What Is Agriculture in the Classroom?

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Americans are becoming appallingly ignorant on most issues concerning agriculture. Educating the public on the historic, present, and future importance of agriculture to America's economy and society as a whole will be important in determining the industry's ability to remain viable and competitive. According to Lucas Calpouzos of California State Univ., Chico, "As a country's agricultural efficiency declines, its standard of living declines." Lowering agricultural efficiency means that food and fiber products will be more expensive, which would leave less money for discretionary spending. Everyone, therefore, should be concerned about important issues related to agriculture.

Every year, America becomes less rural and more urban. As we lose touch with our agrarian roots, voting citizens are becoming less informed on major issues that affect agriculture. While Americans may have good intentions, they may in fact support policies detrimental to the industry. Elected officials have fewer rural constituents. Future legislators will be several generations removed from the land and, thus, agriculturally illiterate. As a result, rural legislators and agricultural associations will have to work harder and spend more money to inform urban legislators about their views on industry issues.

Waiting to educate the public as adults is a major mistake. Most attitudes and opinions are formed between the ages of 8 to 13. Ideas formed during these critical developmental years are carried throughout a person's lifetime. The seeds of positive thoughts about the agricultural industry should be planted in elementary school. Knowledge of agriculture is useful in developing critical thinking skills for teaching science, history, geography, political science, math, language, arts, and economics. Most teachers spend little time presenting agricultural information because they know so little about the industry. We cannot expect teachers to discuss a subject they know little about.

Positive results have been achieved in kindergarten through 12th grade with agricultural education programs. The results have been dramatic, especially with teachers. They have been very responsive to and appreciative of the efforts made by the industry to inform them about agriculture and provide resource material for their classrooms.

The California Foundation for Agriculture in the Classroom was organized in 1986 to increase the understanding of agriculture by supporting projects in four areas: teacher training, student programs, classroom resource material, and public awareness programs (Table 1). The foundation has been very successful in bringing together agriculture and education to develop and implement various educational activities dealing with agriculture.

During the 1970s the agriculture industry in California became more involved in educating the public on agricultural issues. Groups including the California Women for Agriculture, commodity associations, U.S. Cooperative Extension Service, Farm Bureau, and Future Farmers of America chapters presented agricultural information to students and teachers.

In 1980, California's Agriculture in the Classroom (AITC) efforts officially began. The San Francisco Unified School District requested assistance from the California Farm Bureau in organizing activities and resource material to educate students and teachers about agriculture through teacher workshops, student field trips, farm day in the city, farmer visits to classes, audio-visual material, and lesson plans.

The program's efforts have expanded since 1980. In 1982, a statewide resource committee combined the resources and ideas of agriculture and education representatives into a joint educational program. The California Foundation for AITC provided additional financial resources for AITC projects designed to create a greater awareness and understanding of agriculture among today's students, teachers, and general public.

While several elements are necessary for a successful agricultural

program in the classroom, three basic elements are required:

1) *Partnership between agriculture and education.* Classroom teachers, curriculum specialists, and school administrators representing kindergarten through the 12th grade along with university instructors have joined hands with agriculturists to develop and implement California's AITC program. By joining together we can enhance and multiply our individual abilities and resources. As we work together on AITC activities, we develop new friendships and learn about new ideas and issues concerning both agriculture and education.

2) *Partnership between the public and private sectors.* The problems we face today, and will face in the future, will be better solved by working together to enhance our individual resources and abilities. In California, AITC brings together public agencies, including the state Dept. of Education, the state Dept. of Food and Agriculture, local school districts, and various private agricultural companies and associations. A team effort is much more effective than approaching the challenge independently.

3) *Variety of activities and resources.* An activity that interests a second-grade teacher may not be of interest to a high school geography teacher, and an activity for a fourth grader will probably not be interesting to a high school student. To increase successfully the understanding of agriculture, a variety of AITC activities and resources should be offered to help students and teachers learn about agriculture.

In California, strong partnerships and a variety of AITC activities have been developed through the California Foundation for AITC. Three important groups provide the foundation's leadership: a board of directors, advisory council, and resource committee.

The board of directors consists of eight members representing

Table 1. Various Agriculture in the Classroom projects and activities.

