

Ten Tips for the Successful Ag Teacher

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Teaching agriculture continues to be one of the most rewarding, yet challenging, careers in education. It is my belief each teacher must have a sound personal philosophy about what agricultural education is and can do for its students if that teacher is to be successful. A personal philosophy will guide one's actions.

With that in mind, I would like to offer some suggestions that may help establish or reshape your personal philosophy about agricultural education. These aren't my own ideas, but a collection of suggestions gathered through the years from teachers I would put in the Ag Teacher Hall of Fame – teachers who were effective in helping students be successful; teachers who made an impact. These ideas are undoubtedly consistent with the advice given in teacher preparation classes, but I've come to realize we all need reminders and encouragement from time to time to help us maintain focus about what our program can provide students. Here's my top ten list (in no particular order):

1. **Teachers should attend the annual state teachers' conference and state FFA convention.** My personal belief is that you cannot afford to miss these events other than for sickness, death, some other job responsibility in conflict with the dates (i.e., local fair) or a once-in-a-lifetime family opportunity. The intention is not to lessen the importance of these conflicting events, but to emphasize that these state meetings provide some of the best opportunities for idea exchange. Dialogues with other teachers can help you deal with problems you may be experiencing. And how can your FFA chapter feel it is really part of the state association without representation at the convention?
2. **Don't be afraid to ask for help and things.** In most cases, people are eager to help the agriculture program and/or FFA chapter. Parents and community leaders who are familiar with your program often either have resources you need or know how to get them. Don't be afraid to tell your school and county administration of your wants. It allows you to share your vision for the future and demonstrates initiative and enthusiasm administrators may not see from teachers in other departments.
3. **Develop time management skills.** Some of the best agriculture teachers developed good time management skills early in their careers. Most accomplish this by looking weeks and months ahead, establishing deadlines, and "backward planning" - planning with the end in mind. For the day-to-day tasks, sometimes just maintaining a small dry-erase board in the office will do the job. Take five minutes each morning to update the "To Do" list, prioritize, and get moving. Ask yourself – Am I normally submitting requested information: a) before the deadline; b) on the deadline date; or c) late?
4. **Clean house and organize (classroom, ag mechanics lab, greenhouse, meats lab, etc.).** Agriculture teachers have large areas and countless resources to keep

organized. Add to that the paperwork required by the school, county, and state, and then toss in some student work that needs graded, and suddenly, the teacher can hardly find his/her desk. I am also convinced teachers are so giving of their time to help individual students achieve that they neglect the attention their classroom, labs, and storage areas need. Dedicate some of your planning time each week to catching up on the housekeeping chores. Throw a lot of things away. Simply ask yourself a couple of questions: If someone asked for anything (a paper, requisition, textbook, or tool), could I find it in less than one minute? Can an individual walk through my lab area(s) without having to step over something?

5. **Don't sacrifice agricultural education in the name of FFA.** The FFA organization provides countless opportunities for student recognition. It can be a fabulous public relations tool. It is a mistake, however, to sacrifice sound education in order to have a successful FFA chapter. FFA should be an outgrowth of the program, not a substitute for it. Try to hit that perfect blend of FFA activities that complement the agricultural education program. Remember in the long run that as agricultural education goes, so goes FFA.
6. **Establish a network of program support.** You may try to do it all, but you'll tire of it after some time. Establish and regularly meet with your advisory council. Ditto for an FFA Alumni or Boosters organization. While you may need to provide some organizational leadership to both groups, especially in their infancy, don't view this as another thing on your already congested "To Do" list. Rather, view this as the way to allow others to be engaged in your program and help you accomplish so many things you would never be able to do alone.
7. **Make supervisory visits a priority.** Probably some of the most valuable time you'll ever spend in your job is involved with student supervision. Be visible to your students and in your community. And be sure to check record books while making visits. Whether you like or dislike the way students keep records in West Virginia, it's the only book teachers have endorsed at this time. I believe a better record book and/or system will eventually emerge, but until then, be sure to insist that your students maintain quality records in the currently endorsed book.
8. **Encourage scope in SAE.** I have an unsettling feeling that we may be losing the concept of scope in supervised agricultural experience programs. Before you throw down this article in disgust, please understand that I am aware of many students with substantial scope and investment. Some of the American FFA Degree applicants I see when visiting those being considered for Star Farmer and Star Agribusinessperson have very impressive operations. And I am not so far out of touch that I don't remember how difficult it is for some students to develop meaningful SAEs – how good it felt if each student was at least doing something which bore a semblance of a SAE. I realize students can learn valuable information and skill in SAEs with limited scope. I fear, however, that many students who begin with "project" SAEs are never challenged to grow beyond that in their upperclassmen years. Perhaps my fears are unfounded but they are based upon: a) the number of chapters that have (or rather don't have) State FFA Degree recipients; and b) the number of State FFA Degree applications reflecting SAEs of a market animal each year or unpaid hours on the family farm. I am not

saying these are not legitimate enterprises, I am simply asking if you are encouraging students to expand beyond “project agriculture.”

9. **Be professional and accountable.** Look and act like the best teacher and to some, you’ll be the best teacher. Stay on task and your students are likely to do so as well. And be able to defend that your instructional practices and FFA activities have educational value. Have data – in today’s age, student performance carries more weight with stakeholders than the “warm and fuzzy” FFA stories we like to share (although those can help!).
10. **Tell everyone who will listen what you do.** Either because of modesty or busyness, we don’t often do a good job of telling others what we do and how successful our students are. Spread the word!
11. **BONUS – Attend a quality professional inservice.** There are a number of great professional development activities teachers have the opportunity to attend. Many of these exist in West Virginia, but I would encourage teachers to participate in regional and national activities as well. We have some outstanding things happening in our state, and you may not realize how good things are until you attend activities with your counterparts from other states.

It is unlikely any agriculture teacher needs to completely retool his/her personal philosophy about the program, but all of us need to periodically review our mission. I challenge teachers to scan the list one more time and find one or two suggestions on which to focus in this school year.