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Supporting Early Career Teachers

The Power of Kindness: The Small Acts That Keep Teachers Teaching

by Dr. Laura Hasselquist

Beginning teachers leaving the classroom is not a new problem. For as long as there have been scholarly writings about education, teacher attrition has been a challenge. It is an issue that rightly deserves our attention. Keeping the best and brightest educators in the classroom should be a clear focus for all of us.

One of the simplest things we can do is practice kindness. Kindness toward new teachers, kindness toward veteran teachers, and kindness toward students who are considering a career in education. Kindness does not have to be a grand gesture. Often, it is the simple acts - reaching out, offering encouragement, or sharing a kind word, that make a HUGE difference for teachers at every stage of their careers. At least, it did for me.

As a young teacher, everyone tells you that your first year is going to be tough, and it was. But I often found myself thinking, *This is hard, but I can do this*. It was a great mantra that helped me through year one. At times, I felt overwhelmed and exhausted, but I never considered leaving the classroom. That came in year two.

I was struggling with my seventh-hour Fish and Wildlife class: twenty-seven boys ranging from freshmen to seniors during the last hour of the day. It felt like no matter what I did or what I tried, everyone, including me, was miserable. It was especially frus-

trating because my other section of the same class responded well to the topics, teaching strategies, and activities. Seventh hour, on the other hand, just could not handle it. It was a truly disheartening way to end each day.

Soon, it became a vicious cycle. I started to dread that class, which I am sure the students could sense. That, in turn, escalated the problems, which then increased my dread. It got to the point that a student who had me earlier in the day and then again during seventh hour told me I

Get back on that surfboard and ride the waves. All teachers get knocked down. Just don't make a decision when you're not on the board.

seemed like two different people. About halfway through the semester, I was done. I typed up my resignation letter.

The next day, we had a county agricultural education teacher meeting. I told an agriculture teacher I deeply admired that I did not think I was coming back. She asked me why and listened as I vented about feeling completely ineffective and unable to be the teacher my students deserved. I talked about how this class was grinding me down in ways I did not know were possible.

When I finished, she said something I will NEVER forget because it saved my career and has become advice I now share with others. She said, "Get back on that

surfboard and ride the waves. All teachers get knocked down. Just don't make a decision when you're not on the board." She then shared, with remarkable vulnerability, that even after more than 30 years of teaching, she was still struggling with challenges involving students. What was so refreshing about that conversation was that she emphasized there was no shame or stigma in leaving the classroom. She simply wanted to make sure the decision was not a reaction to one difficult situation and that I owed it to myself to think carefully about such an important choice. The simple act of listening, validating my feelings, and reminding me that I had options was all I needed.

Ten years later, when I moved to South Dakota and became a brand-new teacher educator, I was trying to learn my new role while adjusting to teaching future teachers. I was hesitant and unsure of myself. A veteran teacher in the state, known for speaking his mind and telling people exactly what he thought, would seek me out at conferences during those first few years. It always started the same way: "Hey! Come here. I've got to talk to you." Cue my immediate anxiety. Then he would say, "I am so glad you are here!" That simple phrase put me at ease and made a tremendous difference, more than he will ever know.

High school students and preservice teachers benefit from kindness just as much as practicing teachers do. I cannot tell you how many students have become more enthusiastic and excited

about entering the profession because of a positive interaction with a current teacher. Those efforts are never wasted. They matter, and they leave a lasting impression.

Challenge yourself to incorporate acts of kindness into your

professional life. Those small acts can create lasting impacts. A few encouraging words, a willingness to listen, or a simple expression of support may be exactly what someone needs to keep moving forward. We often never know the battles others are facing, but we

do know that kindness has the power to lighten the load. In a profession built on relationships, those small moments of care can influence careers, shape futures, and help ensure that great teachers remain where they are needed most: in the classroom.



Simple Ways to Show Kindness



- **Listen without trying to fix everything.** Sometimes people simply need someone to hear them.
- **Validate someone's feelings.** Let them know their struggles, frustrations, and concerns are real.
- **Offer words of encouragement.** A few positive words can help someone keep moving forward.
- **Tell someone you're glad they're here.** A simple "I'm so glad you're here" can ease anxiety and create a sense of belonging.
- **Reach out to check in.** Send a quick message, stop by a classroom, or ask how someone is doing.
- **Celebrate small wins.** Recognize progress, effort, and growth, not just major accomplishments.
- **Share your time and expertise.** Offer advice, resources, or support to a new teacher or preservice teacher.
- **Invite someone into the conversation.** Help colleagues and students feel included and valued.
- **Write a note of appreciation.** A handwritten note, email, or text can have a lasting impact.
- **Show interest in others' goals and aspirations.** Ask about their students, projects, activities, or career plans.
- **Offer help before it is requested.** Small gestures, such as sharing materials or lending a hand, can reduce stress.
- **Speak positively about the profession.** Your enthusiasm and encouragement may inspire the next generation of teachers.
- **Support future teachers.** Encourage high school students and preservice teachers who are exploring education as a career.
- **Assume positive intentions.** Extend grace when colleagues are facing challenges you may not see.
- **Express gratitude often.** A sincere "thank you" is one of the simplest forms of kindness.



Dr. Laura Hasselquist is in her twentieth year as an educator and is an associate professor at South Dakota State University. She intentionally incorporates acts of kindness into her teaching and professional interactions, recognizing that small gestures of encouragement and support can have a powerful impact on teacher retention. Through her work, she strives to help great teachers remain in the classroom and continue making a difference in the lives of their students.



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Supporting the Next Generation of Agriculture Teachers

by Dr. Brandie Disberger

I developed a passion for supporting early-career teachers in my second year of teaching school-based agricultural education. Mostly because I felt blindsided by my first year. I had no idea how hard it would be, and I knew that to protect the profession, we had to do a better job of supporting those who were working to navigate the challenges experienced early in the profession.

In 2003, I began the Novice Teacher program in Kansas; at that time, it was simply a meeting for the beginning teachers held directly before our summer teachers conference. We strived to provide words of wisdom, mentoring, and physical resources, including curriculum to teaching tools. Fast forward 20 years, and I continue to run the program and am proud of the team that has taken the program from one meeting to a multi-year support system. In 2016, I began working on my PhD. There was no doubt that the topic of my dissertation would relate to early-career agriculture teachers. I began a qualitative study following eight beginning teachers through their first three years of teaching, speaking with them on the phone once a month and having annual focus groups with them

each summer. Through the study, I found that there are natural peaks and valleys in the academic year for teachers. We tend to start on high and have a mid-semester slump, and then end the semester with renewed excitement as we reflect on all of the accomplishments from the semester. While this cycle is something teachers experience every year. These peaks and valleys are very extreme in the early career teachers' lives. Over time, we develop coping mechanisms and are able to plan for the craziest time of the year to make the peaks and valleys of the career less extreme, and therefore, less overwhelming.

Following the completion of my PhD, I returned to lead the beginning educator support team. At the same time, the program was significantly enhanced through additional funding provided by the Kansas FFA Foundation. These funds were used to support a Beginning Educator Support Team (BEST) school-based coach. The Coach was an experienced teacher who observed each beginning teacher for a full day, providing support and wisdom. During the same time, we experienced a shift towards significantly more alternatively certified teachers. The

BEST program has continued to evolve to meet the ever-changing needs of our early career teachers through regular Zoom meetings, in-person professional development four times per year, and 1-2 BEST Coach visits. Kansas is not alone; many states are grappling with how to meet the needs of various sources of teachers, all coming into the profession at the same time.

I am delighted to help bring to the profession ideas and resources from across the nation in this edition of the Agricultural Education Magazine. The featured articles will help us exchange ideas and resources by learning what other states are doing to support their teachers. This idea exchange will only benefit our profession as a whole as we work to develop the best support systems for our next generation of agriculture teachers. Listen to the voices from our profession and think about how you or your state could further expand and support early career teachers through formal and informal programs. The fastest way to solve our teacher shortage is in the retention of those who have already stepped up to Teach Ag!



Dr. Brandie Disberger is a Teaching Associate Professor of Agricultural Education at Kansas State University. Prior to her fifteen years at K-State, she was the agriculture teacher at Southeast of Saline High School in Gypsum, KS, for 10 years. Brandie has facilitated support for early-career agriculture teachers in Kansas for over 20 years.

Build It and They Will Come – Mentor Them and They Will Stay

by Dr. Kelly Hoelting

My first year of teaching was anything but easy; in fact, I remember many moments during those early years when I wondered if I was going to make it as an agriculture education teacher. I remember having many conversations with experienced agriculture education teachers who helped me many times over. While none of those teachers were my assigned mentor, they all provided me with a listening ear, a piece of advice, curriculum suggestions, or a hug at just the right time.

I will never forget the difference they made in my life as an ag teacher, and the lives of many other agricultural educators over the years.

This story, along with the many others, are examples of how we as agricultural educators have the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of early-career agricultural educators. Each year, a new group of agricultural education teachers step into classrooms, shops, labs, and greenhouses with fresh ideas and eager hearts. These early career teachers bring energy and innovation to their programs and to our profession, but they also face challenges that can make their first few years feel extremely overwhelming. Supporting these teachers isn't just a nice gesture; it is essential to the future of agriculture education.

Agricultural educators wear many hats: classroom instructor,

FFA advisor, fundraiser, problem solver, and coach. For many early-career teachers, balancing this responsibility while learning the ins and outs of the overall Agriculture Education program can be daunting. Many new teachers report struggling with time management, navigating the Ag program and the FFA expectations, and finding their own professional identity. A mentoring program has proved a successful tool in helping retain early career teachers (Callahan, 2016). Formalized mentoring during preservice

In agricultural education, the informal mentoring that comes from our fellow agricultural educators is many times the boost needed to help early-career teachers through these first years of teaching.

teacher experiences helps to support the overall growth and development of agricultural education teachers as they move into their first years in the classroom (Korte & Simonsen, 2018). Many school districts offer a formal mentoring program for all new teachers; the success of this mentorship program depends on the relationship built with the mentor (Settle et al., 2024). The formal programs are an important component of the mentoring landscape, but in agricultural education, the informal mentoring that comes from our fellow agricultural educators is many times the boost needed to help early-career teachers through these first years of teaching.

What is informal mentoring?

Informal mentoring occurs outside of an organized formal program when agriculture educators naturally come together to form a mentor-mentee relationship. These relationships begin to form at career development events, agricultural education professional development workshops, county fairs, FFA conventions, and many other events. Informal mentoring results from naturally occurring exchanges at work or in other social and community settings. These relationships

can develop spontaneously or through more deliberate motivation by the mentor or mentee (Dougherty et al., 2007).

Typically, informal mentoring relationships, which often form based on mutual interest and shared experiences of those involved, can provide more specific support to the teachers, benefiting both their agriculture education program and their mental health. Studies show that informal mentor relationships typically are more successful for both parties (Settle et al., 2024).

Informal mentoring relationships are an important element in many SBAE teachers' overall success in their careers. A mentor can offer real-world advice, classroom strategies, and emotional support that lasts a lifetime. While formal mentoring programs set up by the school or another entity informal mentoring is just

as impactful, if not more. It is important for agricultural educators to understand the importance of informal mentoring and how it can make an impact on our early career educators and their long-term retention in the classroom and in agriculture. While it can be mentee-driven, the relationship is often more adaptable and personal, covering a broader range of topics and potentially lasting longer than formal mentorships.

