Best Practices for Competition in the 4-H Youth Development Program

- Avoid using undue pressure to secure participation in a competitive experience or to achieve a common degree of excellence. Make participation optional.

- Have classes for contestants in different stages of development and set standards appropriate for all classes to ensure the possibility of some degree of success for all contestants. Classes should relate to the project learning experience.

- Standards of excellence, developed from research-based data, should be used for all competitive learning experiences and be made available to all interested youth and adults prior to participating in the activity.

- In judging the achievements or progress of young people, always explain the standards used and how selections were made in relation to these standards rather than on the basis of comparing one person with another. Capabilities related to age and any other limitations should be considered by the judge.

- Help judges and volunteer leaders to recognize that concern for the individual is preeminent rather than the contest or award.

- 4-H’ers in all competitive learning experiences should receive feedback on how they and/or their products compared to a predetermined and pre-announced standard of excellence. Conference judging or a form of face-to-face interaction is the preferred method for providing feedback to 4-H’ers.

- Help youth develop intrinsic satisfactions. As youth are able, provide them opportunities to use their knowledge and skills to teach or lead others.

- Provide increasing opportunities for youth to evaluate their own work against challenging standards.

- Keep competition in line with educational objectives, 4-H and Extension Policy, and the staff time requirements for paid and volunteer staff.

- The Danish judging system provides every exhibitor with a recognition of his/her accomplishments. If conference judging is not possible, insist that the judge provide constructive written comments about the exhibit.

- Rules and enforcement of them should ensure that all exhibitors are treated equitably. Care should be taken to ensure that the exhibit reflects the work of the 4-H member and not the parent or leader.

- Premiums and awards should be appropriate and consistent with the item exhibited and the effort required. There should be a high degree of equity throughout the exhibition.

- Recognize exhibitors by making their names visible in conjunction with their exhibits. Use discretion and creativity in displaying exhibits so as not to overexpose those who placed in the lower grades.

- Avoid singling out individuals either as a “parade of winners” or as recipients of a single bottom award.

- Utilize teen and adult volunteers in as many leadership and decision-making roles as possible in conjunction with the exhibition. Increased responsibility and recognition for leadership may be one of the most valuable outcomes of the exhibition.

- Attempt to make the exhibition a family affair. 4-H fairs and shows should strengthen not weaken the family.

- From “Competition in 4-H”, a report from the National 4-H Competition Task Force, 1989