

Don't Mess With...

By Gary Moore

Most people are familiar with the phrase, "Don't Mess With Texas." This is the tough-talking litter prevention campaign sponsored by the Texas Department of Transportation that started in 1986. The campaign reminds Texans to keep their trash in the car and off the roads.

My wife and I were co-presidents of the Cary (NC) High School PTA for two years. During this time, the phrase "Don't Mess With ..." took on a whole new meaning. Our PTA experiences in this 2,000-student high school has several implications for agricultural educators.

Don't Mess with the Band Boosters

The strongest parent group on campus is the Band Boosters. These folks are rabid about the band. The Cary High School (CHS) band is nationally recognized and the primary reason is the support of the Band Boosters. They raise an astronomical amount of money each year to support travel and other band functions. The band boosters own a semi-trailer truck just to haul the band equipment. We learned early on to support the band boosters, and they would support us.

Don't Mess with the Parents' Coalition for Excellence (PCE)

There is not a large minority population at CHS; yet they have a very vocal support group—the Parents' Coalition for Excellence. This group conducts after school tutoring programs and produces a variety of cultural events to recognize the unique heritage of minority

students. The PCE is willing to help all students, not just minority students. This organization is an effective voice for minority students and insures them a place at the table.

Don't Mess with the NJROTC Boosters Club

In the first year of our presidency, a new program was established in the school. This was the Naval Junior ROTC program. They were the new kids on the block and were just getting started. The PTA provided support to get them up and running. We suggested they might want to organize a boosters club. They did. The booster club raised money, provided transportation for trips, served as chaperons at a variety of functions, and helped train the drill and rifle teams (since there were no seasoned upperclassmen). It didn't take long for this booster group to start flexing its power. It even lobbied with the Chairman of the state Board of Education in regards to counting JROTC for PE credit.

It is OK to Mess with the Agricultural Education Program.

Cary High School has a rich agricultural education tradition. Some of the top teachers in the state either taught or student taught at CHS. During my tenure as PTA president, the agricultural education program was closed; and it deserved to be closed. Why?

Some years earlier a new teacher was hired. This person was an industry-trained teacher and did not want a 12-month contract. She wanted to spend the summers on the beach. There was an active FFA alumni associated with the program. The new teacher was given a list of the members and leaders. She didn't

want to bother with an alumni group. She also didn't want a FFA because that was a farm organization. She decided to have a horticulture club. Basically this teacher discarded the traditional components of a strong agricultural education program.

Enrollment in the program steadily went downhill. In order to justify the program, the teacher decided to teach special horticulture classes for the special education students. Enrollment continued to plummet. The administration finally had no choice but to close the program. Since the booster group (the alumni) was no longer involved, there was no one to lift one finger to keep the program open. And even I was not willing to support this program that charaded as an agricultural education program. I had tried to work with the teacher, but she chose her own path.

Lessons Learned from Cary High School

There are numerous reasons why an agricultural education program needs a support group (alumni, booster club, advisory committee or whatever you want to call it). A support group can:

* *Help keep the program on track.*

Rookie teachers (and even experienced teachers) can use all the help they can get. A strong support group can help point the program in the direction it should go. If there had been an agricultural education support group at CHS, the program would not have disintegrated.

* *Help secure finances, equipment and facilities.*

There are hundreds of examples

across the nation where agricultural education support groups have raised funds to support the agricultural education program. Some North Carolina examples include:

- The South Rowan FFA has a mini-bus and a new red barn on the school farm.
- The West Carteret FFA has a 17 ft. cargo trailer to assist with setting up and working at the Seafood Festival.
- The Southern Guilford FFA Alumni sponsors a rodeo with receipts being used to support scholarships, the chapter banquet, and student

participation in a variety of FFA events.

The alumni helped with all these projects. Support groups can make things happen

** Help prepare teams.*

There is no law that says the agriculture teacher must prepare all the Career Development Event teams. Support groups can help. The ROTC boosters at CHS spend hours with the rifle team. With the time demands on an agriculture teacher, it would be wise to have assistance in training teams.