What does informal mentoring look like in agricultural education?

As agricultural educators, many of us do not think of ourselves as mentors, but just as a group of teachers who meet together at events to talk about what is going on at our school and the needs of our programs. These very meet ups are where the magic happens! The natural relationship that begins through these informal conversations are the piece that is important to many teachers. Many times, agriculture educators don't even realize they are involved in informal

mentoring, and might not even realize they are a mentor. Here are some examples of what informal mentoring could look like in agricultural education.

- Providing a sounding board and helping others solve problems or encourage opportunities for professional development.
- Purchasing a coffee, donut, or sending an encouraging note.
- Answering a question on social media posed by another educator.
- A more experienced teacher notices an early-career teacher needing help at a CDE/LDE.
- Taking an interest in a group of early-career teachers' conversations and offering direction on an issue at school.
- A teacher providing advice, support, or coaching to a fellow agricultural educator.
- Reaching out and giving encouragement to a fellow teacher.

- Celebrating the accomplishments of others through conversations, social media posts, etc.
- Send a quick email, text, or snap to a fellow agricultural educator
- Advocating for agricultural education teachers or programs to others in the community.

Agricultural education teachers are known for their strong network, creating a family that supports each other and helps to build up programs and teachers. As our profession grows, we have increased the number of opportunities for our students, which can leave us running in every direction, finding it hard to have the time for a simple conversation that can lead to building an informal mentoring relationship. It is important that we understand the lasting impact we can have on another teacher. Supporting new teachers is not the job of one person; it is a shared responsibility of the whole agricultural education community. Well-supported teachers are more likely to stay in the profession and inspire generations of students.

Continuing to find ways to be mentors for early career teachers helps to build up the profession and works on retaining teachers in agricultural education. As we find ourselves becoming mentors, to be the most effective, we need to focus on what mentees want from the relationship to ensure

“At the end of our agricultural education journey, our legacy is defined by the impact we leave on others.”

Informal Mentorship can turn into many years of friendship. Mentors provide guidance, wisdom, and countless lessons learned, not to mention support and positivity when needed most. Their impact on teaching is immeasurable.



they are getting the most out of the relationship. Building trust, friendship, having empathy, and ensuring confidentiality are all important pieces to developing a successful mentor relationship (Settle, et al, 2024). The bonus of an informal mentoring relationship is that one mentor cannot meet all of an individual's needs; you can help to build up the agricultural educator's network of informal mentors who can help provide guidance in multiple areas. By initiating these connections, you can not only help the mentee, but these informal mentor relationships often lead to stronger, more lasting bonds, which is a benefit for all of agricultural education. When we invest in early career teachers, we are investing in the future of agricultural education. Well-supported teachers are more likely to stay in the profession, build strong programs, and inspire generations of students.

Agricultural education programs are growing. In 2024; there were 236 new school-based agricultural education programs established. This is the highest recorded growth of programs in the last 10 years. The enrollment in post-secondary agricultural education programs has averaged a 1.6% increase (Foster et al., 2025). We are continuing to build agricultural education throughout the United States, while it is important to build, it is just as important to retain those agricultural educa-

tors in our programs. Informal mentoring is an important opportunity for all experienced educators to utilize in helping the future of agriculture education.

Many of the mentors that I had during my first few years of teaching agriculture education are now retired or close to retiring. Let's remember, "True leadership isn't defined by a title. It's defined by the impact you leave behind." So, I ask you as fellow agricultural educators, "Who have you reached out to today to encourage? Who have you lifted up, inspired, or helped to mentor today?" Because at the end of our agricultural education journey, our legacy is defined by the impact we leave on others. Did we ignite confidence in our other agricultural educators? Did we have empathy and help spark growth for other teachers' journeys? Other agricultural educators will never forget how it feels to have a mentor who leaves them empowered and inspired to continue teaching.

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Dr. Kelly Hoelting is an agricultural education teacher at Mission Valley High School in Eskridge, KS.

A Letter to the Beginning Ag Teacher

by Emma Lehmann

Classroom prepared, Google Classrooms readied, lunch packed... check, check, and check. First-year teacher Miss Lehmann was ready to fulfill a dream that had been growing for the past eight years. People always said the first couple of years teaching were the hardest, but I was ready. My first few years of teaching agriculture education and advising FFA members would be a breeze, or so I thought.

While there have been many moments during these past five years of teaching that I would consider a dream, there have

been just as many – if not more – moments of learning, uh-ohs, and scenarios that made me say: “I’m never doing that again.” Now, I realize I still have much to learn from the wiser Owls of our time. However, I am confident that I have knowledge, experiences, and stories to help those who come after us current Owls.

It seems fitting to start this advice-giving and story-telling journey at the beginning – the application process. In college, my peers and I were taught by three outstanding professors who taught us to pour into our resumes and cover letters as they serve as our true first impression.

Here’s my first piece of advice: be mindful of the words you use, sound humble with what you write, but proud of what you have accomplished while showing who you are as an educator and person. Fitting everything into a double-sided single piece of paper is difficult, so have several people of all backgrounds read over your application documents and make critiques. When you finally get the call for an interview – try to interview in person. If doing an online interview – speaking from personal experience – don’t set-up the interview in the ag classroom office, especially during FFA week. While in-

(LEFT) Retired Neodesha FFA senior jackets at the annual Chapter FFA Banquet. I started this tradition during my second year of teaching; it quickly became a favorite moment for the seniors, their families, and of mine.

(RIGHT) Attending one of the Neodesha Basketball away games. While teaching about agriculture is a passion of mine, I realize my students might have other interests too. Supporting my students in their activities has been and remains to be a priority of mine as a teacher.



interviewing, I had students knocking on the window and opening the door to ask questions. Thankfully, the committee chuckled and understood the situation; I was asked to visit, offered the job and accepted. While everything worked out for me, please save yourself the stress and reserve a private room.

Looking ahead to my first day of teaching, I was confident in my abilities to teach and change lives. While the confidence in my ability is still there, nerves creep in on the first day of school every year for me. It can be intimidating standing up in front of 20 high school students who have no filter. Ease your way into having those introductory conversations by standing outside your doorway, greeting each student. Some students might look at you weird while others may ignore you, but I promise there will be at least one student who will strike up a conversation. When you are starting your in-

troduction, look at that student, it will help calm your nerves and make them feel welcomed. Hopefully by the end of your first day you feel excited and eager for the future, knowing that it's okay to also feel exhausted and a little overwhelmed. It is often said among educators that teaching is not for the weak and faint of heart and that statement remains true.

“Realize that it's okay not to know everything.”

As you start diving into the various subjects including welding, livestock production, floral design, or agribusiness, realize that it's okay not to know everything. My brother is a professional welder; I asked him to visit with my welding classes one day, talk to them about his career, and provide some point-

ers to my students. The students and I loved having a professional give them more experienced advice. Invite professionals to come talk to your classes and help teach a lesson; the connections you, your program, and the kids will make are incredible.

Taking this a step further, ask those professionals for a tour of their business. I wasn't from the area where I was teaching, so I didn't know many places to tour, but I knew my students needed to see skills they were learning inside the classroom used in the real world. So, I asked our suppliers and local businesses first. It became a yearly tradition for my welding class to tour our Air-gas supplier and for the animal science students to partake in a working field trip with a local beef producer. Those students helped process 300 cow-calf pairs in a day, giving them shots, implants, castrating, deworming, and learning how to detect pregnancies. Eventually, I had my students help find tours for classes

(LEFT) Professional welder, Eric Lehmann, speaking to students about the welding profession and his experiences. After answering student questions, Eric worked with each of them on their welding technique. (RIGHT) A former Animal Science student participating in the yearly “working field trip” at Porter Family Ag Farms located in Fredonia, Kansas.



Attending one of the Neodesha Football games showing support to my students. Although I am passionate about teaching agriculture, I understand that my students' interests extend beyond the classroom and beyond agriculture itself. Being present for and supporting their various activities has always been an important part of my role as a teacher.

“While you may be the only ag teacher in the school, know that does not mean you are alone in this journey of teaching agricultural education.”

and turned the activity into a lesson. Don't be afraid to have your students help with the research as this will help them buy-in to you and your instruction.

One of the biggest trips most agricultural teachers take every year is the National FFA Convention. While I've only taken students to convention for five years, I've learned a couple things. First, book your hotel rooms early and check the hotel reviews. Even if those all seem to check out okay, ask other advisors if they've heard about any issues concerning the hotel you're looking into. Moreover, stick pennies in hotel doors instead of pieces of tape from the door to the wall. You always seem to have pennies lying around and they're cheaper than a roll of tape. Additionally, any time you stop at a gas station while on the trip have students help you clean out the trash in the van. Make sure, however, you don't hold the van keys in the same hand as the trash. Otherwise, you'll have to go dumpster diving after realizing you threw the keys away on accident.

While taking kids on FFA trips is fun and watching their Supervised Agricultural Experiences grow is inspiring, I encourage you as a teacher to show up for their non-ag events. I understand

our schedules get busy, but our students need to see us in the audience at their play, in the stands at their game, or in the church pew as they get confirmed. I can promise you that students will notice who is and is not at their events. Be the teacher who is in the first group.

Now, I highly encourage you to attend your students' events but know you don't need to go to every single one. Something that I am still working on at times is learning to say: “not right now” and creating a better work-life-balance for myself. At the start of my teaching career, I was getting to school early and leaving around 7:30 every night. I was trying to do everything, make sure it was perfect, and show up to all the activities no matter how far the event was while taking master's courses. I was running myself into the ground when finally, one of my mentors said that if I didn't slow down and stop trying to do everything I would burnout and leave the teaching profession. I have witnessed this happen to many other teachers and the reality of his words hit home. I'd advise you to set an alarm on your phone, so you know when



to head home. Set one or two evenings aside each week to do something you enjoy that is not related to work. Put a cap on the number of student events you attend each week and then find a person who will hold you accountable to these changes.

Finally, there will come a day when you decide to leave, whether that be through retirement, a different employment opportunity, or for love. I left a program I had built up, which had students and a community I poured my heart into, and a classroom I had made my mark on as an educator. My advice here is to leave on a good note. I told my kids how much they meant to me and promised to keep tabs on them. To this day I still get phone calls, random texts, and Facebook messages about memories, life updates, and invites to their milestones. Turn your resignation letter to the board into a thank you and recap all the successes your students and program had, highlighting the good times. Give the janitors and secretaries a small gift of appreciation. Finally, tidy up your classroom – push

the chairs in, close the cabinet doors, clean the white board, and turn the lights off.

If you decide to make your way back into another classroom, make sure you don't compare the programs and kids against each other. Each one is unique and different with their own traditions. Share your knowledge and wisdom as any FFA Advisor promises to do but let the kids direct the path the program takes. While it can be difficult seeing things done differently than you'd prefer, ask questions to understand before jumping into fix or change. You might learn something new in the process.

Before I make this letter too long, I want to give one last piece of advice. Considering that this career is challenging and comes with an extensive job description, build a community of people around you who will support you in the tough times and celebrate with you in the exciting moments. While you may be the only ag teacher in the school, know that does not mean you are alone in this journey of teaching agricultural education. As I always tell my former and current students, "Be a decent human being and know that I am always in your corner!"

