

Making Oklahoma 4-H Beyond Ready

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The Problem

Oklahoma 4-H experienced sharp declines in club membership and certified volunteer engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic, with enrollment levels that have not fully recovered. These losses were compounded by changes to the County Extension Budget Model, stagnant county educator salaries, and increased competition from public education systems offering higher compensation. Collectively, these pressures resulted in high turnover among County Educators and the hiring of new educators with limited experience in youth development or 4-H programming.

These conditions contributed to inconsistent program quality across counties and growing frustration among parents and volunteers. Stakeholder concerns frequently reflected real gaps in Extension Educator preparedness, support, and accountability. These challenges were corroborated through a statewide SWOT analysis (2020–2021) and enrollment trend reviews, underscoring the need for a coordinated, system-level response.

The Plan

The response focused on rebuilding Oklahoma 4-H through intentional, quality-driven growth rather than rapid expansion that could compromise sustainability. A two-part strategy was developed with District Program Specialists and State 4-H faculty to address county-level practice and statewide alignment.

At the county level, 4-H Beyond Ready Reviews were implemented using a research-informed tool to assess program quality, educator capacity, and support needs. District Directors were engaged early through data-informed discussions at an Extension Leadership Retreat to identify thriving and struggling counties, reinforcing that the review process was developmental and not punitive. Reviews include structured conversations with County Extension Educators, identification of strengths and improvement areas, recommended supports from District and State 4-H offices, and follow-up goal setting with progress monitoring. All counties also complete a condensed self-review and develop member and volunteer recruitment and retention plans.

At the statewide level, preparation began for an external Beyond Ready Review. To ensure timely and credible input, an externally facilitated NOISE analysis was launched, including a statewide survey and six stakeholder sessions representing educators, specialists, and key partners. Results will inform the external review and future program direction.

Progress

County-level Beyond Ready Reviews are now conducted monthly, leading to clearer expectations, stronger alignment among county, district, and state supports, and more focused conversations on program quality. A key outcome has been the development of a New Educator Plan of Work for the first two years of employment, including quarterly check-ins and integration of Century III professional development. This structure has improved clarity and early success for new educators.

Reviews also revealed the need for stronger transition supports. In response, onboarding and offboarding expectations are being standardized, including requirements for current County 4-H Yearbooks. Counties demonstrating exemplary practices are increasingly used as models for peer learning and informal mentorship.

In 2026, volunteer engagement improved, with 82 new certified volunteers representing 6.66 percent growth and fewer clubs operating without certified volunteers. More than 1,000 state record books were submitted, indicating improved program quality and youth engagement. While overall membership growth reached 1.6 percent, below the 5 percent target, this reflects a deliberate prioritization of program quality and capacity building over rapid recruitment.

The statewide Beyond Ready effort has completed four of six NOISE analysis sessions, with findings informing the upcoming external review and ongoing program refinement.

FSLI Supports

Participation in FSLI directly supported my leadership throughout this initiative by strengthening skills in adaptive leadership, communication, and shared accountability. Emphasizing the “why” behind change helped engage District Directors, County Extension Educators, and state-level staff, framing Beyond Ready Reviews as a tool for improvement rather than compliance.

FSLI principles also guided my approach to leading the State 4-H leadership team and coaching County Extension Educators. Collaborative problem-solving, goal setting, and context-specific measures of success increased educator ownership, reduced resistance, and built trust. Overall, FSLI provided a practical framework for managing change and aligning stakeholders around a shared vision for making Oklahoma 4-H Beyond Ready.