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4-H Delivery to Homeschool Audiences

Mike Knutz

Oregon State University, mike.knutz@oregonstate.edu



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4-H Delivery to Homeschool Audiences

Abstract

4-H Professionals can increase the scope of their program and meet the needs of a growing segment of youth in their community through outreach to homeschoolers. A 4-H Homeschool Program involves coordinating enrichment classes and field trips for homeschool families. 4-H membership has increased by 24% from 2003 to 2005 in Polk County, Oregon, and homeschoolers account for 43% of that increase. The number of 4-H volunteers has increased from the influx of homeschooling parents. This article gives the basics for implementing and delivering programming to homeschoolers, which can increase the overall size and scope of county 4-H programs.

Mike Knutz

Assistant Professor and Extension 4-H Agent
OSU Extension Service - Polk County
Oregon State University
mike.knutz@oregonstate.edu

Introduction

4-H Professionals can increase the scope of their program and meet the needs of a growing segment of youth in their community through outreach to homeschoolers. Homeschooling constitutes the largest educational trend in the country. According to the National Home Education Research Institute (2005, NHERI), approximately 1.7 to 2 million students were being homeschooled during the 2001-2002 school year. More children are in homeschool than in charter schools and public voucher programs combined. The number of home-educated students is growing in the United States at an estimated rate of 10% to 15% a year (Ray, 2005). This growing audience presents an opportunity for 4-H programs to assist homeschool families in reaching their educational goals, while increasing the reach of 4-H.

What Is a 4-H Homeschool Program?

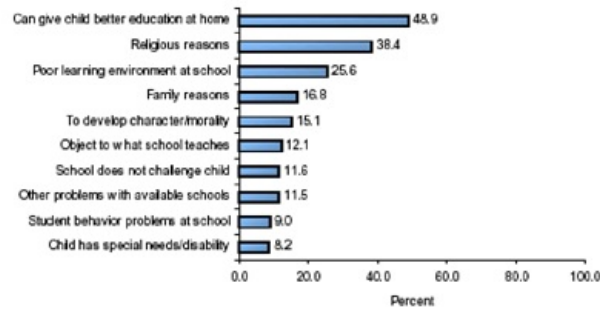
A 4-H Homeschool Program involves coordinating enrichment classes and field trips for homeschool families. Enrichment classes use 4-H curriculum taught by volunteers, partners, and/or 4-H staff during the school day. Popular life skill classes taught in Polk County, Oregon include: Computers, Cooking, Sewing, Digital Photography, GPS, and Natural Science. Homeschooling parents teach these classes, held one afternoon a week for a 6- to 8-week series. Classes are offered to age-appropriate divisions, like grades K-1, 2-3, 4-6, and 7-9. Students may pay a fee to cover the cost of materials or are asked to bring materials outlined by the instructor. This allows each volunteer to organize his or her class and get materials without the 4-H professional having to worry about financial details.

Knowing Your Audience

As with any new audience, the best way to start is by asking them what they want. Start with

families that are already involved in 4-H. According to a NHERI study, 14% of all homeschoolers are involved in 4-H. Before you open the lines of communication, make sure you start with an understanding of this target audience. Building a trusting relationship with homeschoolers will depend largely on your ability to respect their choice to educate their children at home (Mirochnik & McIntire, 1991). Next, it is helpful to understand parents' motivations for teaching their children at home, which is depicted in Figure 1 (Bielick, Chandler, & Broughman, 2001).

Figure 1.
Why They Homeschool



NOTE: Percentages do not add to 100 percent because respondents could give more than one reason.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Parent Survey of the National Household Education Surveys Program, 1999

According to Ray, "Contrary to common belief, the decision to homeschool is not limited to religious individuals or members of "fringe" groups--homeschooling parents across the country represent all income brackets, education levels, races, and political and religious affiliations" (2005). These parents are willing to collaborate in some capacity to provide children with quality educational opportunities. With this in mind, you can start gathering information.

Getting Started

Before you launch a 4-H Homeschool Program, find what opportunities exist in your area for homeschoolers. You may be able to partner with others by offering curricula and other resources. If few programs exist for homeschoolers, begin to assess the need for one by contacting homeschool families through local school districts, education service districts, or homeschool networks, newsletters, and support groups. State homeschool organizations can connect you to local families. The following are national homeschool organizations:

- Homeschool Legal Defense Association <<http://www.hsllda.org/>>
- National Home Education Network <<http://www.nhen.org/>>
- Homeschool Central <<http://homeschoolcentral.com/hsorg.htm>>

Organizing a field trip is a great tool for getting acquainted with the homeschool audience in your area. This involves coordinating a tour to a museum, science center, zoo, or other site or event. Many of these destinations offer programs targeted to homeschoolers. Families are eager to provide these types of experiences to their children, especially when it comes with a group discount. And there is no need to worry about transportation as parents do their part there. You can advertise through the local homeschool organization's newsletter or email network. Having them sign up through the Extension office will give you the beginning of an address list for future programs.

Finding volunteers is a challenge most 4-H professionals face. A couple of motivated volunteers brought this program from the ground up. Our first program started with only three classes, taught by a 4-H staff member and two 4-H leaders who were homeschooling parents. Subsequent events grew from this initial program, as parents were eager to volunteer to broaden the age range and class offerings.

Curriculum trainings in Project WILD, Project WILD Aquatic, and Project Learning Tree were offered to parents in addition to general 4-H leader training. These trainings were made available during the homeschool program, thus youth and parents were both engaged, and childcare was not a barrier for parents to attend the training. Curriculum training sessions allowed the more reluctant parents to feel comfortable volunteering.

As with every 4-H program, partners are essential. A community college allowed the use of their lab for computer classes. The county fairgrounds, a church, and an arboretum have allowed the homeschool program to use their facilities at no charge. The Soil and Water Conservation District taught natural science and water quality classes. The Audubon Society taught classes on bird nest box building. You can rely on the curriculum and resources that are at your camps, afterschool programs, and school enrichment programs to be successful with your homeschool audience. 4-H professionals can rely on their cadre of resources and partners to support their efforts in offering a

Conclusion

The grassroots approach to starting a homeschool program has developed a sense of community with the families involved and has contributed to its sustainability.

Don't be afraid to start small. The first homeschool program included 33 youth and has grown to over 100. 4-H membership has increased by 24% from 2003 to 2005, and Homeschoolers account for 43% of that increase. The number of 4-H volunteers has increased from the influx of homeschooling parents. The 4-H Homeschool Program has served a need in the community and increased the scope of 4-H in Polk County, Oregon.

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