From a Five-Year Owl,
Miss Lehmann



Emma Lehmann; Fifth-year Agricultural Education Teacher and FFA Advisor, Lisbon High School, Lisbon, North Dakota

Supporting the Next Generation of California Agriculture Teachers

by Dr. Bill Kellogg & Tanisha Norvell

Agricultural Education in California is alive and well. Enrollments in secondary programs are growing every year. Like many states, the need in California to recruit and retain new teachers remains one of the greatest threats to the viability of agricultural education programs over time. Three simple strategies are making an impact on teacher retention, especially in the early career years of teachers.

A Simple Thank You Matters.

Since 2014 at the California FFA State Leadership Conference, something special has happened at the Teach Ag California booth. FFA members from across the state stop by to share their gratitude for the Ag teachers who have shaped their lives. Each student is invited to fill out a handwritten thank you card expressing appreciation to their Ag teacher(s), shar-

ing a fond memory, or testifying to an influence they have made. A small gesture with a big impact.

By the end of the conference, more than 2,500 postcards are collected annually, each carrying a personal note of thanks. Dedicated agriculture teachers, volunteers, and the Teach Ag Campaign Director carefully sort and mail the cards to over 300 agricultural education programs across California. For many teachers, these surprise messages arrive just when they are needed most, during one of the busiest and most demanding stretches of the school year- the month of June. One Ag teacher shared, "These always show up in my box at the perfect time. It is so fun reading the little things that my students are grateful for. Lilly Baker, Biggs High School"

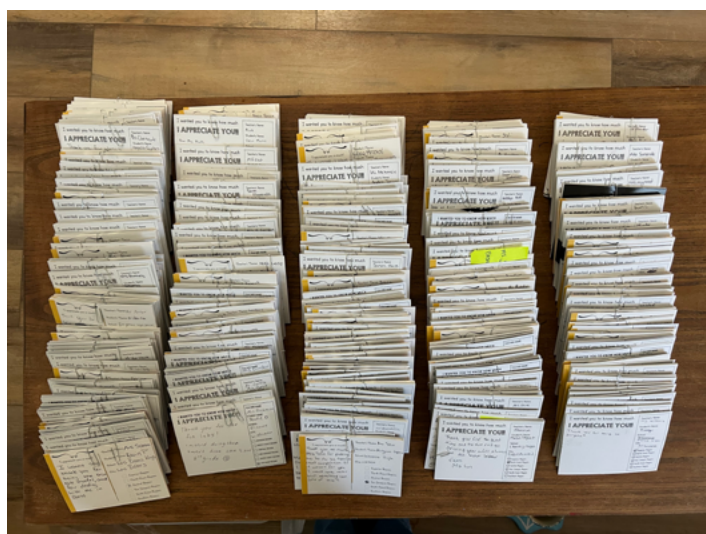
This simple act of appreciation is more than a kind gesture; it serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of teacher recognition in retaining quality educators within the agricultural education profession. Teaching Ag is a uniquely demanding calling. Between managing classrooms, advising FFA chapters, coordinating SAEs, coaching CDE and LDE teams, and advising an Ag program, Ag teachers often work long hours. The workload is heavy, and without adequate support and recognition, Ag teacher burnout becomes a real threat.

Research shows that teachers' decisions to remain in the profession are heavily influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic recognition (Johnson et al., 2005). That is where initiatives like the "thank you card campaign" make a difference. Teacher retention is not



(LEFT) A grateful group of FFA members writing a thank you card to their Ag teachers at the State FFA Convention!

(RIGHT) Over 2,500 hand-written thank you cards, organized by chapter and region!



just about salary or workload; it's about feeling valued. Recognition fosters connection, strengthens morale, and reinforces the "why" behind the hard work of dedicated Ag teachers.

Personalized Welcome Packages: Starting the Year with Support

Recognition and encouragement does not end with thank you cards! In 2024, California welcomed 106 first-year agriculture teachers to the profession with personalized packages shipped directly to their classrooms. Packages typically arrive in mid-November, providing our new teachers with a boost of excitement and encouragement as they round out their first semester of teaching. Each package included a set of custom Teach Ag dry-erase markers and written Words of Welcome and Wisdom from veteran agriculture teachers. One teacher can be quoted as saying, "They don't care how much you know until they know how much

you care. If you can dive in and let these kids know you care and really invest in who they are, they will follow you anywhere." Each year, the welcome packages vary; for 2025, a new batch of veteran teachers were asked to share inspiring words that will accompany Teach Ag-branded dry-erase markers, a lanyard, and pennant.

While the items themselves are simple, the message is profound: your work matters, and we are rooting for you. For many new teachers, receiving these packages creates a sense of belonging and confidence during the challenging first weeks of teaching. As education researcher Dr. Richard Ingersoll noted, "Recognition and a sense of belonging are among the strongest predictors of teacher satisfaction."

Teach Ag California helps early-career teachers feel supported, recognized, and empowered. Recognition in these small, tangible forms strengthens motivation

and commitment to students and programs while fostering a culture of mentorship and gratitude within the agricultural education community.

The New Professionals Institute: Building Skills, Confidence, and Community

The first years of teaching are often the most challenging for agriculture educators. To address these challenges, California has established the Grow AgEd Program, a comprehensive professional development initiative designed to support teachers at every career stage. Research indicates that professional development needs vary depending on years of experience (DiBenedett, Willis, & Barrick, 2018), so Grow AgEd offers a range of opportunities, one of which is the New Professionals Institute (NPI) for early-career teachers.

The NPI is specifically designed for teachers in their first three years of teaching. Research shows these educators need support in classroom and behavior management, content knowledge, FFA program development, and SAE oversight (Roberts et al., 2020). The two-day institute delivers targeted workshops addressing these areas while also connecting participants with veteran agriculture educators who share practical advice and mentorship. Attendees expand their professional networks, meet peers facing similar challenges, and connect with state leaders in agricultural education.

The conference serves approximately 225 participants annually, including over 60% of first-year teachers in California. Workshops are grouped by years of experience, enabling participants to engage with peers at similar stages of their careers. First and

This simple act of appreciation is more than a kind gesture; it serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of teacher recognition in retaining quality educators within the agricultural education profession.



Participants of NPI connect with peers within their region. Pictured here is a group of teachers from California's Central Region.

second-year teachers choose from 24 workshops covering classroom strategies, FFA/SAE, program management, and community engagement. Third-year teachers focus on industry-based experiences, gaining real-world context and resources to enrich instruction. Participants consistently praise the opportunity to gain fresh ideas, practical guidance, and a sense of community with peers.

In addition to professional development, participants can earn one semester unit of academic credit per year, supporting salary advancement. Teachers who complete all three years achieve "Program Completer" status, receiving formal recognition and a commemorative gift for their dedication to professional growth.

At its core, the NPI offers early-career teachers the tools, mentorship, and recognition they need to thrive rather than merely survive. By combining targeted workshops, industry experiences, networking, and tangible incentives, California is making a significant investment in retaining high-quality agricultural educators. This layered approach ensures that students are guided by supported, skilled, and motivated teachers, strengthening

the future of agriculture education across the state.

The Ripple Effect: Recognition Strengthens the Profession

Recognition doesn't just improve teacher morale; it has a ripple effect that impacts students, schools, and the profession as a whole. When teachers feel appreciated, they are more likely to remain in the profession, invest in their programs, and continue inspiring students. Small gestures, like handwritten postcards, welcome packages, and targeted professional development, can reignite passion!

By implementing these initiatives, California is strengthening the agricultural education profession to ensure students are guided by skilled, motivated, and inspired Ag teachers. Recognition fosters a culture where educators feel valued, supported, and connected, helping to retain high-quality Ag teachers in a profession that directly shapes the next generation of agricultural leaders.

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Dr. Bill Kellogg has been a high school teacher and university agricultural education professor at Cal Poly-San Luis Obispo for a combined 49 years.



Tanisha Norvell began her career as a high school agriculture teacher and is now serving as the Campaign Director for Teach Ag California.

Rooted in Teaching: Cultivating a Supportive Climate for Teacher Retention

by Lee Petitgout

The Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement (CERRA) at Winthrop University reports each year on educational statistics in South Carolina. While the state touts one of the higher retention rates in the country at 89.7%, the goal is always for that percentage to increase. CERRA also reports a retention rate of 81.3% for first-year teachers in the state, while teachers completing their third year of teaching have a retention rate of 82.9%.

SC Agricultural Education's team of 6 staff members observed a trend with teacher morale as it relates to burn-out & retention, which is very common among Agriculture teachers. Who can argue that the Agriculture teacher is not the hardest work-

ing, most driven teacher in the building at any school? And, let's not forget the title of scheduling taskmaster of all events & chores. Team SC Ag Ed searched for methods to equip those teachers with the tools to not only survive but thrive. The goal was to assist SC Agriculture teachers with developing a quality root system by cultivating what is important: **belonging, connection, & support.**

A 3-step process, which encompasses strategies for all experience levels, was developed & implemented to proactively address teacher retention.

Step 1: Belonging & The New Teacher Cohort

As with any state's new Agriculture teachers, South Carolina recruits from varying backgrounds. The new teacher cohort each year is made up of recent

graduates, alternatively certified individuals entering the teaching profession, experienced teachers moving from other subject areas, & Agriculture teachers relocating to the state. The South Carolina Association of Agricultural Educators (SCAAE) applied for NAAE's STAR Grant, in hopes of improving the state's ability to not only recruit but retain quality teachers. The STAR Grant allowed South Carolina to offer, at no cost to the teachers or their districts, a New Teacher Retreat. The 3-day event offers a casual environment at the SC FFA Leadership Center, where teachers are exposed to all things Ag Education. Areas such as FFA, adult education, funding sources, "wise owl" advice from experienced teachers, National FFA Teacher Ambassador how-tos, SCAAE introduction, & camping procedures are well-visited topics



(LEFT) Social time is a key component of the New Teacher Retreat model for the cohort.

(RIGHT) First stop at the New Teacher Retreat: collecting all of the gifts, including this year's teacher survival kit, complete with all of the things a first-year Ag teacher would need...but doesn't know it yet!





(LEFT) New Teacher Cohort team success: breaking out of the escape room!

(RIGHT) SC Agricultural Education Director, Mr. Troy Helms (right), tours the horticulture facilities at Denmark-Olar High School with Mr. Daniel Scott (left), Agricultural Educator, & his students.

throughout the weekend. Mrs. Jillian Lash, FFA Executive Director, even developed an advisor handbook for the retreat, filled with everything that a new FFA advisor may need to know about South Carolina FFA: events, appropriate advisor dress for the occasion, field trip preparation, & so many other topics. The new teacher retreat is topped off with great food, fellowship, fireside chats, & always a fun challenge, such as an escape room.

State staff then offer four Zoom touchpoint opportunities throughout the year, where members can fellowship, discuss issues & celebrate achievements. Many times, the Zoom opportunities develop into merely an allocated time for the cohort to spend together.

The SC Farmer & Agribusiness Association annual convention in January offers another in-person opportunity for the cohort to hone their skills with a sponsored interactive gathering. Last year, Dr. Kirby Player & Mrs. Paula Beecher, of Clemson University College of Agriculture, Forestry, & Life Sciences, led a networking do's & don'ts event for the cohort where they practiced interacting

with Agriculture professionals while enjoying hors d'oeuvres. They learned the proper methods for addressing questions which may lead to differing opinions, how to broach the subject of funding & finances, & how to effectively communicate with industry professionals.

