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At-risk youth prosper in 4-H afterschool program

4-H afterschool programs at St. Charles Recreation Center in Denver are helping neighborhood kids learn, work together, interact with positive adults and build community.

Situation

At the end of the school day many youth face hours of unstructured time until their family returns home in the evening. Denver's St. Charles Recreation Center, located on the inner city's northwest edge, is a regular destination for more than 100 neighborhood youth. Yet, at-risk youth also need to engage with caring adults who can engage their curiosities and hold them accountable for their actions.

Extension's Response

In September 2009, Denver County Extension 4-H started weekly afterschool programming at St. Charles Recreation Center. Although Denver 4-H has previously partnered with the Denver Parks and Recreation Department to offer programming, the ongoing drop-in afterschool program at St. Charles is the first of its kind in the Denver metropolitan area.

Afterschool programs currently focus on science, cooking, and arts and crafts. 4-H volunteers offer three to four weekly, drop-in sessions that last 60 to 90 minutes and are free of charge. Each session features a hands-on activity. Daily attendance varies from five to 20 students, although many programs are capped at 15 students. Amy Brady, CSU Denver County Extension 4-H program associate, recruits, trains and supports the 4-H volunteers. She also assists with instruction. St. Charles Recreation Center provides the classroom space and purchases all program supplies.

Afterschool programs consistently emphasize life skills, particularly problem solving, resiliency, sharing, conflict resolution, self-responsibility and cooperation. Volunteers do their best to ensure that the program environment is welcoming and safe. In addition:

- Science programs explore the mysterious intricacies of engineering, physics, the natural world and everyday life. Weekly experiments engage youth in critical thinking, collaborative problem solving and independent learning. Students build volcanoes, make chalk, suck the air out of marshmallows, drop eggs, engineer harmonicas and much more.

Cooking classes expose kids to unfamiliar ethnic, regional and international foods, such as East Indian samosas, Hopi stew and French beignets. Youth share responsibilities for cooking and cleaning. They also help each other learn skills such as measuring, slicing and mixing. In order to participate in class, youth agree to taste the foods they make as they eat together.

- Arts and crafts programs focus on individual creativity and expression. Projects have included holiday crafts, clay pots, creative painting techniques and building recycled material sculptures.

A total of 1,750 youth from five to 14 years in age have participated in afterschool programs at St. Charles. Of these, 99.5 percent represent minority populations.



The Bottom Line

- 4-H afterschool enrichment programs help at-risk youth develop critical life skills and a love for learning.
- 4-H afterschool enrichment programs engage at-risk youth with caring adults who can engage their curiosities and hold them accountable for their actions.
- CSU Denver County Extension 4-H programming is helping build community by developing strong youth.

By the Numbers

- Total number of youth served since 2009: 1,750
- Average monthly budget for afterschool programs: \$150
- Meals cooked: more than 50
- Experiments conducted: more than 75
- Age range of afterschool participants: 5 to 14 years

Results

The St. Charles Recreation Center 4-H afterschool program has promoted youth, family and community development at levels that far exceed the expectations of program partners. According to recreation center director Casey Howshar, “We could offer programs five days a week, there’s that much interest.”

4-H volunteers report that youth have gained confidence, knowledge and important life skills, such as collaborative group problem solving. Cooking, science and art programs require youth to work together to accomplish tasks, share responsibilities and help each other learn. Programs also provide youth what they don’t get in schools: hands-on learning, an intimate learning environment and an opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue with a caring adult who isn’t pressured to get through a lesson plan or concerned about test performance.

“I’ve seen a total transformation of their knowledge,” says Rachel Foster, a 4-H volunteer who leads one of the weekly science programs. Science concepts such as ‘liquid versus solid state’ were foreign to students when they first started out. Through hands-on experiments that bring concepts to life, understanding blossomed. Now, experienced youth help less experienced youth understand scientific concepts. “I don’t have to be the active explainer anymore,” she says. Foster has also witnessed her participants apply inquiry and group skills to their everyday curiosities. “My science club has changed from a room full of blank stares to a room full of scientists,” she says.

According to 4-H volunteer Rebecca Revoal, who leads weekly cooking sessions, helping kids relate to each other and to her is one of the most valuable aspects of the program. Revoal explains, “They learn about how to interact with people, about teamwork and working with people who may irritate you at school. We cover a lot of life lessons and what’s going on in their lives. We all have to meet each other where we are.”

Revoal also uses cooking as a way to develop character and explore the unknown by working in partnership with a caring adult. According to Revoal, at first the kids didn’t want to try foods that were unfamiliar. “I told them you have to try new things and step out,” she says. “It’s fine if you don’t like something, but you have to try it. That’s what this is about. Now I rarely have to say anything.” Revoal reports that some students have begun requesting favorite recipes and are making and eating them at home with their families. “They’re starting new family traditions,” she says.

As a result of increasing visibility in the community, Denver County Extension 4-H has added regular weekly school enrichment programs at Annunciation Catholic School, located just three blocks from St. Charles. Denver County Extension 4-H will expand into two additional inner city recreation centers in the fall of 2011.

“Students are extending their collaborative and critical thinking skills beyond the classroom.”

– Rachel Foster
4-H volunteer

“This community is starting to transform because their kids have a place to go and they’re learning.”

– Amy Brady
Denver County Extension 4-H Program Associate

Contact Information

Amy Brady
CSU Extension, Denver County
4-H Youth Development Program Associate
(720) 371-1391
amy.brady@denvergov.org