

Dumping Grounds

By Barry Croom and Gary Moore

The stories about Mr. Watson¹ are legendary.

During the unit of instruction on welding, students in his class welded the tines of the garden tiller to a support post in the agriculture shop. When Mr. Watson tried to take it outside for use by his horticulture classes later, he found that he couldn't budge it. On another occasion, students took the agricultural mechanics textbooks in his classroom and sawed them up using the table saw in the agriculture shop. Students also locked him in the horticultural storage shed, and he was finally released after two hours when a passerby heard the sound of him beating on the doors of the shed.

Somewhere along the way, students gave him the nickname "hubcap". The origin of this nickname comes from students placing rocks inside the hubcaps to his personal automobile. You can imagine what this sounded like driving down the highway. Eventually, "Hubcap" Watson couldn't cure this obvious mechanical problem, and eventually sold the car because of it.

Old Hubcap had acquired a unique reputation at his school. Many students took his classes because it was an easy period during the day when they could kick back and avoid strenuous mental activity. Conversely, some students avoided his classes because they did not offer the challenge and rigor they desired. "Hubcap" Watson's classroom had become the dumping ground for the students who would not behave appropriately in other classes.

One of the worst things that can happen to an Agriscience program is for it to become a dumping ground for incorrigible and lazy students in a school. Agriscience programs are not some type of in-school suspension program that happens to have an agricultural motif. Agriscience is a bona fide part of the curriculum in many schools and should be treated as such.

Certainly the framers of vocational education had strong concerns about who should be enrolled in vocational education courses.

"The Federal Board desires to emphasize the fact that vocational schools and classes are not fostered under the Smith-Hughes Act for the purpose of giving instruction to the backward, deficient, incorrigible, or otherwise subnormal individuals; by that such schools and classes are to be established and maintained for the clearly avowed purpose of giving thorough vocational instruction to healthy, normal individuals to the end that they may be prepared for profitable and efficient employment. Such education should command the best efforts of normal boys and girls." (Federal Board for Vocational Education, 1917, p. 17)

Much has changed since the Federal Board for Vocational Education published those guidelines in Bulletin Number 1. In most cases, career and technical education programs have adapted readily to include special populations in education. The purpose of this article is not to focus on the education of students with special needs, for they should be welcome in every Agriscience program. To exclude them is a grave injustice and not in the best traditions of the teaching profession.

We must serve all students who enter our classrooms. Instead, the purpose of this article is to attack the premise that Agriscience programs are suitable "dumping grounds" for the incorrigible and lazy students within a school.

While some students are placed in Agriscience programs by some administrative action, the majority of students are in the classroom because of the reputation of the agriculture instructor. Even if the Agriscience teacher who served in the program before you did not do a good job, there comes a point when the responsibility for the

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program becomes your own. As a colleague of ours often says, "After four years as an agriculture teacher, you get the type of students you deserve."

Incorrigible students are exasperating to the teacher and other students, and can often be a danger to themselves and others in the class. Student misbehavior becomes very important when one considers the type of environment in which instruction occurs. The Agriscience program in a school is unique from other academic programs because there are multiple learn-

ing environments such as classrooms, laboratories, and greenhouses. Students are taught the use of power tools that can cause serious injury if used improperly. Agricultural chemicals and pesticides that are used in the instructional program and can cause injury if students fail to heed safety warnings. Students enter the program with varying degrees of skill in using power tools and agricultural equipment, and in handling livestock.

In most cases, the Agriscience courses are electives. While many students take courses because of a serious interest in agriculture, some students take the course hoping to avoid a rigorous academic experience. In the unique environment of the Agriscience program how does a teacher become insulated from the risk of becoming a dumping ground for every social problem in a school?

A short-term solution to the problem is become involved politically within the school. Agriscience teachers who ingratiate themselves to the administration and work to establish relationships based primarily on personality are doomed to eventual failure. Today's school administrators are focused on measurable accountability, and teacher performance is valued more than the "good old boy" network.