Step 2: Connection & Program Tours

The challenge of a slim state staff drove the SC Agricultural Education team to develop strategies for retention that provide the most "bang for the buck" as it pertained to time, energy, & geographic restrictions, since the staff is not centrally located in one office. The team was seeking a method for learning more about the state's programs within the middle & high schools. The team hoped to formulate a plan that would allow them to learn more about some lesser-known Agricultural Education programs & teachers. Program tours were the answer!

The team carves out 2 days per semester to visit both middle & high school Agriculture programs. Visits consist of touching base with students, teachers,

& administrators to show the team's appreciation for all that each entity does to make the program a success. SC Agricultural Education staff select tour stops based on factors such as new/beginning teachers &/or programs, underserved populations, unique settings for programs, etc. During the tours, the staff seeks opportunities to engage with students while the teacher is actively teaching. The team asks questions, observes labs, & spends as much time with the students & teacher as possible. While scheduled for only 30 minutes to not interfere with instruction, the team attempts to pack as much into the small window of opportunity as possible.

A direct result of the program tours has been observed with increased participation at FFA events, teacher morale & a developed pride in programming. There are numerous examples of teachers who rarely engaged with state staff prior to the program tour visits who now openly inquire about new growth opportunities for themselves & their students. The team has watched as teachers whose programs were targeted for visits step up

to volunteer for leadership roles within their state's teacher association (SCAAE), procure awards & scholarship support for their students, & actively advocate for their programs.

Step 3: Support & The Administrative Link

The SC Ag Education Team faced challenges at times where there were conflicts within local school districts between the Agriculture program & administration. Most instances were merely misunderstandings or the ignorance to programming, extended contract requirements, or general knowledge of Career Technical Education (CTE) programs as a whole from newly appointed administrators or those who may have originated in a non-CTE area. Realizing that the key to teacher retention begins locally, the team identified a need for cultivating & building solid relationships with local administrators.

South Carolina has 2 region coordinators, Mindy Sandifer (regions 3 & 4) & Lee Petitgout (regions 1 & 2). Their primary responsibility is to support teachers within their districts. The region coordinators are responsible for quality review measure (QRM) evaluations, extended contract funding allocations, teacher contract fulfillment, & overall support of programming. So, the plan for

building administrative relationships began with the region coordinators. They began to attend state CTE director conferences & distribute an administrator's handbook, which was developed by the coordinators & the team's administrative assistant, Jennifer Woody. The handbook was dubbed "the administrator's cheat sheet to Ag Education." An appropriate nickname for the handbook it was, as it contains Ag Education lingo & definitions, such as SAE, CDE, LDE, & many more. The handbook also includes examples of an extended contract, yearly calendars of activities,

about the state's Ag Education programming. The piece boasts SAE statistics, year-round, curriculum-based camping opportunities, curriculum pathways, & much more. Sometimes the opportunity to introduce an administrator to Ag Education is a small one-minute opportunity. That is why the "2-pager" was developed. The piece has also proven vital for disseminating information to legislators & other supporters.

Ultimately, solid relationships are a slow build. But, with the addition of the handbook & the quick look, the team has quality leave-behind printed pieces to

continue to tell the SC Ag Education story after a visit. The goal is to continue to develop administrative connections which open communication between local school districts & the state entities that support them.

A direct result of the program tours has been observed with increased participation at FFA events, teacher morale & a developed pride in programming.

explanations for all Ag Education entities, such as FFA, SC Farmer & Agribusiness Association (the state's adult education / Young Farmer organization), & the FFA Leadership Center. The handbook is distributed almost as widely as the coordinators' business cards, as every CTE administrator's office now seems to host a SC Ag Ed Administrator's handbook.

The second relationship building tactic came in the form of a foldable 2-page quick look printed piece full of statistics

If, or when, issues arise, the schools & administration which have forged a professional relationship tend to allow the SC Agricultural Education team to assist in pushing through the challenges based on a solid, established relationship. Advice is shared & taken when both parties have built a professional trust in each other's ability to achieve the common goal of supporting Ag Education programming within the local school district.



As Associate Director of South Carolina Agricultural Education, Lee Petitgout leverages three decades of passion and purpose to ignite learners and elevate the future of agriculture.

All Paths, One Purpose: Expanding Support for Every Career and Technical Education Teacher

by Dr. Lavyne Rada

Across classrooms and laboratories, from welding bays to kitchens to greenhouses, new teachers are finding their footing in the dynamic world of Career and Technical Education (CTE). These early years are full of promise, but they are also full of pressure. Teachers must master curriculum, manage laboratories, connect with students, and navigate complex systems, often with limited preparation, time, or support.

In Minnesota, we've long recognized that keeping talented teachers in the profession takes more than recruitment. It requires retention systems that meet teachers where they are. For decades, Agricultural, Food, and Natural Resources (AFNR) education has led the nation in teacher induction through strong mentoring and community-based support that builds a network of teachers across each state. As our teaching workforce has diversified, so have the pathways into the classroom. Many CTE educators now come directly from industry, bringing rich technical expertise but less formal preparation for teaching. Even our early-career teachers who begin after a university teacher preparation program have varied personal experiences with school-based agricultural education, work-based learning, and FFA. To support early-career teachers today requires a recognition of these shifts to meet teachers where they are.

These changing needs called for a new approach. Our approach honors AFNR's legacy with teach-

“Early-career teacher success is dependent on improving the individual teacher’s abilities and confidence while providing support in their daily school setting, and additionally building a regional and discipline-relevant network.”

er retention programming in Minnesota while expanding the circle of support to include every CTE teacher, regardless of pathway. The result is Minnesota's Career and Technical Education Teacher Induction Program (CTE TIP), a statewide effort to build belonging, confidence, and competence among early-career teachers during their most formative years.

Building on a Proven Foundation

For more than 25 years, AFNR education in Minnesota has led the way in supporting new teachers through structured induction and mentorship through AFNR's Teacher Induction Program (AFNR TIP) through the University of Minnesota. However, as the experiences of early-career teachers shifted over the past few years, additional and different supports were needed that met teachers where they were.

Recognizing this need, we used the AFNR Teacher Induction Program as a foundation to design a statewide model for all CTE teachers. The new framework not only builds on AFNR's success in mentorship and com-

munity but was also adapted to the realities of teachers entering from industry, through alternative preparation routes, and with a range of personal experiences in CTE classrooms.

CTE TIP serves early-career educators across all of Minnesota's CTE licenses. This comprehensive system creates a professional home for teachers who might otherwise feel isolated in their schools or content areas by building networks across CTE disciplines throughout the entire state. “Being able to talk and connect with other teachers in my licensure field was so useful,” were the words of a new FCS teacher who transitioned from being a chef. He continued, “I do not have anyone else in my building at school to talk through and share ideas with.”

Listening to Teacher Voices

The foundation of CTE TIP is grounded in creating multiple layers of support. Using this lens, the program believes that early-career teacher success is dependent on improving the individual teacher's abilities and confidence while providing support

in their daily school setting, and additionally building a regional and discipline-relevant network. Minnesota's model helps early-career teachers not only improve classroom practice but also develop the skills needed to sustain long-term careers.

Understanding what new teachers experience is central to effective induction. Between 2021 and 2025, more than 300 early-career CTE teachers participated in the statewide program. For each cohort, we examined the perceived challenges and professional development needs at the beginning and end of the school year. This data was then used to develop the professional development plan for the year by identifying challenges that need to be addressed immediately and those that shift as teacher experience changes. The findings reflect both progress and persistent needs.

At the start of the year, the top challenges were familiar: lack of spare time, motivating students, limited instructional materials, and heavy teaching loads. By spring, many of these improved through mentoring and professional development,

yet time management and student motivation remained top concerns. Significant gains were seen in relationships with parents, organization, and lesson planning. While there are many similarities between each cohort, there are differences when the results were compared by pathway to licensure.

These insights helped Minnesota refine its approach. Rather than treating all early-career teachers as a single group, CTE TIP tailors professional development and mentoring to align with each teacher's background and experience. Of the 300 participants, more than 80% did not complete a teacher preparation program in the content area prior to becoming a CTE teacher. Overall, the program has had participants from every CTE licensure area with about 20% having an agriculture education license, 14% from business and marketing, 22% in family and consumer sciences, 7% from medical careers, 31% from trades and industry (i.e., construction, manufacturing, transportation, communications technology), 9% with Work-Based Learning, and then remaining working with cosmetology or law enforcement

and public safety. Within each cohort, 17-23% of participants have a permanent teaching license but are teaching in a CTE outside their permanent license. Though all participants have unique pathways that brought them to the classroom, we build on the foundation that we all have some expertise and we all have things to learn. With a focus on growth, we are able to design each component with purpose.

Designing Support with Intention

Each year, CTE TIP brings early-career educators together through in-person seminars, online learning communities, and one-on-one mentoring and coaching. Sessions blend technical topics with personal development, focusing on time management, classroom organization, instructional design, and strategies for engaging all learners. When focusing on topics that are new and critical to all, such as advisory boards and engaging industry, all participants work and learn together. However, when we are talking about teaching methods, those with more than three years of teaching experience in a non-CTE field learn together about best practices unique to CTE such as aligning content to industry standards, incorporating career exploration, and developing and assessing employability skills. Those new to teaching focus on course, unit, and lesson plan development during that time.

Each cohort begins with a required virtual orientation and an in-person Induction Seminar. During the orientation and seminar, community building is an essential priority as we build an understanding that many of



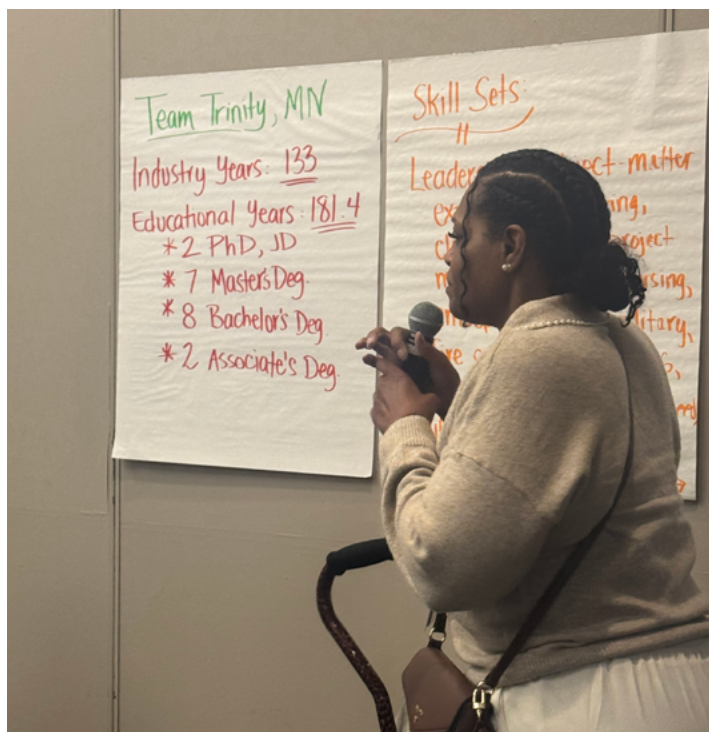
All CTE TIP participants come together in the first month of the school year to build a foundation of understanding for all program participants.

