

Inclusive Adventures: Customizing 4-H for Youth with Special Needs

Heather Pogue, UF/IFAS Putnam 4-H Youth Development Agent

Purpose:

Approximately 15% of kindergarten through 12th-grade students in Florida receive special education services (FLDOE, 2024). Developing a training program for 4-H volunteers would enhance their understanding of the needs of youth with disabilities and equip them with the skills to implement effective accommodations and modifications. This training would foster an inclusive 4-H environment where all members have the opportunity to succeed and reach their fullest potential.

Methods:

I created a training that taught our volunteers how to make accommodations and modifications for special needs youth in their clubs. Volunteers were taught the difference between accommodations and modifications. Then, they were provided hands-on experience using scenarios for which they created accommodations and modifications to better serve the specific youth with special needs in their scenario. In the club environment, youth were given boards with pre-cut holes to assist them in planting seeds at the correct spacing in their raised beds. Tasks were broken down into smaller, manageable steps to support their success. Quiet spaces were provided for youth to work on their project books without distractions, and youth mentors were paired with participants to help guide them through more complex tasks.

Accomplishments and Significant Changes:

As a result of this training, volunteers became better prepared to support their members with special needs and gained a deeper understanding of their unique needs. Recognizing youth's success in their clubs with these accommodations and modifications, I created modified project reports for the special needs youth (n=31) to help them succeed in their 4-H projects according to their abilities. Youth who had previously scored less than 50% on their project reports achieved higher scores, between 75-96%, due to completing project reports that matched their individual skill levels.

Through the love some volunteers found for the special needs youth, a club was created at Mellon Learning Center, a school in Putnam County for youth with special needs. The club began with seven members. The following year, it grew to 16 members. In end-of-year surveys, those 16 youth reported feeling a sense of belonging and purpose by teaching their peers skills they had learned, they felt they could make their own decisions, and they felt safe in their club meetings. By making thoughtful accommodations and modifications, these youth, who often face significant challenges, could meet their goals and thrive within the 4-H program.



January 29, 2025

Dear FAE4-HA Reviewers,

I am honored to support Heather Pogue's nomination for the Diversity and Inclusion Award. Her unwavering dedication to fostering inclusive, accessible, and impactful youth development within 4-H has made a profound and lasting difference in Putnam County and beyond. Through her tireless efforts, Heather has broken down barriers and ensured that all youth—regardless of ability, background, or circumstance—can thrive, grow, and develop the skills necessary for lifelong success.

One of Heather's most transformational initiatives is the creation of a 4-H club at a special needs school, designed specifically to serve youth who often face challenges in traditional programming. What began with seven members quickly grew to 16 in just its second year, demonstrating the trust, engagement, and sense of belonging she has fostered. Recognizing the need for adaptable programming, Heather developed modified project reports and personalized accommodations, ensuring that each member can fully participate, contribute, and celebrate their individual achievements. By reimagining traditional 4-H practices, she has set a new standard for inclusivity, serving as a model for other 4-H leaders striving to create equitable opportunities for all youth.

Heather's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion extends beyond her county and district to the national level through her work with NAE4-HYPD's Opportunity 4 All Committee. As the current co-chair, she has been a leading advocate for expanding equitable access and inclusive programming across 4-H nationwide. Her leadership and advocacy will continue to grow in impact, as she is set to become chair of the committee next year. In this role, she will continue using her voice to champion meaningful policy changes, promote best practices, and empower youth from all walks of life.

Heather Pogue's passion, leadership, and innovative approach have transformed lives and strengthened 4-H at every level. Her trailblazing work in creating accessible learning environments and advocating for inclusivity makes her a truly deserving candidate for this award. I wholeheartedly support her nomination and have no doubt that her vision and dedication will continue to shape the future of 4-H for generations to come.

Sincerely,

Dallas Meringolo

UF/IFAS Extension
Lake County
Interim County Extension Director
Extension Agent II
4-H Youth Development





DATE: January 29, 2025

TO: FAE4-HA Award Selection Committee

FROM: Geralyn Sachs, UF/IFAS Extension Central District 4-H Regional Specialized Agent IV

RE: Support Letter for Mrs. Heather Pogue, UF/IFAS Putnam County Extension Agent I

Dear Selection Committee,

It is with great enthusiasm that I write this letter of support of the nomination of Mrs. Heather Pogue to receive the Florida 4-H Diversity and Inclusion Award. As the Central District 4-H Regional Specialized Agent, I have the pleasure of working with and learning from Heather regarding her effort to promote and implement an inclusive environment for diverse audiences.

At the county level, Heather has designed and applied several accommodation practices for youth taking part in school and community 4-H clubs. These accommodations are related to the completion of record books, activity engagement, and meeting accessibility. She has also created a number of blogs and fact sheets that focus on empowering youth with special needs. At the district and national level, Heather has presented training sessions for her professional peers on best practices when working with youth of special needs. Heather has also written a lesson plan for 4-H professionals to use when training 4-H volunteers about youth accommodations. This publication sparked great interest at the district and national sessions.

Heather's previous career as a classroom teacher has provided her a strong foundation for working with youth of all abilities. As a result of her effort, more youth in Putnam County can experience the sense of belonging and confidence building programs through their 4-H engagement.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Geralyn Sachs".

Geralyn Sachs

UF/IFAS Extension Central District 4-H Regional Specialized Agent IV

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January 28, 2025

FAE4-HA Awards Committee,

I am writing to express my unwavering support for Heather Pogue, Putnam County 4-H Extension Agent, to receive the FAE4-HA Diversity and Inclusion Award. Heather's commitment to creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for 4-H youth members with special needs has been transformative for our County. My mother spent her entire career educating special needs youth in Putnam County, so I recognize the importance and value of Heather's contribution.

Heather first developed a training program for 4-H volunteers that equips them with the necessary skills to make accommodations and modifications tailored to the unique needs of each youth member. As a result, volunteers have become better equipped to support these young individuals, ensuring their successful participation in the 4-H program. Her initiative extended to creating project reports designed to meet youth members at their respective levels. This personalized approach has significantly contributed to the success of these young members, enabling them to achieve their fullest potential within the 4-H program.

One of Heather's most notable achievements is establishing a special needs club within the Putnam County 4-H community. The club began with seven original members and saw an impressive increase to sixteen members in its second year. This growth is a testament to the positive impact of Heather's work. Youth who may not always be included or feel successful in other settings have found a supportive and nurturing environment where they can thrive and achieve their goals.

Heather's dedication, compassion, and innovative approach have made a profound difference in the lives of many young individuals. Her work embodies the true spirit of 4-H, fostering an inclusive and empowering environment for all. I wholeheartedly support Heather's continued efforts and believe she is most qualified to receive the Diversity and Inclusion Award.

Sincerely,



Wendy Mussoline, UF/IFAS Putnam County Extension Director