

The Hidden Diversity Factor

by Ann Gibson Horne


A Last week I sat in a room with a group of newly elected State FFA Officers. As we were going through paperwork and other necessary details, one of our adult staff members told the group that if they hadn't already provided it, they would need to give us copies of their auto and health insurance policies, and that it was their responsibility to maintain both throughout their year of service. One boy dropped his head and quietly said that the health insurance information he had turned in with his application was no longer valid because his dad had lost his job and the family no longer had any health insurance and he didn't know when they would have it again. You could tell he was embarrassed, and to be honest I was surprised because although I didn't know him well, he

had always seemed to be one of the kids whose family was financially comfortable. What surprised me even more, though, was two of the other kids immediately telling him that he should check into the state's insurance plan for children in low-income families because they were on that and it covered them even though they had graduated from high school. By this time next year I will know them and their families well, but at this point I would not have thought any of them came from low-income families.

When talking about diversity, most people immediately think of race or gender. You can walk into any agriculture classroom and measure with just a glance the balance of male to female or Hispanic to white students. There's another area of diversity, though, that we often overlook

and that can't be measured just by looking at the students sitting in our classrooms. It's class, or socioeconomic level. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of children living in poverty increased from 11.7 million in 2001 to 12.1 million in 2002 (1) and the official poverty rate in the U.S. has increased every year for the last four consecutive years. The United States, a country most people think of as affluent, had the highest level of poverty in the industrialized world in 2001. (2) As agricultural educators, it's critical that we think about this issue and the impact it has on our students.

Traditionally, our classrooms have been filled with a higher-than-average number of students from low-income families. You can look at this as an example of counselors using us for a dumping ground, or you can think about it from the viewpoint that maybe these students gravitate to our programs because they feel like they can accomplish something there that will help them later in life. A lot of students from low-income families don't even consider the possibility of college. They hope to graduate, get a job at a factory or in a greenhouse or as a welder or a truck driver or at the chicken plant or whatever, get married, have a family, and live a quiet, peaceful life. They may see no relevance between Advanced English Literature and their life, but they do see a connection between what they learn in our classes and what they experience every day. It's up to us as teachers to recognize their potential, and encourage them to pursue advanced training and certification or



Even basic activities take on new meaning when a student is unable to afford the minimum materials.

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college or whatever best suits their needs and potential. Too often counselors and others relegate students they don't consider "college material" to an inferior status and leave them to fend for themselves while they help the Ivy League-bound fill out their applications. They don't realize that welders may very well earn more than college professors, or that the reading level required for someone in the John Deere service technician program is higher than that for a bank president. Often, the Agriculture teacher/FFA Advisor is the one person who encourages students – and their parents – to think about college or professional training.

FFA provides students with many opportunities to travel and experience new things. One of the reasons early agriculture teachers came up with the idea of a student organization was to expose farm boys to the world outside their small communities, and thousands of leaders in all walks of life have resulted from that first gathering in 1928. But we all know that everything costs money. Whether it's going to summer leadership camp, state or national FFA convention, or state fair, there are expenses involved. For many students, cost is not an issue. Their parents see the benefit of the experience and are more than willing to pay for it. Other students have parents who may see the benefit, but simply aren't able to come up with the money. More and more new teachers come from middle-class families, where they grew up comfortably able to participate in any activity they wanted. It's hard for them to recognize students who don't participate not because they don't want to get involved, but because they can't afford it and are too embarrassed to say so. We have always prided ourselves as a profession on really knowing our students – we visit their homes to look at their SAE projects, we take

them on trips, we are involved in their lives outside of the classroom. It seems, though, that in the modern days of trying to do everything we need to, SAE visits are often overlooked, and in too many cases the ag teacher may not make it out to every student's home. It's really critical that we try to do this and meet every student's parents or guardians. (Note to younger teachers – a pay-off to this is often better behavior in the classroom!) Often, the kids you need to visit the most are the ones who are the hardest to visit, because they are embarrassed for you to see their homes or because their parents work inconvenient shifts, but you need to keep trying. Another tactic that one

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veteran teacher told me about is riding the school bus routes and just seeing where all the kids live. He was amazed to discover that he had kids living in homes that ranged from having four-car garages to having no indoor plumbing. This is more and more true as the divide between the "haves and have-nots" gets wider and wider. Another thing you have to think about is that a family may have the outward appearance of being financially stable but in truth be

struggling to make ends meet. So many families these days are living paycheck to paycheck, and one big expense, whether it's a major car repair or a hospital bill, or a parent losing their job, can make the whole budget fall apart. You may not see an FFA jacket as being that expensive, but to a mother who's worried about coming up with enough to pay the electricity bill, \$42 is a lot of money. Zweig (2004) points out that, "While in any given year 12 to 15 percent of the population is poor, over a ten-year period 40 percent experience poverty in at least one year because most poor people cycle in and out of poverty; they don't stay poor for long periods. Poverty is something that happens to the working class, not some marginal "other" on the fringes of society." (3)

