

SCIENCE & EDUCATION Impact

Benefits from USDA/Land-Grant Partnership

Character Counts

Extension's 4-H has helped kids, communities for 100 years.

Once a rural technology transfer that targeted farm kids, 4-H has matured into an inclusive program that teaches urban and rural youth about information technology, nutrition, environmental stewardship and life skills more suited for this millennium.

On the occasion of the 100th birthday of 4-H, the nation's preeminent youth education program, communities across America have been holding formal conversations about youth and their vision for the new century. It turns out that the education and personal development gleaned from "Learning by Doing" and the adages of Head, Heart, Hands and Health are as important and relevant today as they were when the 4-H clover was conceived.

Payoff

- **4-H matters.** Young men and women in 4-H don't do some of the things their peers do. A statewide study of Montana 4-Hers found they are less likely to get drunk, smoke, steal or use drugs. They were more likely, though, to give money or time to charity, help the poor, act as role models to younger children and get better grades. A **Missouri** survey found 4-Hers spend less time watching TV and report better grades than their public school peers. When other factors such as parents' education and extracurricular activities were held constant, the number of hours spent in 4-H activities were the best predictor of better grades.
- **Pillars of the community.** Character Counts!, a six-pillar character development program that teaches fairness, caring, respect, responsibility, citizenship and trustworthiness, is sweeping the country through Cooperative Extension's county- and community-based 4-H educators. **Ohio State Extension's** Wayne County office reports the program has grown from two elementary schools to 17, reaching nearly 3,500 students. More than 25,000 **Tennessee** youth have participated in the program. One county agent helped teach the Choices Count segment to 3,867 grade school students, and civic leaders want to extend the program to churches and businesses. **Louisiana** agents and volunteers reached

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184,666 elementary school students while 17,000 preschoolers received Character Critters, a series of cartoon characters that illustrate the six pillars. Character Counts! also has been credited with improving classroom behavior. A **Purdue** youth educator says a survey of teachers and administrators in Indiana's Carroll County indicates most teachers found the Character Counts! students were more responsible, cooperative and respectful. **Arkansas** has introduced the program to 300 schools in 41 counties, reaching more than 55,656 students two years ago. **Alabama** is gearing up for the program, with trained staff in each of the state's 67 counties. Forty schoolteachers also have been trained in delivering the program.

- **Service learning.** Early involvement in community service has been shown to lead to higher levels of civic involvement as adults. Service learning has been a cornerstone of modern 4-H activities, resulting in beautification projects, teen mentoring programs and other valuable endeavors. Following Sept. 11, **Missouri** 4-Hers raised more than \$17,000 in less than a month for the New York 4-H Foundation through the 4-H Kids Helping Kids campaign. More than 64,000 **Tennessee** 4-Hers and adults conducted more than 1,160 service learning projects in 2001. When an area drought lowered water levels, 60 **Georgia** 4-Hers in Coweta County hit the shore, cleaning up 39 tires, three shopping carts and 12 truck loads of trash.
- **Community compassion.** Helping others grows good kids. **Missouri** 4-Hers in Jasper County have pioneered a program to produce weighted blankets and jackets that help soothe autistic children. The club also made an instructional video for other 4-H clubs that want to get involved. **Mississippi** youth at the state 4-H congress raised \$1,000 for the Ronald McDonald House. **Tennessee** youth turned a \$5,000 grant into \$10,000 by purchasing and raising livestock and volunteering at a local food bank.
- **Prepared for employment.** A national 4-H educational initiative has made workforce development a priority. **Tennessee** 4-H agents trained 14,286 young people in 45 counties how to transition from school to work last year. A **Prairie View A&M**

program in Texas for 167 teen-agers paid off when they went home – 62 participated in a local entrepreneurship project and 17 joined or started a business project. 4-H alumni in **Nebraska** say 4-H skills serve them well in business, citing public speaking skills and self-confidence as factors in their success. A program in **Delaware** for 50 high school students helped them learn and earn \$41,979 for 7,159 hours of work over the summer. **Rutgers** Extension helped 4-Hers create their own opportunities, teaching them to operate their own farmers markets at USDA food assistance sites in two counties. More than 300 New Jersey youth have been trained in business skills and customer relations.

- **Class acts.** Rather than rely on scare tactics, a **Purdue** school enrichment program teaches the financial and social costs of drunk driving, reaching 20,000 Indiana teens. A **Washington State** 4-H reading enrichment program helped 140 middle school students improve reading abilities by one to five grade levels.



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