

Ag Buddies: Making Connections with Agriculture Leaders and Elementary Youth

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Introduction

The author Bill McBean defines being a leader as, “exhibiting moral and ethical courage and setting an example for everyone.” Leadership begins at an early age and demonstrating the right way to lead and how to teach others should be instilled in a child when they are young enough to develop the right tools for success. Future Farmers of America and the agriculture programs that it is integrated into are prime examples of what being a leader inhibits. The National FFA Organization states that, “they taught us that agriculture is more than planting and harvesting — it's a science, it's a business and it's an art. So today, we are still the Future Farmers of America. But, we are also the future biologists, future chemists, future veterinarians, future engineers, future entrepreneurs and future civic leaders.” These methods and beliefs need to be integrated into the younger generations starting at the elementary level. The concept of Ag Buddies a program that takes high school agriculture leadership students to local elementary schools’ to teach their passion and knowledge, is a way to give the next generation an opportunity to learn and find their fire for the agriculture industry. The idea is to create a program full of curriculum-based content and activities to take to the elementary schools and have the high school leadership students lead these lessons and activities to integrate agriculture into the students’ lives and elementary schools.

Background

In California, there are over three hundred secondary agriculture programs; at the grade school level there are no formal agriculture programs with a written curriculum. The idea that some students will not be able to learn about agriculture until they are in high school is an injustice to the students, but also to the agriculture industry and the future of our world and economic growth. Zahra, H.M., and Ali, S. have researched the idea of agriculture being integrated into the elementary curriculum and their finds, documented in the journal article, “Factors Related with Integrating Environment and Agriculture into Elementary School Curriculum”, demonstrates that we need agriculture at the grade school level to progress for the future of agriculture. Their study was based on how teachers view agriculture and the knowledge base that they have the perception that they portray to their students. Their studies indicated that out of the 343 teachers selected to showcase their knowledge 46.9% had high levels of positive response for agriculture in the class curriculum. They concluded that achieving this concept would progress and better the educational system. “Agricultural literacy is increasingly regarded as an important issue in sustainability education.” The journal article, “Agricultural Literacy” is increasingly regarded as an important issue in sustainability education, by: Gabriele Frohlich*, Marlen Goldschmidt* and Franz X. Bogner. This study was given to fifth and sixth graders who go to schools with no agriculture education or knowledge-based learning; the findings indicated that animals and processing were seen to be the area that students knew the most about. The statistics indicate that the issue lies in the fact that the teachers do not have the knowledge-base and skill-set about agriculture to teach and help these students. It is essential to apply agriculture practices to the common core curriculum currently in place at the grade school level.

There are some groups that advocate for agriculture, but a lot of academia is set at the secondary level, The Plant Foundation is a non-profit organization that tries to change that. They have created a website that has videos and mini lessons that can be integrated into the grade schools. The founders have worked in industry and have brought others in from industry to help better the future of agriculture; the videos are great tools for Ag Buddies to help students understand what agriculture is because it is a very hands-on industry. The Plant Foundation hopes to create a curriculum that can eventually be utilized in the classroom. The National Teach Ag campaign dedicates itself to spreading the voice of agriculture and creating future agriculture teachers. This campaign is aimed at the older generation, and the tools they have on their website such as games, lesson plans and activities to be utilized; these resources can be used in the elementary schools and get the students thinking about and understanding agriculture. Using these tools we can create more agriculture teachers and future industry leaders. This can also be seen through agclassroom and the actual website that has curriculum standards to follow to make sure what is taught is useful and beneficial to the future.

Methodology

A typical day for “Ag Buddies” would involve the following planning and execution:

It was decided that two Arroyo Grande public schools would be the participants of the study, with potential to expand to any high school with an agriculture program (Knobloch, N. A., & Martin, R. A.). Before the big day began we spoke with each teacher to decide when a good time of the day would be to have the high schoolers visit the elementary school. It was decided upon 1:15 pm right after the elementary school’s lunch recess. The authors also spoke with Mrs. Carney and she arranged that three high school students would travel to Harloe Elementary to present Mrs. Cajas’ 6th grade classroom with the Ag Buddies Day. There are 30 elementary students enrolled in the class, but it is unpredictable how many students will be present the day of the program.

The presentation was designed for an entire class of about 30 elementary students. However, the presentation completed was for 24 students. While liability played a role in transportation, Mrs. Carney arranged the release of the high school students and they greeted the authors in front of Harloe Elementary School. Per Harloe’s policy on visitors, the authors checked in at the front office and were given a nametag and then allowed to go to Mrs. Cajas’ classroom. Mrs. Cajas informed the authors that all students in her class had already signed a photo release from a previous event.

The authors prepared the high schoolers by giving them the powerpoint and jeopardy game about a week prior to the scheduled visit. Mrs. Carney selected the three high school students of the Arroyo Grande FFA’s officer team with an interest in agricultural education and presentation skills. There are five subtopics to be presented and the FFA leaders split the presentation amongst themselves. The authors suggested the presentation be made as part of the regular school day and should last about 15 minutes so the students don't lose focus (Filsecker, & Hickey), and then carry out the game portion another 15 minutes.

The authors provided the content and observed the high school presenters in action. Suggestions to improve the Ag Buddies program were discussed amongst the authors and provided to Mrs. Carney for further leadership development. Mrs. Cajas was contacted following the Ag Buddies Day presentation for feedback.

Results

The authors conducted further research regarding feedback from the high school agriculture teacher and the elementary school teacher. The following notes were noted for future improvements. Mrs. Cajas said that she found the program to be “educational and engaging for the students” and that she would highly recommend a program being established on a regular basis for even more elementary school classrooms. Mrs. Cajas supported the authors’ research on time allotment and mentioned “the kids received just enough information without getting bored, and the students loved the interactive game at the end.”

Additional feedback was received from Mrs. Carney, the high school agriculture teacher that mentioned that she loved the idea of the program and was disappointed that she wasn't able to attend the event. However, she said “for a program without a leadership class, it was challenging to arrange, but that it would probably be much more fluid with a school that does have a leadership class during regular school hours.” The authors of the program feel that the day as a whole was very successful and they see the potential for the program to expand to more classrooms at each school and more schools countywide. The group found that the program went very smoothly, but wasn't sure that it would be as successful if there was more work placed on the high schoolers such as them having to create the program themselves. Therefore the authors feel that it would be beneficial if the lessons were already made and simply given to the high school students to present.

Moving Forward

High school FFA agricultural leadership classes are the backbone of a successful FFA program. A typical leadership class consists of the agricultural leadership teacher, the six or more chapter officers and 25 other students. The methodology for this project can be redistributed and implemented by any FFA chapter or high school leadership class with an elementary school in close proximity. It is recommended the same elementary school be visited frequently to further develop the Ag Buddies relationships over time. Each visit should be approached with the same attention to campus security and administration awareness. The authors suggest Ag Buddies programming be combined with annual agricultural events, or coincide with industry celebrations. Examples include National FFA Week, Thank a Farmer, community fairs, expos and festivals. To expand future curriculum, the Ag Buddies program can rely upon California Ag in the Classroom and the Plant Foundation for archived lesson plans.