

## 4-H National Congress and Conference EVALUATION REPORT

### Evaluation Method

Phone or face-to-face interviews with: 1) twenty-five youth who attended Congress or Conference during the past 3 years; 2) eight county educators with 4-H responsibility (selected randomly from each district); 3) adult chaperones; and 4) a sample of youth who did not attend Congress or Conference (mainly those who were at the State Fair).

During the interviews, participants were asked to discuss:

- Communication issues: how they heard about it, what they knew about it;
- Application/selection process: preparation, support, time commitment, plan of action, interview process, and financial support issues;
- Experience: what the experience was like, value to youth;
- Post-Experience expectations: expectations after returning from the trip, follow-up activities, efforts around their plan of action;
- Sum-up thoughts: whether they encourage other youth to go, possible roadblocks for kids who might want to go, ways to improve the process.

In addition, youth were asked to rate their experience as a whole on a 10-point scale and asked to talk about how the experience has helped them in their daily lives, as they continue in their future.

### Youth Demographics

Gender: Female=16 (67%)  
Male=8 (33%)

Age (at time of interview): 17 years=5 (21%)  
18 years=8 (33%)  
19 years=7 (29%)  
20 years=4 (17%)

Ethnicity: White=24 (100%)

Place of residence: Rural Farm=12 (50%)  
Rural Non-Farm=5 (21%)  
Small Town=3 (13%)  
Suburb=1 (4%)  
Metro –Twin Cities=3 (13%)

### Key Findings

**Value to Youth:** Youth and adults overwhelmingly agreed that both National Congress and Conference provide valuable learning opportunities for youth in 4-H. Youth

discussed the value of getting to meet people from across the country, being exposed to different cultures, getting a national perspective of 4-H, and coming together and sharing ideas. The youth also talked about the skills they acquired, including leadership (especially by Conference attendees), interviewing, developing resumes, planning, public speaking and learning to work with people with different ideas, values and perspectives. Several youth also talked about being inspired to make a difference and getting excited about service to their communities (especially for those who attended Congress).

Nearly all youth also indicated that they enjoyed their experiences. When asked to rate their experiences on a scale from 1 being “terrible” and 10 being the “best experience of their life” the average rating was 8. However, there was less agreement about the value of the experience over time. Several youth indicated that the experience did not have any long-term value, others identified concrete advantages in terms of applying for college or jobs, and a few youth discussed long-term outcomes such as being a better person. Several youth discussed the “whole” of the experience and that the value gained was greater than the trip itself. For these youth, the effort it took to pull together a resume, portfolio and plan of action, and the interview process were all great learning experiences. Interestingly, the one youth who carried out his/her service plan noted that the service experience was much more valuable to him/her than the trip experience itself.

**Financial Support:** About half the youth indicated that their trips were fully funded through the state and county (supported by their Federation, club or local businesses). Others paid anywhere from \$100-\$300 to attend. Youth and adults had mixed feelings about whether or not financial support made a difference in youths’ decisions to attend. For example, most youth did not know what financial support was available when they applied. And, while most adults said that financial support was critical, over half (56%) the youth indicated that financial support did not play a role in their decision to go; they would have attended without financial support. Several noted that financial support was not a deciding factor only because they knew they could have raised the funds themselves. The youth did note that more kids might apply if they knew in advance that financial support was available. Both adults and youth indicated that the cost of the trips might be a factor in keeping other youth from applying.

It’s interesting to note that nearly all of the youth we talked to at the 2001 State Fair (randomly selected and asked if they would talk with us) who have neither attended Congress or Conference, indicated it would be a hardship for them to come up with the money to fund the trip. Researcher’s note: it appears that those who apply to attend, who seem to be better connected to county federation and have leadership roles in local clubs, are confident they could raise the funds needed through these and other entities.

**Post-trip Expectations:** Youth did not feel that many expectations were placed on them regarding follow-up efforts. While youth did talk about being aware of some requirements, they were not held accountable for completing them. In essence, as one youth indicated, “the experience ends with the trip.” In cases where youth were given

money from their federation and/or club, they felt obligated to do a presentation about the trip, usually in the form of slide presentations or picture scrapbooks. In these cases, youth indicated that they often conducted such presentations without being asked to do so. Youth expressed being disappointed at the lack of follow-up and would like to see more guidance from the state level in terms of accomplishing projects (perhaps a single service project led by all those who attended) and getting the attendees together to talk to other 4-Hers about their experiences.

It should be noted that while there was near unanimous agreement about the lack of post-trip expectations, there was less agreement about whether this is a problem for youth. A greater number of youth, however, thought that there should be more accountability and would like to see greater state level support for follow-through on their service plans or real opportunities to utilize their learned skills and energy at the state level.