Another hallmark of the program is its individualized approach blended with cross-disciplinary collaboration. During the fall in-person seminar, sessions focus on broad foundational components of CTE while also breaking the group into different tracks based on experiences and

These conversations often extend beyond logistics to well-be-

After the Induction Seminar, CTE TIP meets virtually once a month. Each virtual seminar begins with mentoring group break-outs to share successes over the past month, provides opportunities to share resources with each other, and teaches about one topic of need identified by the cohort's needs assessment. Topics we have had include: engaging students, using artificial intelli-

(RIGHT) Program participants create team resumes at the beginning of the conference to elevate the variety of experiences of program participants. This strategy builds the network as early-career teachers realize no two paths are identical.



gence, assessment, state and federal funding, program promotion, time management, and advisory boards. The year concludes with a Summer Seminar where teachers celebrate the past year, reflect on lessons learned, and begin planning for future years.

Mentorship as the Anchor

While the seminars provide structure, it's the mentorship network that gives CTE TIP its staying power. Each early-career teacher is paired with an experienced mentor who provides individualized guidance throughout the year. Mentors serve not just as resources for content-specific questions but as sounding boards, connectors, and advocates. As one AFNR early-career teacher who transitioned from science expressed, "My mentor was amazing! He came to my classroom many times, gave me positive feedback, and helped me implement new ideas. Knowing I had someone to call made all the difference."

These relationships create a ripple effect. As mentors and mentees build trust, they contribute to a culture of collaboration that extends beyond the induction year. Many mentees later return to serve as mentors themselves, continuing the cycle of support. Engaging a variety of mentors has also improved retention, as one business and marketing mentor reflected: "As a mentor, CTE TIP rejuvenated me. I feel like I have something to give. I can support and help others more than I realized. I fi-

nally feel relevant. Not just some 30 years of experience teacher nearing retirement."

What the Data Tell Us

The impact of CTE TIP can be seen in both data and dialogue. Teachers who participate consistently report increased confidence, improved classroom management, and stronger connections with colleagues. Statistical analyses from 2021–2025 revealed significant improvement in professional challenges identified at the start of the year, with the largest gains in lesson planning, organization, and relationships with colleagues.

Yet the program doesn't shy away from the persistent issues that remain, such as workload, time, and student motivation. These ongoing challenges inform future program design, ensuring that induction content evolves alongside teachers' realities and support our decision to expand beyond one year of support. Teachers are allowed to remain in CTE TIP a second year, and a second program option has been added to expand support for up to five years.

The second program groups participants by licensure area and focuses on moving from surviving to thriving by digging deeper into content-specific topics like Career and Technical Student Organizations, work-based learning, advisory boards, and curriculum development. Based on their needs assessment data, each group develops a professional development plan for the year, iden-

tifying the topics for each month and projects the group wants to develop together. As the research shows, effective induction isn't a one-time event. It's a dynamic system that must adapt.

One of the most powerful outcomes of Minnesota's model is its shift in mindset from helping teachers *survive* their first years to helping them thrive in sustainable careers. CTE TIP's emphasis on reflection, balance, and connection moves beyond technical skill-building to address the human side of teaching. A medical career teacher described it this way: "The most useful aspect was the ability to collaborate with other teachers: sharing experiences, new ideas, and best practices. It was a safe environment without judgment."

A Model for the Future

Minnesota's induction framework now stands as a model for how states can expand proven systems to serve a broader range of teachers. What began in AFNR education has grown into a comprehensive, cross-disciplinary network that connects teachers from every CTE pathway under a shared purpose: to keep great educators in the classroom.

Each year, as new teachers enter their classrooms with fresh ideas and hopeful energy, CTE TIP ensures they never have to do it alone. Because when teachers feel supported, they stay. When they stay, our students, programs, and communities all grow stronger.



Layne Rada is the Associate Director of Teacher Recruitment & Retention through Minnesota CTE at Lakes Country Service Cooperative. She is also the Director of Minnesota's Career and Technical Education Teacher Induction Program.

South Dakota New Teacher Professional Development Opportunities

by Mercedes Snedeker & Sara Colombe

Remember your first day on the job, in front of 30 students? It is daunting! Plus add on the challenge of balancing FFA activities and Supervised Agricultural Experiences (SAE), it can be very overwhelming. Each year, the South Dakota Agricultural Education Association (SDAAE) tries to make teaching agriculture less daunting for our new teachers. Over the past few years, there

has been a significant shift in the number of young people entering the agriculture education profession. Another trend emerging is more teachers are becoming

alternatively certified through a variety of ways. SDAAE hoped to help new teachers in their teacher journey, by implementing a big brother/big sister program, monthly new teacher check-in virtual meetings and new teacher academy workshops.

While these programs have been around in various forms for quite a few years, the SDAAE officer team has constantly evaluated how they can improve these programs to better serve new teachers and the agriculture education community throughout South Dakota. Last school year, we added monthly new teacher zoom meetings to connect teachers with SDAAE officers and state staff. These zoom meetings give

new teachers an opportunity to collaborate with other new and experienced teachers throughout the state. We have continued our new teacher academy workshops but have added more discussion and hands-on labs that teachers can use in their classrooms. Lastly, some changes that have taken place include adding a mentor coordinator to our big brother/sister program to add another layer of accountability to make

plies. Right away it was decided to share hands-on activities that Sara, SDAAE President, implements with her students during the first day of class. This has been a great strategy for her classroom because students get a preview of the topics they will experience in the class.

During this three hour time period, new teachers can engage in a variety of hands-on activities including; food science osmosis,

livestock injection lab, edible welding, nail balance challenge, edible soil texture, plant grafting, and brain break activities.

This workshop also gives

the participants opportunities to ask questions to more experienced teachers. We also have the opportunity for new teachers to meet each team player of the SD Ag Ed Team. This includes leaders from SD FFA, SD FFA Foundation, South Dakota Association for Career and Technical Education (SDACTE), and SDAAE. This enables the new teachers to have a face with the name and better understand their role in Team Ag Ed across the State of South Dakota before their first day in the classroom.

Monthly Virtual Meetings:

During different seasons it can be difficult for teachers to get together for a variety of reasons including; weather, travel

“Many of our agriculture education programs are single teacher programs across the state and sometimes you feel like your own island at your school. These virtual meetings make the “islands” closer which helps build the sense of community.”

this program more valuable for the big brothers/sisters and new teachers throughout the year.

New Teacher Academy Workshops:

The New Teacher Academy Workshops are held at both our Summer Conference event and aligned with our Winter Professional Development Event. These workshops are done during the first morning of each professional development experience, before the conference kicks off and last about three hours. The planning committee has received feedback from some of the participants that they want a workshop which shows them ready to go activities which do not need many sup-

distance, or life commitments. So instead of bringing teachers together in person we meet virtually each month. During these events, the first 20-30 minutes is either a speaker or a short presentation about a related topic of the three circle model: agriculture education, FFA or SAE. Topics we have discussed include: classroom management, FFA rosters, lesson planning, time management skills, curriculum creation and CDE/LDE management. After the presentation there is time for new teachers to collaborate with each other. Collaboration between teachers who are experiencing the similar challenges is vital to give new teachers a sense of community within the agriculture education group. During this time the facilitator allows space for questions and concerns to be brought forth and for the new teachers to offer advice. It has been a great opportunity to be at these zoom meetings and provide them information and share my experiences.

During the second half of the hour of the meeting, new teachers ask questions of state staff, other

seasoned teachers and mentors (if they are present). This gives the new teachers time to collaborate with other teachers they may not necessarily see at their district events. Many of our agriculture education programs are single teacher programs across the state and sometimes you feel like your own island at your school. These virtual meetings make the “islands” closer which helps build the sense of community.”

Big Brother/Big Sister Mentorship:

South Dakota has had a long standing tradition of implementing a Big Brother/Big Sister mentorship program each year. However, in the past year it has gotten a revamp to help to en-

gage both new teachers and their agriculture education mentor. This revamp was made possible through the National Association of Agriculture Educators (NAAE) Teach Ag STARS funding and the South Dakota FFA Foundation STAR Partner Program.

Potential mentor teachers were asked to fill out an application. Teachers are asked to describe what mentorship means to them as part of the application. After the application process, pairs are made by the big brother/big sister coordinator based on location within the state, interests and needs. Pairings are announced at the SDAAE Annual Banquet during our summer conference at the end of July.

“Collaboration between teachers who are experiencing the similar challenges is vital to give new teachers a sense of community within the agriculture education group.”

Big brother/Big Sister mentors and mentees gathered following the FFA Teacher Creed presentation at our Kentucky Derby-themed banquet.



One big brother/big sister program requirement is teachers are asked to connect for a total of 15 hours throughout the year and communicate at least once a month. This requirement is to encourage participants to ask questions pertaining to their experiences. While this is a new program, we are working to continue to grow it by making it a two year program so new teachers and big brother/sisters will be paired for their first two years of their teaching experience.

A majority of our teachers in the SDAAE have less than 10 years of experience, this is a common trend with other states. The SDAAE officer team has been really focusing on how we can utilize our experienced agricultural educators to help these new teachers stay in the classroom. Adding Mark Kelehut, a retired agricultural educator, as the mentoring coordinator has been very beneficial to enhance the big brother/sister program. "My hope is that it will also provide the young teacher with a successful, experienced teacher that can work with the new teacher and provide instruction and guidance on issues that relate to curriculum, classroom management,

working with other teachers and administrators, and being the FFA Advisor. Through this network my hope is that the new teacher realizes that they have resources and a support group around them and that their experiences are ones that most all teachers have gone through," said Ketelhut when reflecting on his role as mentoring coordinator. "Ultimately, I hope that the program results in new teachers being able to more positively navigate and survive their first year of teaching and will result in more teachers being retained in the profession."

Like many, there continues to be an agriculture teacher shortage within the state of South Dakota, South Dakota Association for Agriculture Educators (SDAAE) is working to help keep new teachers in the profession by helping to make the first school year less daunting.



Mercedes Snedeker is the AFNR Specialist for South Dakota Department of Education and State FFA Advisor for the South Dakota FFA. She was an agriculture education classroom teacher for 5 years before moving to her current position.



Sara Colombe is the agriculture education instructor for Milbank High School in Milbank, South Dakota. She has been teaching for 11 years. She is currently serving as the South Dakota Association of Agriculture Educators (SDAAE) President.

Mentorship as a Strategic Response to Teacher Shortages: Insights From the Mentor's Perspective.

by Dr. John Tummons, Heather Eberlin, & Avery Deevers

If we keep young teachers in the profession, we won't have a teacher shortage!" As we struggle to increase the supply of teachers to fill open teaching positions, a more effective strategy to address the shortage could be to keep the teachers we already have in agriculture classrooms. New teacher mentorship is a key strategy to increase retention, foster professional growth, and build resilient educational communities from within (Tummons et al., 2024).

Missouri requires all new teachers to participate in a highly structured, two-year mentoring program. Each new teacher is paired with an experienced agriculture instructor. The mentor program is planned and implemented by State Staff, Agriculture teachers, and teacher educators throughout

the school year. This program meets the Beginning Teacher Assistance Program (BTAP) certification requirements. Our results speak for themselves- since 2023, 92.5% of our first- and second-year teachers were retained in the profession.

Veteran mentor Mary Leykamp summarized the program's impact, stating, "The mentor program in the state of Missouri isn't just a resource—it's a lifeline." For early-career educators, their assigned mentor often becomes the anchor that stabilizes their transition into the profession. Over time, these relationships evolve into networks of mentors, colleagues, and friends who form a durable professional support system. This human connection transforms mentorship from a helpful tool into a strategic imperative.

