

By Choice and Not By Chance

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Agriculture educators are vital to the success and structure of the agriculture industry. They shape young minds, and help them become more familiar with the ways of agriculture. They work from dusk to dawn, even past that on most occasions, doing anything from early morning practices to perfect a contest team to late night bus rides returning home from a trip. Some people aren't cut out for that kind of work, or weren't prepared when they chose this career and end up leaving. But for those who have stuck with it, and have multiple years of experience under their belt, why did they stay, or even join the profession? It is crucial to figure out why these individuals stay in agriculture education, so that information can be used to recruit and retain educators to allow this part of agriculture to continue to grow.

The need to recruit agriculture educators has increased tremendously after the 2021-2022 school year. In Missouri alone, a total of 47 agriculture educators left the profession. Out of that 47, 11 teachers left after their first year of teaching, and 18 total left after their second and third year (Salaries & Experience, 2022). Not only are many leaving the teaching profession, but few are even choosing this career. Luckily, there are a few things we can begin doing to bring people back to agriculture education; one of those being to focus on those who have already established careers in agriculture.

Instead of strictly targeting high school students and encouraging them to become ag teachers, we should start pursuing agriculture businessmen and women. It would keep them in an agriculture field, and allow them to use their passion to teach the next generation of agriculturists. Even targeting those of an older crowd would be highly beneficial.

I recently had the pleasure of talking to Steve Stinnett, a soon-to-be retired firefighter, who is currently taking classes to become an ag teacher. Mr. Stinnett will be turning 50 later this

year, and after 22 years of service as a firefighter, he still possesses the desire to have a career and make a change. His way of doing that is by becoming an ag teacher. Steve recounted, "I have always loved agriculture and have always had a special place for it. I loved my FFA days, and really enjoyed helping my kids with their own journeys through the program." Steve revealed he even has his associates degree in animal science, and that he has never strayed from agriculture, due to living on a farm, and owning cattle.

When I asked what drove him to become an ag teacher, out of all things, he responded, "I want to help as many people as possible, and this is a good place to do that." He followed up by stating, "I will be clumsy and awkward at first, but as long as I can offer them that base knowledge, I will have that sense of fulfillment. There will be kids that are better at some things that I'm not the best at, but as long as I teach them something that they can carry with them, I will feel like I succeeded." Steve continued to tell me he aspires to teach these kids what it is like to be a winner, but also what it is like to be a loser and to have to get back up. He also mentioned he has a lot of real world knowledge and experience younger teachers may not be able to offer (2022). With those experiences, he can help both the students and other teachers.

A way to both recruit and retain ag educators is by having healthy and effective conversations about the tough times that come with being an agriculture educator. By having current ag teachers speak about how their job isn't always what it seems, and about the difficulties that come with it, will help prepare those who are aspiring to become ag teachers for the challenges to come. Without having these conversations many newer teachers may feel overwhelmed and unprepared for what needs to be done. One of my ag advisors, Jay Shepherd, now going on 24 years of teaching, strongly believes in this. "To keep teachers we have to, as a profession, be willing to help the younger teachers with any issues they have" (2022). It can

become especially difficult whenever they are a single teaching program, taking over for another teacher, or being a newly added teacher to programs that are expanding. However, many of them are making it work, and flourishing in these positions.

In the case of Kylie Schoenberger, she is in her second year at Crane, a single teacher program. I spoke to her about her experiences, and how she had to adjust to such a change. She explained to me, “It was a sink or swim situation. This was the moment that I figured out if I was cut out for this.” She revealed that when she entered into that teaching position she had mixed emotions. She comments that she really enjoys being able to shape the program and set expectations for the chapter, however, she faces a lot of challenges as their only ag educator. Such as if a personal issue comes up, she has to reach out to the community for support, which she struggled with at first. She went on to explain, “Obviously even in a multi teacher program, but especially in a single teacher setting, I had to really rely on the community and have their support. Which in the beginning wasn’t easy to ask for, or admit I needed” (2022).

I wanted to know what drove Kylie to continue. What made her want to go to work everyday, even with all the struggles she faces on a daily basis. Kylie enthusiastically provided reasons why she loves being an agriculture educator. “I know this is the basic answer and you have heard this a million times, but it's true. Being able to see my kids succeed brings me so much joy. Knowing that I can help them find their purpose, and be successful is what gets me out of bed in the morning. Also just the amazing things that we get to experience together helps me continue going. It gives me this sense of fulfillment that pushes me to continue everyday ” (2022).

There are several ways to start increasing the amount of ag teachers, and to draw people back into the profession. But it all boils down to one simple thing, the reason that people join the

profession and stay. Fulfillment. That is what ag teachers want out of this job. Whether that be ones that are just starting out, or those that have been in the profession for 15 plus years, each one told me the same thing. That feeling of fulfillment is what keeps them going from day to day and year to year. The success that comes from the hours of reading and editing speeches, to the long hours of teaching a new contest, having the kids succeed brings them a sense of fulfillment that drives them to continue. Ag teachers are dire to the continuation and success of agriculture. They further inform new generations, and inspire them to find careers in agriculture. These educators are the ones that keep the ag industry thriving, so even if it takes a little more work and effort to bring more in, it will benefit the entire industry in the long run.

References

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I certify that this is the work of Calli Augusta.

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