



Taking Ag to the Classroom

Today's kids have fewer connections to farm life and agriculture, which makes it more important than ever to take ag to the classroom.

by Kindra Gordon

Ask kids in elementary school where their food comes from and you might be astonished by some of the answers — a grocery store ... McDonald's ... chocolate milk from chocolate cows. While those responses might sound far-fetched, they are unfortunately what many 8-, 9- and 10-year-olds think.

Fewer consumers today are growing up with a connection to farm life and production agriculture — and it's not just individuals in large, urban cities. Even those who live in moderately rural areas may have minimal opportunities to spend time on a farm, which means they may not know the difference between corn or soybeans, an Angus or a Holstein, much less what those ag products are used for.

"As we all know, we are becoming generations removed from production agriculture. That bridge to the farm and that understanding of where our food comes from isn't there anymore," says Susan Anderson, an education specialist for the University of Minnesota, who focuses on helping teachers integrate agriculture into their classroom curriculums.

Anderson, who lives on a farm near Redwood Falls, Minn., champions that the ag industry needs to work to reconnect consumers with understanding agriculture.

"Food, clothing and shelter come from agriculture," she says, "and it is important the people understand the importance of agriculture to them, because a lot of decisions that affect agriculture are made in the voting booth."

Promoting ag literacy

Through her work as an education specialist, Anderson facilitates workshops for teachers to help them integrate agriculture into areas of social studies, science, math and language arts curriculums.

"Ag literacy can be tied into every subject," she says and cites examples of environment, ecosystems and history. For instance, Anderson points out the key role agriculture played in the history and development of the United States. She has learned that ag classroom

presentations often are best received in elementary grades, because students are curious and willing to ask questions. However, with a science or environmental approach, agriculture can also be appropriately incorporated into junior high and high school classes as well.

Anderson suggests that an easy way to integrate ag into youth lessons — whether you are a teacher or simply a guest presenter — is by sharing a book that relates to agriculture. One of her favorites is a fiction book titled *Tops and Bottoms*, which is based on an African folktale and chronicles a

competition between a hare and a bear in the crops that they plant.

"It's a great story for kids and adults and provides a chance to talk about the different crops that farmers grow," Anderson says.

She notes that Minnesota

"We're losing 5,000 acres per day of productive land to development."

— Susan Anderson

Ag in the Classroom also offers a book bundle for sale nationwide of 22 different books with agricultural themes that would be appropriate for sharing in the classroom.

Wyoming women host 'Ag Expos'

The Wyoming CattleWomen take agriculture to several elementary schools through their own unique approach — an “ag expo.” The expo is usually set up in a large building or covered arena with a variety of stations that students rotate through to learn about ag during a field trip, explains Judy West, immediate past president of the Wyoming CattleWomen. West raises Red Angus with her family near Chugwater, about 45 miles north of Cheyenne.

She explains that the stations represent all aspects of agriculture — from livestock and beef byproducts to crops and natural resources. “We try to cover several topics so the students are exposed to as much as possible about agriculture,” West says.

Some of the people they’ve featured at different stations of the ag expo in the past have included a woman who spins wool and shares information about the sheep industry; a woman who is a wheat farmer and shows the process of grinding wheat, making dough and baking bread; a brand inspector; and representatives from the conservation district and division of wildlife.

West reports that one of their Wyoming counties also hosts a field trip that takes students to a ranch, a feedlot and then a restaurant where they have a burger for lunch.

“It’s a great way for students to see the entire beef chain and learn how beef is produced,” she says.

(For more information visit www.mda.state.mn.us/kids and click on “Children’s Literature Book Bundle.”)

Another suggestion that Anderson offers for ag classroom presentations is to keep them hands-on in order to make it interesting to the students. This may include taking photos of your farm, taking samples of crops or coproducts for the students to see, or taking an ear tag that they can pass around the classroom. With each of these items, share a story about how that object is used on the farm and why it is important to the safe production of livestock.

Likewise, two key messages Anderson suggests emphasizing when visiting with students are (1) the important role farmers and ranchers have in caring for the soil, along with the fact that almost everything we eat comes from the soil; and (2) the importance of livestock grazing, particularly that people can’t digest grass, and cattle and other livestock can turn it into food that feeds the world.

By sharing these facts, Anderson hopes future consumers will develop a better understanding of the importance of farmland and rangeland.

“We’re losing 5,000 acres per day of productive land to development,” she says. “I think this is an important factor for people to realize.”