Missouri's Agriculture Education Beginning Teacher Assistance Program draws on beginning teacher frameworks by Lipton and Wellman's (2003) and Disberger et al. (2003). Much like production agriculture, the school year for new teachers has different "seasons"; each season has its unique tasks and challenges. For this project, we asked mentors to reflect on the successes, challenges, and support provided in each season.

Phase I: Anticipation (excited)

Anticipation occurs in July and August. This stage is characterized by idealism, excitement, and a strong desire to make a meaningful impact. Mentors and new teachers collaborate to prepare classrooms, develop instructional materials, and establish

Mentors lead carousel workshops for early career teachers to provide resources to address urgent challenges in FFA, SAE, and classroom implementation.



For more on the beginning teacher frameworks from Disberger et al. (2003):



lish foundational routines. Three core areas of immediate need during this phase:

- **Curriculum Planning:** Mentors provide example instructional calendars and pacing guides that reflect their vision for impactful teaching. New teachers quickly discover their plans need adjustment. Missouri's program fosters early reflection and collaboration between mentors and protégés.
- **SAE Records Management:** Agriculture educators have a variety of student record management systems, supervised agricultural experiences, and other metrics critical to student success. Mentors guide new teachers through these systems, ensuring continuity and accuracy from the outset.

- **Classroom Management:** Establishing routines and behavioral expectations is essential for creating a productive learning environment. Mentors help new teachers develop strategies tailored to their specific student populations and instructional contexts.

“For early-career educators, their assigned mentor often becomes the anchor that stabilizes their transition into the profession.”

First-year teacher Bayleigh H. reflected on the program's value, stating, “The mentor program helped me establish a game plan for the year and gave me the opportunity to collaborate with a more experienced educator in my area.” One mentor observed that her new teacher “excelled during

her first week, establishing strong student relationships and setting clear expectations”—a testament to the program's ability to foster early success.

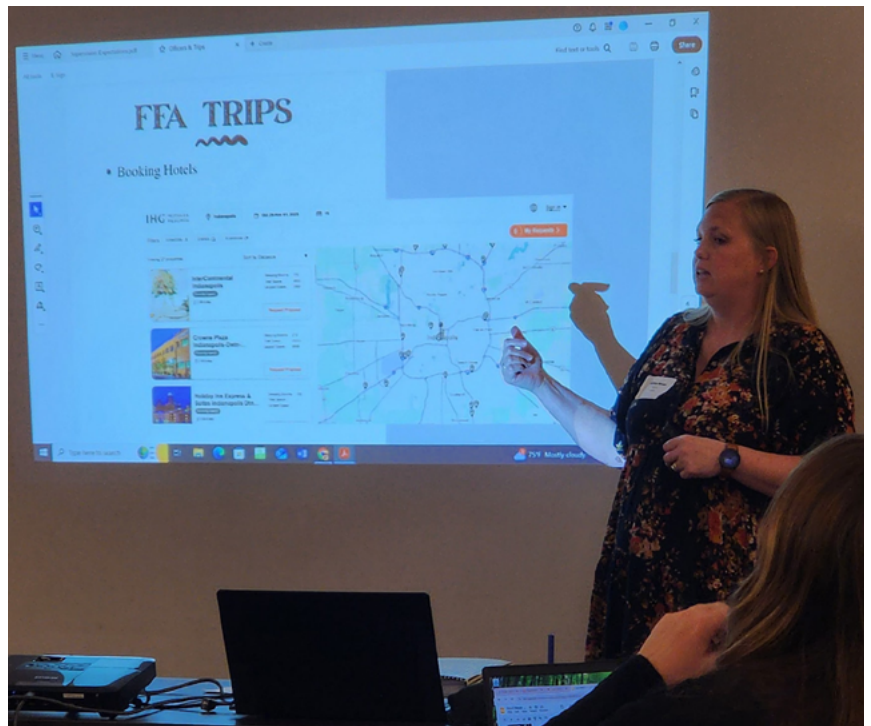
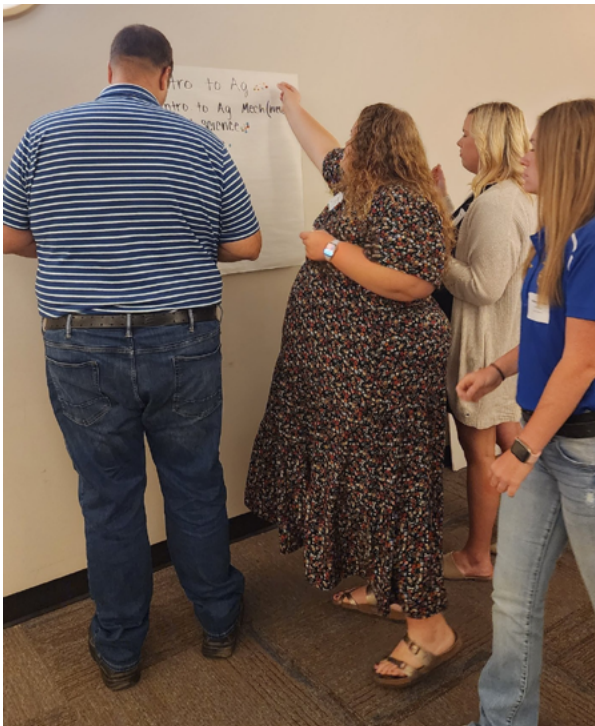
Phase II: Survival (Challenged)

By September and October, the enthusiasm of the Anticipation Phase begins to wane as new challenges emerge. The Survival Phase is marked by mounting pressures related to time management, student behavior, and administrative dynamics. New teachers are trying to figure out how to submit rosters, order jackets, and decode the mysterious world of SAE records. Specific challenges include:

- **Orienting themselves:** New teachers are dropped into a world of acronyms (AET, POA, SAE), deadlines, and expectations. They must navigate

(LEFT) Early career teachers participate in a gallery walk to share teaching ideas and strategies for core content areas.

(RIGHT) Mrs. Brown shares wisdom of practice to help early career teachers plan their trip to the National FFA Convention.



learning management systems, manage behavior, and balance new roles.

- **Classroom setup:** Classroom management hits hard. Middle schoolers test boundaries. Seniors challenge authority, and new teachers are still figuring out how to hold the line.
- **Event planning:** Fundraising efforts and preparations for the National FFA Convention add additional layers of complexity.

Missouri hosts a September meeting for new teachers and their mentors to coincide with this phase. This meeting provides a structured opportunity for mentors and new teachers to address emerging concerns, share strategies, and recalibrate expectations. The program also encourages carpooling to meetings, transforming travel time into informal yet intentional opportunities for dialogue and support. These interactions are particularly valuable during high-stress periods, offering new

teachers a sense of solidarity and reassurance.

Phase III: Disillusionment (Overwhelmed)

The Disillusionment Phase occurs in late October and November, following National FFA Convention. Exhaustion sets in as teachers return from intensive travel and programming, only to face grading backlogs. New teachers can be frustrated with how veteran colleagues appear to manage their responsibilities with comparative ease. This phase is often the most challenging, as initial excitement gives way to self-doubt and fatigue. In November, contests, classrooms, and community events collide. Teachers are juggling more than ever—and feeling the weight.

- Teachers are **overloaded and adjusting**, handling multiple responsibilities and interpersonal challenges.
- Teachers need help **mediating classroom behavior** and student apathy.

– **Fostering professional relationships** becomes an urgent need, as disagreements with co-teachers and issues with administration bubble up.

– **Balancing responsibility:** new teachers feel they are behind on everything.

– **Lack of communication:** The holiday season brings joy—and silence. Communication dips. Teachers feel disconnected, especially if they’re not getting responses or support.

To address this critical juncture, Missouri hosts six district-level meetings in November. These sessions are strategically timed to provide targeted professional development when protégés need it most. Content of these meetings can be seen in Figure 1.

Phases IV & V: Rejuvenation and Reflection (Refreshed and Challenged)

Educators enter the Rejuvenation and Reflection phases

Figure 1. Phase III - Content covered in district-level meetings held in November		
<i>SAE Records and Award Preparation</i>	<i>Instructional Resource Exchange</i>	<i>Work-Life Balance Support</i>
Specialists assist teachers in closing out student records and preparing applications for state degrees and proficiency awards.	Second-year teachers present innovative lesson plans and instructional strategies, enabling participants to expand their pedagogical repertoire.	Mentors share practical advice on wellness strategies such as, in-class grading, time management techniques, and meal prepping. These strategies help protégés navigate the physical and emotional demands of the profession

Figure 2. Phases IV & V: Outcomes of district meetings and professional development events held in January	
<i>Purpose and fulfillment:</i>	<i>Differentiated learning</i>
During these gatherings, new teachers consistently cite three core reasons they love teaching: the joy of watching students grow and succeed, the fulfillment of building meaningful relationships, and the excitement of hands-on learning that sparks curiosity and discovery. What once felt overwhelming in October now fuels their passion, as they witness “light bulb moments” and student breakthroughs in both classroom and lab settings.	New teachers can tailor the program assignments to their evolving needs. Whether developing student recruitment plans, integrating technology, or engaging with community organizations, teachers are empowered to apply foundational knowledge while exploring innovative strategies. This flexibility ensures that mentorship remains relevant and impactful throughout the academic year

during the spring semester. Confidence begins to return, and teachers develop a deeper understanding of their roles. In January, greenhouses, grants, and contests dominate the mentoring conversations. Teachers are building curriculum while still learning how to teach. Missouri's program reinforces this growth through January district meetings and statewide professional development events that emphasize collaboration, shared purpose, and pedagogical excellence. Outcomes of the January meeting can be seen in Figure 2.

February can be a time of introspection. Teachers begin to evaluate their own growth. Some feel burned out, while others question their fit in the profession. March: The end is in sight, but the path is crowded. Banquets, contests, and applications pile up. New teachers focus on **contest execution**, **student involvement**, and **greenhouse/shop projects**. Teachers are tired, but more confident and involved

in advanced planning and student development. As the year culminates with the state FFA convention, chapter banquets, and graduation ceremonies, Teachers are **reflecting and transitioning**—preparing for closure, evaluating their growth, and considering future directions.

A Model for National Implementation

Missouri's Agriculture Education Mentoring Program stands as a cornerstone in the recruitment and retention of agricultural educators. By fostering intentional mentorship during the most critical phases of a teacher's early career, the program cultivates emotional resilience, instructional excellence, and a strong sense of belonging. Protégés gain practical skills, confidence, and enduring relationships to anchor them in the profession. Through this structured support, Missouri continues to build a vibrant pipeline of passionate, student-centered educators, assuring that the future

of agricultural education remains strong, inspired, and sustainable.

Other states can draw valuable lessons from Missouri's approach. To replicate this model, states should begin by establishing cross-institutional partnerships among state departments of education, universities, and veteran educators. These partnerships should be grounded in a shared commitment to mentorship as a strategic priority. States must also align mentorship phases with the academic calendar, ensuring that support is timely and responsive to the evolving needs of new teachers. Flexibility is key: programs must accommodate diverse entry pathways and local program contexts. Finally, mentorship must be relational as well as technical. By prioritizing human connection alongside skill development, states can create mentoring programs that not only retain teachers but also inspire them.

Quick Reminders for Increasing Mentorship Communication



Communication Roadblocks: What Gets in the Way?

