

Charter High school ag programs flourish as farms dwindle

The Associated Press - By JIM SUHR - AP Business Writer

(8 hours ago)

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ST. LOUIS (AP) — High school agriculture programs sprouting across the nation's Corn Belt are teaching teenagers, many of them in urban environments, that careers in the field often have nothing to do with cows and plows.

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The curriculums, taking hold as school budgets tighten and the numbers of farms in the U.S. decline, are rich in science and touted as stepping stones for college-bound students considering careers in everything from urban forestry to renewable natural resources and genetic engineering of crops, perhaps for agribusiness giants such as Monsanto, Dow, DuPont and Pioneer.

Ag-minded students are in luck: Tens of thousands of jobs open up each year in the broader agriculture field, and roughly half are filled by college grads with actual ag-related degrees, observers say.

"There's a shortage of workers in a number of careers, and the numbers of those jobs are staggering," said Harley Hepner, the Illinois State Board of Education's chief consultant for ag education. "Schools that understand we can get students in the ag program know they're going to be taxpaying citizens with good-paying jobs."

Along with school programs, membership in Future Farmers of America is up to about 580,000 — nearly double its ranks of the mid-1980s. That spike dispels the notion the national organization is merely a haven for farm kids, given that the number of U.S. farms are on a long-term downward trend, shrinking another 4 percent between 2007 and 2012, according to the latest federal figures available.

Untold numbers of FFA members have scant to do with farms, as Rebecca Goodman illustrates.

In Indiana, where corn is king, the 18-year-old junior is her school's active FFA president but could never be confused for a country girl. Goodman, who's lived in Indianapolis since she was 3, had never been on a farm, and her experience with animals is limited to cats and dogs.

"The only thing I planted was a small garden, and the only thing that grew out of it were weeds," she admits.

Yet Goodman aspires to be a conservation officer, crediting tiny Beech Grove schools' fledgling agricultural sciences program with steering her that way.

Beech Grove's Applied Life Sciences Academy, unveiled in November 2012, is billed as a place of hands-on, frequently technical exploration of live plants and animals. Educators say it makes a connection, helping students who otherwise may grapple with comprehending concepts and theories in a traditional math or science class.

"We live on the motto that 99 percent of the population doesn't have anything to do with (farm) production," said Chris Kaufman, a former state education department ag specialist who helped set up Beech Grove's program.

Classes include animal science, plant and soil science, separate offerings of advanced animal and plant science, natural resources, and an introductory course. Some of the courses earn the students high school science credits.

Such offerings increasingly have cropped up in many states in recent years in the nation's breadbasket. Seven Kansas high schools and four in Nebraska joined the fold in the past school year. Over the past three years, Missouri has added seven to bring its statewide total to 331 — up 82 from two decades ago — and Illinois added 10.

Beech Grove's program, among 13 the state has added since 2010, has two middle school and two high school teachers for nearly 500 students, a number that helps the program pay for itself thanks to a state fund that gives districts a per-student stipend depending on the class. Those payouts range from \$375 to \$450 per student, accounting for what Kaufman says has funneled \$180,000 into Beech Grove's coffers.

"Beech Grove needed more electives and teachers, and this was a perfect fit that didn't cost much," he said. "This is about understanding the environment and the world around you as it relates to animals, plants and food, then going out with those skills to get a good career."

It's appeared to connect with Goodman, who remembers "kind of having a hard time with what I wanted to do with my life and was going by the book — be a nurse or something. It kind of made me boxed in, made me feel depressed."

"Before this (program) came, I was in a dark place," she said. "It's helped me find my way back."

Classmate Alicia Perez, 17, once dismissed learning about agriculture, convinced "this is gonna be for people who wanna be farmers." Not so, she now submits.

"It's an amazing program, really life-changing," the 17-year-old junior said of learning about plants and food, which feed her dreams of becoming a chef. "My heart is in culinary arts, and there are so many different careers you can pursue in agriculture."

"This is definitely something you have to go into to realize it's so much broader."
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