So, what can you, as an agriculture teacher, do to help these kids? A big first step is just realizing that you need to stop and think when you're planning activities about how much it is going to cost and whether you have kids who need to participate but may not be able to afford to pay their share. From there, here are a few suggestions:

1. Never publicly single out kids who can't pay. In my experience, the kids who truly can't afford to pay their share are so embarrassed that they would rather say they have some other reason for not participating than to admit they need money. Sometimes, kids who have the money just don't want to pay it because they would rather spend it on CDs or movie tickets. Don't ever ask the entire group, "Is there anybody who isn't going to be able to pay their own way on this trip?" Just let it be known in your chapter that money is never an issue if the kids really want to participate and that they should come to you privately to talk about it. You will have to determine

whether they really can pay or not. If you don't know a family well, talk with the principal, counselor, or teachers who have been in the school a long time. You might also talk to their church leaders for information. When you spend as much time with students as ag teachers do, it's important that you know about their family situations.

2. Try to have the chapter pay for as many things as possible for all the kids. One of the very best ag teachers I know has fundraisers each year to raise money to pay the members' expenses at state and national convention, state fair, livestock shows, leadership camp, meals on CDE trips, etc. The kids pay very little or nothing at all to participate, even those who can afford to. The secret to the success of this is that when she has her hamburger supper/auction fundraisers, the whole community turns out to support them, and most of the parents who could afford to pay their kids' way always seem to bring more auction items and pay very high prices for what they buy – all a way to even things out.

3. Get the kids in Official Dress as often as you can. It builds pride. It also helps level the playing field. One of the great things about our FFA Official Dress is that everyone looks the same; it's not a fashion show when you go to FFA functions. You can buy a white shirt and a pair of black pants at Nordstrom's or Wal-Mart, and the difference is not that noticeable in a crowd. Many chapters buy matching shirts for their judging team members. Anything that can help kids fit in and feel included is a plus.

4. Never just give kids money. It's much better for their self-esteem and their work ethic if they can earn it. Many teachers require students to pay at least a portion of their regis-

tration fees as a non-refundable deposit to avoid all those extras signing up who really don't plan to go, and that's a good policy. Just make sure all the kids have a way to earn the money if their parents can't pay it. Whether it's money to pay their FFA dues or a registration fee, you can usually find people in the community who need small jobs done and are more than willing to pay a good worker to do them. If the chapter is paying all the expenses for an activity, make sure that the members involved were also enthusiastically involved in fundraisers and other chapter projects. Some teachers use a point system where students can exchange points earned for dollars to pay for expenses on trips.

5. Find people in the community who are willing to quietly pay for a student to attend a leadership camp or buy an FFA jacket with no one ever knowing. There are also people who will help kids with SAE projects. Many folks whose children showed livestock but are now grown welcome having FFA members come in and work out plans so that the students can afford to show one of their animals, and you may have local farmers who need summer workers. There are more people out there who will help than teachers often realize. There are a lot of us who wouldn't be where we are today had it not been for someone helping us out somewhere along the road, and it's a good thing to be able to turn the tables and be able to help someone else.

I hope that some of the ideas in this article help you in working with students from low-income families. Remember, of course, to always consider your individual situation and adapt these ideas to what your students need. And don't

forget to use your common sense; don't send a kid to work for someone you don't know well and trust. Try to always be fair to all your students – even though being fair does not always mean doing the same thing for everyone. Keep students' financial information to yourself, or perhaps share it when needed with your advisory committee or scholarship committee when decisions are being made. But most importantly, remember that we are here to help ALL of our students reach their full potential, and that their success is the reason we do what we do every day. You never know, you may be preparing a future state or national officer. I know that I'm thankful that the FFA Advisors of my new state officers took the time and made the effort to make sure they were able to participate and take advantage of all the opportunities available in our great organization. It just shows that you never know the potential locked inside of those freshmen entering your classroom. Do your best to bring it out, for every student who enters your classroom.

(1) U.S. Census Bureau. Poverty: Overview. (<http://www.census.gov>) Retrieved 2006-07-31.

(2) Williams, Brian; Stacey C. Sawyer, Carl M. Wahlstrom (2005). *Marriages, Families, and Intimate Relationships*. Pearson, Boston, MA

(3) Zweig, Michael (2004) *What's Class Got to Do With It: American Society in the 21st Century*. Cornell Univ Press, Ithaca, NY

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