Mentor data revealed three recurring barriers to communication:

1. **Scheduling Conflicts** – “We are both so busy that it is hard to find times for constructive communication.”
2. **Lack of Responsiveness** – “I have emailed and texted a couple of times and haven't heard from her.”
3. **Limited Face-to-Face Opportunities** – “Finding time to do in his on-site visit with the amount I am already gone.”



Recommendations for Mentors

Here's how mentors can better support early-career teachers:

- **Be proactive:** Don't wait for them to ask. Reach out regularly.
- **Normalize the struggle:** Share your own first-year stories.
- **Offer clarity:** Help them decode systems and expectations.
- **Create space:** Schedule time for real conversation—not just check-ins.
- **Celebrate wins:** Even small victories deserve recognition.
- **Be flexible:** Life happens. Adapt your support to their reality.

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To learn more about the Missouri Agricultural Education Mentoring Handbook:



Dr. John Tummons is Director of Undergraduate Studies in Agricultural Education at the University of Missouri, where he instructs and manages the teacher certification program.



Missouri's Professional Development Specialist, Heather Eberlin, draws on 17 years of classroom experience in agricultural education to serve teachers statewide and represent the profession nationally on the National Council for Agricultural Education



Mr. Avery Deevers is an Assistant Instructor at the University of Central Missouri, where he focuses on teacher education of all Career and Technical Areas.

It Takes All Kinds: Helping Ag Students Find Opportunity in Animal Health

by Emily McVey

Zachary Melton didn't set out to work in animal health. In fact, his only connection to the industry was growing up with five cats and a horse. But as a young adult, he found himself in a grief support group for lost pregnancies. There a fellow group member, the administrator of a multi-doctor animal hospital in Denver, told Melton she was hiring. He ended up taking a client service position at the hospital—something that set the trajectory for the rest of his career.

"I historically considered the animal health industry to be one you had to enter as a veterinary medical professional," says Melton. "I never knew you could participate in the industry through roles aligned with business, sales or even customer service backgrounds."

Now Melton is director of sales and strategic partnerships

at MWI Animal Health-AllyDVM, a global animal health distributor and technology company. And he's not the only one who's been surprised by the ample number of career opportunities in animal health.

The need for a new approach

Many students and job seekers assume a career in animal health means working in a veterinary clinic, at an animal shelter, with livestock or in some other traditional role. But in reality the sector hires professionals of all types: data technologists, engineers, manufacturers, lab technicians, sales and marketing professionals, financial analysts, communication experts—the list goes on.

The upshot? Animal health is looking for professionals of all backgrounds, and that starts with students—as well as the educators who mentor them. As a new

workforce development campaign launched by the KC Animal Health Corridor states, it takes all kinds to keep animals healthy, families connected to their pets, and food systems functioning.

To make those options visible and navigable, the Corridor, an organization that supports and promotes the animal health industry in Kansas and Missouri, has introduced exploreahcareers.com. This newly launched site provides educational resources, recruitment materials, digital tools for career seekers, and more to help match diverse interests to career pathways in one place. Educators are already sharing this site and the free resources it houses with interested students.

The site reflects what Melton and many other emerging leaders in animal health say brought them to the field and kept them there: the ability to pursue their



WHATEVER YOU'RE INTO...

YOU'RE OUR KIND OF ANIMAL.

ANIMAL HEALTH. IT TAKES ALL KINDS.

Are you into science. Is tech your thing? Or do you live to create? No matter who you are, the animal health industry is full of all kinds of jobs perfectly suited for someone just like you. Are you our kind? We think so. But see for yourself at exploreahcareers.com



A new campaign spearheaded by the KC Animal Health Corridor aims to attract students and job seekers to animal health careers by demonstrating the variety of skills needed in the sector. The suite of resources at exploreahcareers.com make up a ready-to-go package that ag educators can use to help students pursue opportunities they may not have considered.

passion, a clear sense of their work's impact, and mentorship opportunities that can alter the course of a career.

Passion: Finding a part to play

For Rhea Lawrence, PhD, technical sales and support manager at Dairy Farmers of America, working with animals was always the plan. Lawrence grew up around horses and livestock and fully intended to become a veterinarian.

Upon discovering the effect nutrition can have on the lives of animals in her undergraduate studies, she changed direction. That shift led to a PhD in biology with a specialization in dairy science production.

"I still loved all aspects of animal well-being and found a passion for nutrition," says Lawrence, who now partners with dairy producers to improve calf health. Her story helps break down the stereotype that animal health is dominated by veterinary professionals. There are many roles for people who love animals but for whom veterinary medicine is not the right path.

For ag students who may be considering animal health but aren't sure where to start, the Corridor's new career site features an ["interest profiler"](#) tab. This short quiz allows visitors to rank a few statements and then generates different career opportunities and pathways that align to their abilities and interests.

For young professionals in the industry, combining aptitude with intention makes a big difference. Lawrence highlights the importance of finding a blend of intellectually and practically engaging work. "If we are not challenged, then we are not growing," she explains.

But her work is not just challenging for the sake of challenge. The results of her efforts are

Many students and job seekers assume a career in animal health means working in a veterinary clinic, at an animal shelter, with livestock or in some other traditional role. But in reality the sector hires professionals of all types.

evident in the lives of the young dairy calves she works with. "I can see very quickly the impact my recommendations have on the health, growth, and productivity of the next generation."

Impact: A workforce with purpose

Kayla Shepard, manager of regulatory affairs labeling at pharmaceutical manufacturer Boehringer Ingelheim, also believes the combination of impact and purpose has a powerful effect on discovering opportunities in animal health.

"As an industry we are striving to improve and transform the lives of animals through our products," she says. "It brings me outstanding job satisfaction to know that because of my part we can continue to improve the health and lives of animals."

Shepard's perspective also highlights why many stay in animal health. That is, they can see the line from desk or lab bench to a healthier animal. Her story is an example of how individuals can identify their strengths—whether that's writing, negotiating, or cross-functional coordination—and recognize their role as essential to the industry.

The Corridor's career site lays out a variety of non-clinical animal health roles and provides visitors a glimpse into what everyday responsibilities may look like under the ["career pathways"](#) page. That way learners can see how they might fit before entering the workforce, and educa-

tors can help identify students' strengths and show them what that might look like in an animal health career.

Shepard also loves the dynamic nature of the industry and advises recruiters and educators to emphasize that with young talent. "If anything stays the same, it's that there's always change," Shepard says. "I really enjoy being challenged to find new ways to adjust."

Mentorship: On the importance of being seen

Mary Young, operations support engineer at Merck Animal Health, says mentorship is a fundamental part of helping young people recognize the possibilities in an animal health career. "Mentorship is key," she says. "A great mentor will encourage you to get out of your comfort zone and thrive."

Mentors (including teachers) can connect young people to opportunities as well as build awareness. For example, Young describes an early career experience that made a significant impact: When she was still a newcomer in her role, a team leader invited her to join a high-impact meeting to listen in. Then they debriefed afterward. Young's mentor asked questions like, what was the goal? Who made the decisions? What should we listen for next time?

"There's an immense amount of value in that type of direct mentorship," Young says.

When students envision a future in animal health, human

factors like psychological safety, coaching and shared purpose often matter as much as job titles. The Corridor's career site provides students, educators, mentors and companies alike with a suite of resources that facilitate those types of opportunities.

Stories that help every learner see where they belong

The message is simple: animal health really does take all kinds. Some may pursue veterinary medicine. Others will find purpose in the lab, on a manufacturing floor, or leading a client communications team. But sharing their varied stories—from the impact individuals can have on the lives of animals to the passion they can pursue and the leaders that help them get

there—highlight that they all belong here.

Melton's first impressions working in that early client service job continue to animate his work years later. He remembers the compassion that permeated the work and the realization that he didn't need a white coat to contribute.

"Every person I met inside that animal hospital had a sense of empathy and a sense of presence that I hadn't experienced before in one building," Melton says. "And watching animals come in sick, watching owners come in worrying and leave smiling, all that made me realize this is a unique industry."

For educators and their students, that realization can start with a conversation and a link. Share exploreahcareers.com.

Invite a speaker whose title students don't expect. Connect students with diverse professionals in animal health.

Above all, encourage students who don't fit the "usual mold" in animal health. As Lawrence puts it, "No matter what background you have, you can find a home. We need a vast pool to draw talent from."

The industry is ready for them. With your help, they'll be ready for it too.

Classroom Connections: Tips for Ag Educators

Looking for ways to bring animal health careers into the classroom? Try these ideas:

- **Explore interests.** Have students take the interest profiler quiz on exploreahcareers.com and reflect on how their skills and passions align with different roles in animal health.
- **Show pathways.** Use the site's career pathways section to help students discover job options they may not know exist, from engineering to regulatory affairs to sales and marketing.
- **Invite unexpected guests.** Host guest speakers from less traditional ag careers, such as a nutritionist, regulatory lead, or communications expert, to broaden students' perspectives.
- **Inspire supervised agricultural experience (SAE) ideas.** Use the real-world stories in this article to spark ideas for SAEs tied to animal well-being, science, technology, and communication.
- **Bridge passion with purpose.** Encourage students to think about how their unique interests can make a difference in the lives of animals and the people who care for them.



Emily McVey is Vice President of the KC Animal Health Corridor. She leads the Corridor's workforce development initiatives, partnering with student-focused organizations such as FFA, 4-H, Agriculture Futures of America (AFA) and Minorities in Agriculture Natural Resources and Related Sciences (MANRRS). She also assists with implementing the Corridor's additional strategic priorities.

2025 Ideas Unlimited Award Winner Region 1

An Agriculture Science Workbook Helps Bring Life to Learning

Submitted by Cassidy Dutton, ID

Student authors: Faren Bebeau & Emma Heiden

The National FFA Agriscience Fair is at times overlooked by some teachers and students, but Cassidy Dutton of Region 1 has a plan to make it easy for teachers to integrate it into their lesson plan. The *AGRISCIENCE WORKBOOK* provides a clear, step-by-step guide for students. The FFA Agriscience Fair is a chance for students to find a topic they are passionate about and compete with. They can find real world problems and come up with a solution they develop on their own. Students have the chance to compete at the regional, state, and national level with their projects.

There are many advantages for teachers and students. It allows for an easier grading process while still being able to help students complete each stage of their project without getting overwhelmed. Sometimes it is hard for students to grasp concepts while working on their own. The workbook lets students compile all their written reports seamlessly. While using the workbook, it allows students to learn the “why” behind the project.

There are six different categories that students can choose from that include Animal Science, Environmental Services/ Natural Resources, Food Product and Processing Systems, Plant Systems, Power, Structural, and Technical Systems, and Social

Systems. With a very wide variety, there can be something found for everyone. Each of the topics gives students the ability to find solutions to real-world problems.

The *AGRISCIENCE WORKBOOK* contains an outline for both a 12- and 15-week schedule which can be easily adapted to different programs. Not only can this workbook be used for the science fair, but also in the general classroom as it can be applied to different agricultural topics. Each section is clearly

ing them real-world skills while increasing their engagement and motivation, encouraging deeper understanding, supporting different learning styles, and strengthening collaboration and communication. Educators can tailor a project to specific course objectives due to the adaptable framework of the workbook. Fostering critical-thinking and problem-solving skills while partaking in hands-on learning, helping students explore agriculture in a fun and engaging way.