**Cost Benefit:** While nearly all agreed that the experiences are valuable, a few adults asked the question, “but at what expense?” Since there is a general lack of follow-up and accountability for the youth who attend, how do these experiences add to the value of Minnesota 4-H efforts as a whole? Also, the experience appears to have benefits for a select few. How do you get more kids interested in attending? The whole process was described as a fairly closed one. The Youth interviewed heard about the experiences and were encouraged to apply in three main ways, listed in ordered from most mentioned: 1) by word of mouth or knowing someone who went, 2) through the awards and recognition portion of the state ambassador packet (15 out of 25 were also state ambassadors), and 3) by invitation from Educators who personally believed they were qualified.

**Roadblocks:** Both youth and adults were quick to note that there are roadblocks keeping more kids from applying. One major roadblock is access to information and support. Not enough youth know about it or find out about it. The youth commented that you usually don’t hear about it unless you know someone who went. Once they find out, there are few who are supported in terms of what they “need to do” to get selected. There is some sense that knowing someone who went gives them an edge in terms of “what they need to do” to get selected. Other youth described how critical it was to have access to technology to produce quality application packets—and questioned whether youth who didn’t have such access would be at a disadvantage. Another major roadblock was the time commitment. The youth who have applied tended to be very involved in a number of other roles in 4-H, school and their communities. It was difficult for some to find time to pull together the application packets (which took some up to 40 hours and were due close to the State Fair), be at the face-to-face interviews (especially if they did not go to the State Fair), and going on the trip during the school year. One youth noted that the age requirement only exacerbates the problem because “by the time you’re the right age, you’re really busy.” Interestingly another youth indicated that their age was also an issue during the trip because they were holding discussions with youth from other states much younger than themselves.

The youth interviewed who have not attended National Congress or Conference lends support to the notion that information is not getting to all youth. Nearly all these youth indicated they did not know about these opportunities. When these opportunities were described, they were nearly all unanimous in saying that they would be interested in attending.

**Participant Recommendations:** Youth and adults agreed that the process should be more open and there should be greater focus on what youth accomplish after attending National Congress and Conference. They had much to say about how to go about getting more youth interested. The list below represents common recommendations discussed by both youth and adults.

- ❖ Many people in 4-H, especially youth and adult leaders are not aware of these opportunities. There needs to be much greater effort put forth at educating, promoting and marketing both Congress and Conference to ALL youth, volunteers and Educators. It was noted that it would be especially effective to get youth who already attended to share their experiences with others.
- ❖ Make the opportunities more concrete. Even for the youth who applied, the opportunities seemed “fuzzy.” The youth don’t get it--even the names are confusing. In terms that would most interest youth, better describe what the opportunities are and why it is important for youth to experience them. Again, it would be most effective to get youth who attended to take part in this effort.
- ❖ The qualifications for selection need to be more explicit and the application process needs to be changed. Some youth mistakenly think they are not qualified to apply because of lack of explicit qualification and selection guidelines. Also, since the process is no longer connected to on-going record keeping efforts, the application requirements are pretty time-consuming. Youth report spending anywhere from 2 to 40 hours on the application. Also, not all youth have the technology access to create competitive application packets.
- ❖ Youth need much greater support during the application process and once they return. They would like state level support to carry out their plans of action (perhaps work with other attendees to do a statewide service project). They also encouraged state support in developing statewide leadership roles and opportunities for those who attended Congress and Conference.

**Comparison of Youth and Adult Interviews:** Generally, youth and adults agreed on the major issues including the value of the experience for youth, the roadblocks and the recommendations for improving the process. Where there were differences were in terms of what role financial support plays in youth deciding to apply and to go on the trip. Adults indicated that financial support plays a critical role while the youth were less likely to say that such support plays a major role in their decision-making. Another difference was that while only one youth talked about a wish to go back to the “way things used to be” more adults expressed a sense of nostalgia in terms of what National Congress used to be. While the adults appear to support the philosophical shift from a “reward” model to a “leadership model” they feel that it is much more difficult to sell the opportunities because they are “fuzzier” and the opportunities are not tied specifically to

other 4-H activities. For example, it's much more difficult to support youth in putting together their application packets when things are no longer tied directly to records.

**Comparison of Youth Attending National Congress and Conference:** There were little differences in response from the youth who attended either National Congress or Conference. However, there were some differences in what they learned. The youth who attended Conference were more likely to focus on leadership skills, about sharing power, and listening to all sides, while the youth who attended National Congress focused more on community service, learning to make a differences, and teamwork.

### Summary and Recommendation

There is a great amount of agreement that National Congress and Conference provide valuable learning opportunities for youth beyond what they can gain from state and local involvement. The data also suggest that there is a real need to improve the system including: all kids having access to information about these opportunities, better marketing and promotion, adult support with the application process, and increased support for following through with the service plans or utilizing what they learned in state leadership roles. However, before decisions are made to improve the specific processes within the system, MN 4-H must have a broader conversation about what it wants these experiences to be both for our youth and for MN 4-H as a whole: Should access by all 4-H youth be a critical issue? Should it be a natural progression resulting from 4-H leadership roles at local club, county and state levels? Is individual growth and development by those who attend enough in terms of our investment? The data resulting from this evaluation effort should provide a starting point for conversations around these and other questions.

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