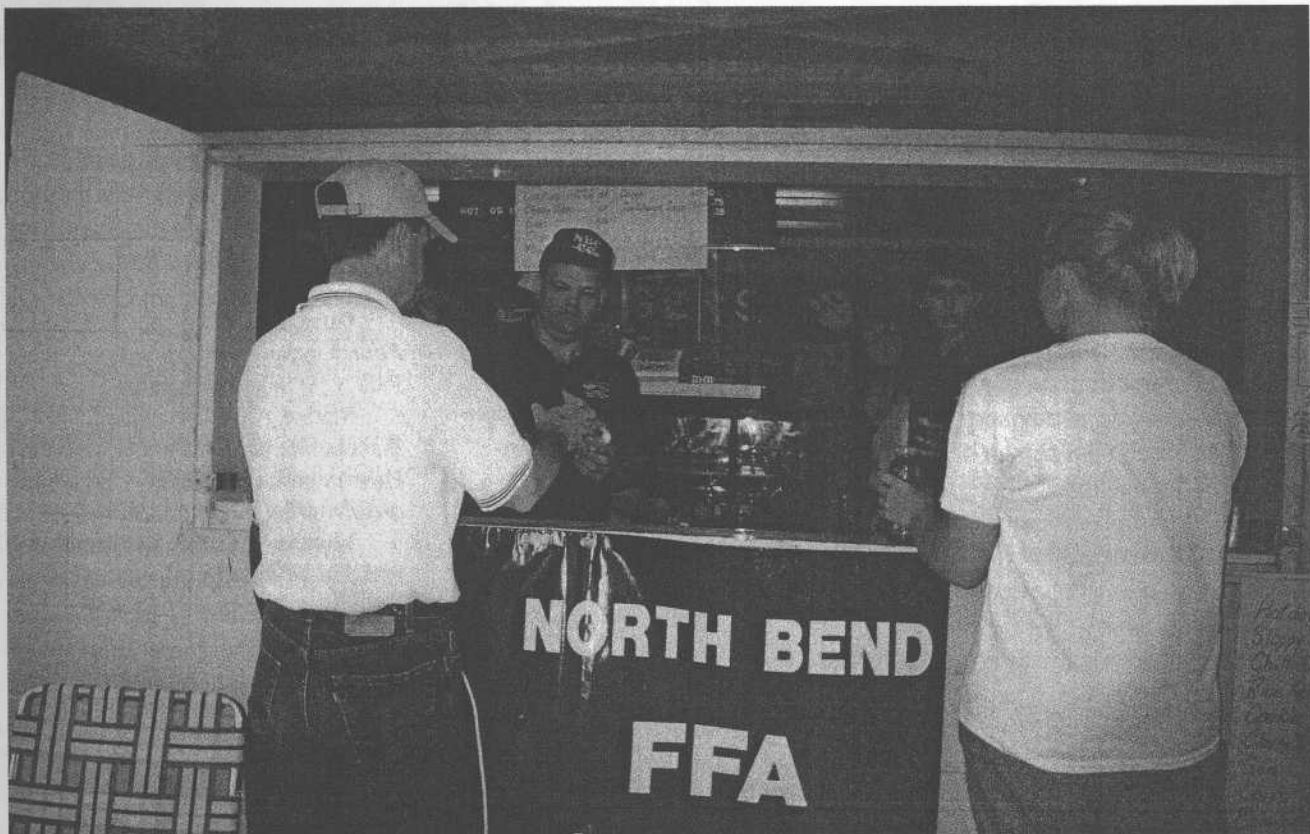
** Be an advocate for the program.*

A support group can be a powerful advocate for the agricultural education program. At CHS no one messes with the band, ROTC or minority students because of their strong support groups. Programs with strong support groups don't get closed. In some schools we (agricultural education) are in the minority. We need a support group.

If we have a support group, then the new slogan can be "Don't Mess With ... the Agricultural Education Program." It is stupid not to have an agricultural education support group.

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"Don't Mess With ... the Agricultural Education Program."



Gary Moore encourages readers to form a support group, such as the FFA Alumni, to help strengthen agricultural education programs. "In some schools we (agricultural education) are in the minority. We need a support group," Moore says. North Bend FFA Alumni members are pictured, raising funds and awareness, through the organization's concession stand. (Photo courtesy of Rebecca Renner.)