<i>Teacher training</i>	
Summer Agricultural Institute	
Agricultural Academy for Leaders in Education	
California Agriculture in the Classroom Conference	
University Student Teacher Program	
San Francisco State Univ. course	
Agriculture in the Classroom Ambassador Program	
County summer agriculture seminars	
<i>Resource material</i>	
Agriculture video library	
Cream of the Crop newsletter for educators	
Farm and Food Bytes computer software	
Resource Committee	
California agricultural magazine for fourth graders	
Science Framework Project	
Dept. of Education Liaison/Textbook Review	
Project Food, Land, and People	
<i>Student programs</i>	
Los Angeles and San Francisco Farm Day	
Adopt a Farmer	
Student farm field trips	
California Breadmake	
<i>Public awareness programs</i>	
Agricultural Institute for Government Executives	
Sonoma Agriculture Institute for Government Executives	
Agriculture in the Classroom display	

agriculture and education. The board sets policy and determines the foundation's budget. Board representation and function vary from state to state.

The advisory council assists the board in promoting the foundation and raising money. The council consists of 14 members from education and agriculture. Each member serves a 2-year term, with a seven-member rotation every year. This rotation provides new enthusiasm, new contacts, and new ideas for promoting the foundation.

The resource advisory committee is an open-membership committee consisting of representatives from public agriculture and education agencies and private associations and companies. The committee meets four times each year to review and discuss AITC resource material, plan the statewide AITC conference, and inform fellow committee members of respective AITC activities. The committee produces a resource newsletter, *Cream of the Crop*, for educators three times annually. This newsletter lists resources, AITC events, and sample lesson plans from educators who have successfully integrated agriculture into their classrooms.

The foundation serves as the umbrella organization for planning, developing, implementing, promoting, and funding various AITC projects. It provides any individual, organization, company, or public agency interested in promoting a greater understanding of agriculture the opportunity to become involved. Successful implementation of AITC activities and materials depends on well-organized and well-informed volunteers and staff from agriculture and education. In California, in addition to state coordination through the foundation, county AITC committees are encouraged to meet regularly to remain informed of county, state, and national AITC activities and to plan local AITC projects.

Future needs. Leaders from the private and public sectors need to recognize and support agricultural literacy. In addition to lending verbal support, they should use their influence to attract financial resources for effective agricultural literacy activities.

A strong partnership between agriculture and education is essential for a successful kindergarten through 12th-grade agricultural education program. Educators and agriculturists must be involved in planning, developing, and implementing agricultural education activities and materials.

Local AITC committees consisting of representatives from all segments of the agricultural industry and education community must meet regularly to coordinate AITC activities.

Integrating the study of agriculture with other subjects will invite more support from teachers and administrators. Teachers using this approach have indicated that their students enjoy learning about a

subject when they can relate it to examples, such as food and fiber or plants and animals.

Every university student majoring in education should receive information on the agricultural industry and be aware of career opportunities in agriculture. A major turnover in the teaching work force is expected in the next few years. Educating new teachers about agriculture must be a priority.

School textbooks must depict agriculture accurately and objectively. Reports state that 80% of teachers teach from textbooks 80% of the time. Clearly, information presented in textbooks has tremendous impact on students. The agriculture industry needs to review current textbooks and work with publishing companies to ensure that agriculture is presented fairly and accurately.

Greater financial resources must be available for hiring staff at the local and state levels to coordinate agricultural literacy activities in the four AITC areas (see Table 1). Financial support should come from the public and private sectors.

Teacher training programs, such as California's Summer Agricultural Institute and local summer agricultural seminars, should be used as models for educational programs for school administrators, elected officials and their aides, and university faculty. Graduates of these successful agriculture institutes serve as excellent industry representatives, as they promote greater awareness among their colleagues, friends, and students. Additional resources are needed to educate teachers and education administrators through institutes and seminars about agriculture's role in society. Only then can our society's agricultural literacy be improved.

The California Foundation for Agriculture in the Classroom is recognized nationally and internationally as a leader in agricultural education. Our programs have been applauded as proactive and aggressive in the fight against agricultural illiteracy. The numerous initiatives affecting agriculture on California's Nov. 1990 ballot illustrated the need to educate the public about the importance of agriculture. AITC focuses on reaching students at impressionable ages, while also educating their teachers and parents about agriculture.

As a result of kindergarten through 12th-grade AITC activities, we will have a society that understands and appreciates the importance of agriculture's positive contributions, a voting public that supports the agricultural industry, and bright young students who will consider careers in agriculture.

Those who wish to contact the Agriculture in the Classroom program in their own state can write to the national office: Agriculture in the Classroom, Room 317-A, Administration Bldg., U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Washington, DC 20250-2200.