Students strengthen literacy skills through research, discussion, and data analysis, while applying scientific and mathematical principles by designing experiments, calculating results, and interpreting findings. The *AGRISCIENCE WORKBOOK* supports educators in guiding students through scientific inquiry while tailoring their learning to personal interests. Scientific inquiry requires students to ask questions that help them explore and understand the natural world, while questioning, observing, experimenting, and analyzing their evidence.

The usefulness of the workbook is what made it implemented in middle school and high school classrooms across many courses. Being able to use the workbook on their agriscience fair projects allowed the students to create a concise and award-winning project, which proved to be beneficial to students' success.

It allows students to learn the “why” behind the project

outlined in the workbook and the accompanying teacher's guide, enabling smooth integration from a classroom assignment to a full Agriscience Fair project. During the week, there are around 20 minutes taken to help students enter information into the Agricultural Experience Tracker [AET]. AET can be a difficult program to navigate around, especially for new members, so it can be very helpful for the students to take time out and learn about it.

Beyond just a fair project, the workbook also serves as a unique tool for project-based learning. Project-based learning helps support students by teach-

Two of Dutton's students advanced to both state and national FFA (Future Farmers of America) conventions while using the workbook as their guide.

Demonstrating success both in and out of the classroom, while also being highly adaptable to students and teachers, the *AGRISCIENCE WORKBOOK* offers the structure, flexibility, and support needed for success. It is effective for both high-achieving students and those who may struggle with writing and scientific inquiry. Helping close performance gaps and giving students the direction they need, the workbook can be used in diverse types of classrooms.

If you flip through the pages, you will find guidelines and useful information as a student and a separate workbook that provides ways to assist your student as an educator. Because of the way the workbook is organized, it can be used as a capstone project or used in smaller components throughout the year. The teacher guide provides the twelve- and fifteen-week pacing plans which outline competition expectations and offers Cassidy's instructional tips and strategies. For those wanting to replicate the project,

the *AGRISCIENCE WORKBOOK* offers structure, flexibility and support needed for successful implementation in any classroom.

Her students were not the only ones rewarded for their participation and success. Cassidy proves to be instrumental in her teaching styles and provides the resources necessary for her students' success. Taking students to the next level in their learning and wanting to be helpful resources to other educators, Cassidy shares her passion in a unique and helpful way.



Faren Bebeau is a senior at South Dakota State University majoring in agriculture communications with a minor in marketing. She enjoys exploring the different aspects of media and communications that have helped support the agriculture industry.



Emma Heiden is a junior agricultural communications major at South Dakota State University. She is passionate about the agricultural industry and sharing its story.

2025 Ideas Unlimited Award Winner Region 2

Students Chase Blue Ribbons With One Teacher's Innovative Idea

Submitted by Nicki Walden, OK

Student authors: Raina Johnson & Grace Sargent

When people hear the term 'animals in agriculture', they often think of cattle, sheep, chickens, and horses, but one that's often overlooked is dogs. From hunting, herding, and protecting cattle, dogs have played a vital role in agriculture for many generations. One educator found a unique way to teach students this in the form of a dog show. Meet Nicki Walden, a region 2 agricultural educator from Oklahoma. Through this project she calls "The Ultimate Dog Showcase" Mrs. Walden is able to connect animal agriculture with an engaging, hands-on project that gets students excited to learn.

Through mixing aspects of science, history, and art, students turned everyday objects into life-size replicas of dog breeds for this one-of-a-kind dog show project. With this creative twist on agriculture education, students are able to deepen their understanding of dogs in agriculture, while reinforcing core academic objectives. Furthering critical thinking, teamwork, and communication skills students learn far beyond textbook learning.

Integrating this project into everyday agricultural curriculum ties directly into the concepts of animal husbandry, agricultural technology, and agricultural history. Just like students can be

taught about breeds of cattle and their purposes, they can also learn about the responsibilities of dogs in agriculture, as breeds were created to help with hunting, herding, and protecting livestock. For example, a Border Collie, primarily known for its herding instincts; students can learn about the history of the breed to examine its certain traits and how it has impacted the agricultural industry.

This project forces students to engage in other academic components of learning, beyond agriculture education.

Dogs have played a large part in the agriculture industry, especially before the development of modern technology. The history of dog use runs deep, and there is a plethora of information to be learned about the various breeds that have impacted the ag industry in a wide variety of ways. Often, this concept is lost in modern teaching, as dogs don't play the central role they used to. Throughout history, dogs weren't always seen or used as companion animals, but as tools to get jobs done. Dogs herded sheep and cattle, protected herds from predators, hunted, hauled carts, and provided protection and defense for people as well. By creating a project in this area, students

are given an opportunity to learn more about the history of the use of these companion animals that once did a lot more than just cuddling and playing fetch.

By challenging students with a project like "The Ultimate Dog Showcase", they are able to gain a deeper appreciation for the ways that dogs and human labor have complimented each other

and have been used in highly productive ways to get jobs done. For educators, this kind of project ties history and practicality together to broaden students' knowledge based on various animal breeds that greatly improved the development of ag-

riculture. Though many ag practices with dogs are a bit outdated, there are still several avenues that specific breeds continue to impact using the skills that are in their bloodstream.

This project forces students to engage in other academic components of learning, beyond agriculture education. Through implementing mathematical concepts such as ratios, fractions, and geometry, this ensures the life-sized dog replicas are scaled to meet the specific breed classifications. Further, students are expected to use literacy skills to effectively conduct research in order to create a detailed summary of their chosen breed. Science is also integrated as students explore genetics and

behavioral traits that come along with their dog breed. Additionally, students practice public speaking and presentation skills during the dog show. They learn to effectively communicate the information they discovered in their research through a detailed presentation. This project allows students to experience real-world applications of agriculture education and take a multidisciplinary approach that enhances their critical thinking skills.

One of the most beneficial aspects of “The Ultimate Dog Showcase” is the opportunity it brings for community engagement. By involving local industry professionals such as veterinarians, dog trainers, and farmers, students gain real-world insight into the roles that dogs play in agriculture. These professionals can serve as judges for the showcase and offer their own firsthand experiences. The expert’s advice not only helps students see the importance of their project but also opens the door to future career paths. Building a connection between agriculture education students with local members of the agriculture community. Students

were able to give feedback on the assignment, one saying, “I really enjoyed building the dog model because it made me feel like I was actually working with animals. It was fun to see how all the pieces came together, and I felt proud of what we made.”

Mrs. Walden highlights that the hands-on nature of the dog showcase played a key role in keeping her students actively engaged. She said in her awards application “Constructing something tangible allowed them to take ownership of their work and connect abstract concepts such as breed standards, genetics, and animal behavior to real-world applications. This interactive approach made learning more meaningful and enjoyable.” In combining creativity with real-world connections, this unique approach to agriculture education inspires students to take a deeper approach to learning and develop skills that benefit them further beyond the classroom.



Raina Johnson is a junior studying agricultural communications at South Dakota State University. She is dedicated to telling agriculture's story and connecting communities through clear, impactful communication.



Grace Sargent is a junior agricultural communication major at South Dakota State University. She is passionate about advocating for the agriculture industry in South Dakota's state government.

2025 Ideas Unlimited Award Winner Region 3

Building Career Skills with a Floral Design Subscription Club

Submitted by Kayla Brune, MN

Student authors: Emily DeCock & Taylor Tennant

One educator in Minnesota gave students the opportunity to run their own floral design subscription company, combining floral design techniques with real-world business experience and teamwork. Agricultural educator Kayla Brune developed the Floral Design Subscription Club, a five-week subscription service open to community members. Subscribers paid a fee in exchange for floral arrangements designed and delivered entirely by students. The program allowed students to experience every aspect of running a small business while applying advanced floral design skills in a classroom setting.

The program began with promoting the subscription service to the community. Students helped create flyers with QR codes as well as shared information through social media, newsletters and school radio announcements. They also assisted with order management through online forms or their school store system. Once subscriptions were secured, students formed small groups and began planning each week's arrangement. The preparation process gave students a chance to organize, communicate and collaborate as they approached each project like a small business.

Each group developed a design based on a theme or holiday while incorporating their own creative ideas and staying within a set budget. They prepared material lists for 30 arrangements,

“The program allowed students to experience every aspect of running a small business while applying advanced floral design skills in a classroom setting.”

calculated the number of stems and other materials needed and created digital mock-ups of their designs. The planning process also included prototype arrangements and enclosure cards, which were included with each final design to give subscribers a personal connection to the student who created it.

After finalizing the designs, students placed orders through the Koehler and Dramm Wholesaler website and processed the flowers upon arrival. They prepared containers, accessories and all necessary materials, ensuring that each arrangement could be assembled efficiently. Groups then demonstrated their arrangement to the class, walking their peers through every step of the process. After the demonstration, students created their own versions of the arrangement. Leftover materials were used for extra practice or additional designs, allowing students to experiment and refine their skills even further. Once students had gained experience with the design process, the program shifted focus to the logistical and financial side of the operation.

Beyond skill development, the subscription model provided a practical way to cover the materials. By collecting subscription fees, the class could afford higher-quality flowers and products than would typically be available for a class like this. This created a more realistic and professional learning environment without increasing costs for the educator or students. When the arrangements were prepared and ready, students took responsibility for delivering their creations to subscribers, putting the final step of the program into action and connecting their classroom work with the community.

Students organized deliveries by location and personally delivered each arrangement to subscribers, including school staff and community members. This gave them experience working with customers, organizing deliveries and seeing the results of their work. Seeing their work displayed in real settings reinforced responsibility and the professional skills needed to complete a project from start to finish.

One of the most popular elements of the whole process was the “Meet Your Designer” enclosure card. The cards included the student’s name, a short introduction and sometimes a personal note about the inspiration behind their design. These cards gave students a sense of ownership over their creations and allowed them to connect with subscribers on a personal level. Receiving positive feedback from the community encouraged students to take pride in their work and highlighted the importance of quality and attention to detail. For many students, delivering the arrangements and seeing their designs displayed in homes, offices and school spaces became one of the most rewarding parts of the experience.

Students were then evaluated on a variety of components, including planning documents, prototype arrangements, enclosure cards, demonstration plans, weekly designs and participation in preparing, making and delivering the arrangements. The program ran three times over two school years, with class sizes ranging from 17 to 25 students. All students had completed

prerequisite courses in Floral Design 1 and 2, ensuring they had the essential skills necessary to succeed in the program. The subscription club was so well received that high demand in the second year led to adding a second section of the class.

The program’s structure was designed to be both straightforward and flexible, making it easy to adjust to a variety of classroom needs. Teachers could run it monthly, seasonally or in shorter segments that focus on specific skills like design planning, flower processing or enclosure card creation. This adaptability means schools don’t need to commit to a full subscription program to see its benefits, as individual elements can be folded into existing horticulture or floral design courses. Beyond its instructional value, the model can also serve as a practical tool for fundraising or cost recovery, helping programs with limited budgets maintain or expand hands-on learning opportunities. The program allows educators to shape the program around their own resources and goals, ensuring it works for both their students and their classrooms.

The Floral Design Subscription Club gave students a chance to bring their ideas to life and share them with the community. It allowed them to take pride in their work and develop confidence, while giving them an experience that connected classroom learning to the real world. Students were able to see the impact of their creativity firsthand, from the arrangements themselves to the “Meet Your Designer” cards that made each piece personal. Beyond developing technical skills, they learned about collaboration, problem-solving and managing a project from start to finish.



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