That said, Anderson emphasizes the importance of getting into classrooms and sharing ag’s story. “Unfortunately, education is not often well-funded, and ag literacy is even tougher to fund,” she says. “So, it’s important that producers support ag literacy, because if we don’t do it, it won’t happen.”

Tips from a veteran

Paulette Keller of Lloyd, Mont., is an example of someone who has made ag literacy happen in her county. As a former elementary teacher and ranch wife, she has taken her passion for agriculture and education to student classrooms for many years.

“I feel like it’s my job to help promote my industry when the need calls,” she says.

The mother of two grown children earned the title of 2006 Outstanding CattleWoman of the Year from the American National CattleWomen (ANCW) for her dedication to the beef industry. Each year she makes a presentation about the industry to the eight schools in her Montana county in the north-central part of the state.

From her classroom experiences, Keller shares the following tips for making an effective presentation:

- ▶ Limit your presentation to about 20-30

minutes in order to keep the students’ attention.

- ▶ If possible, ask the teacher to stay in the room during the presentation to help maintain discipline among the students if necessary. Also, consider establishing your own list of simple rules at the beginning of the presentation — raise your hand to speak, no moving around the room, for example.
- ▶ Be prepared and know your material. “Whenever opportunity knocks be ready to talk about the beef industry,” she says. Keller references that ANCW offers a handbook with classroom materials as do most state Ag in the Classroom programs. Utilize those resources, and have materials that will

engage the students and promote a positive image about beef.

One tactic she uses is a cheeseburger pillow that kids put together as she relates each ingredient to its place in the Food Guide Pyramid. She also likes to have an “extra” project (such as a worksheet or activity) in her presentation kit in case she has extra time at the end of the presentation.

- ▶ Repeat your key message multiple times. Keller notes that most children (and adults) learn by hearing a phrase numerous times or associating a key point with something. Therefore, she likes to include simple songs in her presentations and simply change the words.

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Pen pal programs

Another effective way to share agriculture with elementary students is through pen pal programs — either via letters, e-mails or blogs.

One component of Nebraska’s Ag in the Classroom program is the “Ag Pen Pals program,” which is designed to connect elementary students with area farms or ranches and encourage interest and understanding in agriculture. The primary goal of the partnership is to help kids understand where their food comes from and dispel the misunderstanding that food simply comes from the grocery store.

In 2006, the program linked more than 250 farms and ranches with elementary classrooms in 22 Nebraska cities, including Omaha, Lincoln, Kearney and Grand Island. Through letters, students are able to ask questions about the farm they have been paired with, and the producers share their knowledge about work and life on the farm.

For the program, farm families must communicate with the classroom a minimum of three times during the year. For more information about becoming a pen pal, visit www.nefb.org/ag-ed.

Similar to the pen pals program, Bruce Vincent, a fourth-generation logger from Libby, Mont., and advocate for educating the urban public about natural resource management, has founded a program called Provider Pals. It links an urban classroom with a provider — a rancher, farmer, miner or logger. The program gives the provider the chance to teach the elementary students about the positive aspects regarding natural resource management.

The Provider Pals program has connected ag producers with classrooms across the country and aims to go international as well. For more information or to volunteer to become a provider visit www.providerpals.com.

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For example, she'll sing "If you're happy and you know it say eat beef!" (Instead of saying Hooray!) She has also created beef-related songs to the tune of "Are you sleeping" by using the words "Zinc, Iron, Protein gives you ZIP;" and has incorporated the melody from "The Twelve Days of Christmas" to teach the breeds of cattle.

"People often remember sayings and phrases for a lifetime, and I hope this makes a lasting impression about the beef industry," Keller says. She frequently includes exercise and movement with her classroom programs to keep the students engaged with the presentation.

Presentations tend to be most effective in

small group settings of about 20 or fewer students. But don't be deterred if you have a larger group to present to.

"The important thing is that you are there and you are helping develop ag awareness," Keller says. She likes to focus on giving presentations in the third- to sixth-grade range or the "tweens," as these kids are at the stage of forming many of their decisions and preferences.

In setting up classroom visits, contact the superintendent or if you don't get a response, try contacting the teachers directly. Keller says now many teachers contact her each school year about coming to make her presentation. If a school

declines your offer, Keller suggests trying another approach: Offer to read to a class. Then take a book that talks about agriculture and leave the book with the classroom as a gift when you are finished.

Lastly, Keller says to be patient and don't get discouraged. Remember that being in the classroom and sharing the story about agriculture is the important thing. She emphasizes that your classroom visit should be fun and creative for you and the students. And hopefully kids will take the positive message of beef home to their parents — by singing one of the songs or sharing an educational worksheet with them. 