skill is to teach youth life skills (62% countywide and 67% statewide). The lowest parent/leader program management skill is helping youth to feel like they are an important part of the 4-H program (75% countywide and 82% statewide). The lowest parent/leader prevention skill is managing conflict between youth (85%), which still rated comparatively higher, however, than the state (71%).
Figure 1. Highest Rated Statewide 4-H Program Impacts Compared with Pershing County

Highest Rated Statewide 4-H Impacts

- Knowledge about project
- Communication skills
- Relationship-building
- Competitions teach skills
- Quality of adult leadership
- Listening to youth
- Youth act appropriately
- Make sure facility is safe

Nevada
Pershing County

Figure 2. Lowest Rated Statewide 4-H Program Impacts Compared with Pershing County

Lowest Rated Statewide 4-H Impacts

- Future career choices
- Dealing with conflicts
- Leader training adequate
- Meets changing needs
- Attracts diverse groups
- Teach social skills
- Relate to different cultures
- Prevent hurt feelings

Nevada
Pershing County
Figure 3. Pershing County Highest Rated 4-H Programs Impacts Different from State

Figure 4. Pershing County Lowest Rated 4-H Program Impacts Different from State
Developing an Action Plan to Strengthen Pershing County 4-H

To develop an action plan, Pershing County 4-H professionals combined assessment results with available demographic information. Table 1 illustrates these demographics for Pershing County. One particularly notable item concerns Pershing 4-H enrollment’s low share of the total number of school-age children countywide (14%). It also appears that Pershing 4-H tends to reach mostly white, middle income families.

Given the assessment results and demographic information, the resulting action plan for Pershing County 4-H generally seeks to increase 4-H enrollment and seek greater diversity in member recruitment. It is interesting to note that the lowest rated social skill Pershing 4-H youth learn, how to deal with conflict (42%), was also rated lowest statewide (50%) (see Figure 2). And, the lowest rated parent/leader prevention skill was managing conflict among youth. Thus, the action plan should also seek to strengthen conflict management skills among 4-H youth as well as strengthen parent and leader skills to manage conflict among youth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Pershing County Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of school-age children in Pershing County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of 4-H youth in Pershing County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic distribution of children in Pershing County *(AI/AN) 6% (AS) 2% (H) 25% (B) 1% (W) 66% (O) 0% W (66%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic distribution of 4-H youth in Pershing County *(AI/AN) 2% (AS) 2% (H) 25% (B) 1% (W) 70% (O) 0% W (70%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median income of families in Pershing County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income distribution of 4-H families in Pershing County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent 4-H families in Pershing County earning below $25,000 annually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of families in Pershing County earning below $25,000 annually</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- AI/AN = American Indian; AS = Asian; H = Hispanic; B = Black; W = White; O = Other.

An additional focus of the resulting action plan is to strengthen the 4-H program curricula to focus on teaching youth how to improve organization skills. Given the discrepancies between state and county results regarding parent/leader skills, the resulting action plan should focus on improving leader training and provide information and potential training for 4-H parents as well. Specifically the following objectives are:

- Increase membership numbers and expand cultural and ethnic diversity in member recruitment.
- Improve youth 4-H curricula and project guidelines to emphasize strengthening organization skills youth learn through 4-H participation.
- Emphasize in leader training the importance of teaching youth life skills.
- Emphasize in leader training ways that leaders can help youth feel they are an important part of the 4-H program.
- Focus on improving the development of conflict management and resolution skills in 4-H youth as well as parents and leaders.
- Avoid duplicating public school district efforts in terms of using similar curricula for teaching conflict management skills to youth.
- Incorporate existing curricula, including Character Counts, and other nationally recognized 4-H curricula that target improved conflict management skills.
- Strengthen volunteer leader training to emphasize strategies to improve weak areas of program countywide.
Conclusions
This fact sheet reported the results of the 2003 University of Nevada Cooperative Extension 4-H program impact assessment comparing highest and lowest rated impacts for Pershing County with statewide results. It is intended to inform 4-H parents, leaders and youth members how 4-H impacts their lives, and also assist Extension and 4-H professionals in developing an action plan to further strengthen Pershing County 4-H.

The resulting action plan for Pershing County 4-H will concentrate efforts on working with volunteer leaders, 4-H youth and Extension faculty, to address the lowest rated elements of our county program. We also recognize that Pershing County 4-H has a relatively small share of the total school-age population. We will take steps to increase enrollment numbers and attempt to diversify enrollment as well.

Efforts are currently underway in the majority of Nevada’s counties to develop action plans to strengthen 4-H programs. The resulting action plans will serve as guidelines for strengthening 4-H in a positive, objective manner, and to continue to generate new ways in which 4-H can make the best better.

References