The Teacher Is The Key

Good Teaching

There are a number of things that can effectively insulate the agriscience program from "dumping ground" status. One of the methods by which a teacher can reduce the risk of dumping ground status is to be the best teacher possible. The best teachers work constantly to improve their teach-

ing skill and actively research new and better ways to help students learn. Good teachers know how to teach students and are restless with methods that do not yield results. Good teachers know the content they teach, and design instructional activities that teach this content in an interesting and relevant manner. (The Southeast Center For Teaching Quality, 2004)

"The best defense against student misbehavior is a well-planned and well-executed lesson presented by an enthusiastic teacher." Roy

Eubanks, Retired Agriculture Teacher, North Lenoir High School, Kinston, NC

Individualized Instruction

The best teachers also recognize the importance of individualized instruction and are successful in teaching a diverse population of students. Learning is an individual process, and good teachers try to find ways to help the

individual student learn the material in a manner consistent with their learning style. The best teachers respect and care about their students. (The Southeast Center For Teaching Quality, 2004)

Challenging and Rigorous Instruction

The best teachers attract students who are motivated by challenging and rigorous learning experiences. Students who are looking for a free ride instead of a high quality learning experience either drop the class or conform to the teacher's standard of academic performance. Young people are quite capable of rising to a reasonable level of academic expectation. Accordingly, teachers should implement strategies that attract serious students of agriculture.

Some teachers start each year with a "tough love" type of lecture that goes something like this:

"This course is not required for graduation. This means that you should be in this course because you have an interest in agriculture. If you don't have an interest in agriculture, you should go see your guidance counselor immediately and get out of this course. This course is going to be fun and exciting, but it will be lots of work. We will have homework, papers to write, projects to complete and rigorous tests."

The teacher then follows this up by passing out a rigorous course syllabus with a list of topics to be taught, assignments and grading procedures. Homework is then assigned for the next day. Students with a tendency to goof

off get the message very quickly that agricultural education is not a cakewalk.

Attracting good students means providing a high quality lesson for each class period. Teach from "bell to bell" in every class. Five minutes of free time in a class period will yield almost eight hours of free time in that class by the end of a semester. Research tells us that the best teachers are task-oriented. (Rosenshine and Furst, 1971) Focus on student learning. Give the impression that the most important thing in the world is that the students learn what you are teaching at that moment. Students can tell when the teacher is bored or disinterested in the lesson.

Don't apologize or make excuses for giving homework or requiring students to take notes. Schools aren't amusement parks, they are places for learning, and learning takes effort. Some Agriscience teachers do not give homework, coordinate meaningful lab activities, or administer many tests. Yet, these same teachers wonder why their program is a dumping ground.

Use laboratories for learning, not production assembly lines. The primary focus of Agriscience laboratories is to teach students. Too many labs have become production facilities where monetary income is generated for the Agriscience program, but very little student learning is generated.

In keeping with a rigorous academic schedule, it is important that student be accurately graded on the work they do. Grade inflation is a huge problem in schools; so do not hesitate to give students the grades they earn through their efforts. Do not hesitate to flunk students who fail to meet acceptable academic standards. If lazy students can easily pass a class, then

the teacher's expectations of the students are too low.

One of the most important things that a teacher can do is to show the students that he or she respects them enough to give 100 percent effort everyday in the classroom. Students recognize good teaching when they experience it. Once students recognize that the agriculture teacher is serious about providing a quality program, students interested in agriculture careers will enroll in courses. If the teacher is lazy, the students will soon model this behavior.

"Have something for the students to do, or they will do something to you."

*Walter Jones, Veteran
Agriculture Teacher at
Southwest Edgecombe High
School, Pinetops, North
Carolina.*

Develop high quality FFA experiences for students. Engage them in leading the FFA chapter through activities that teach the importance of

responsible behavior, commitment to a common goal, effective communication, and cooperation. Establish and maintain a high quality supervised agricultural experience (SAE) program that addresses the aspirations and career goals of students. Visit students as part of the SAE program and develop good working relationships with parents and students.

Recruitment

The prudent agriculture teacher will not leave future enrollment to chance, and will aggressively recruit good students. Students who are interested in agricultural careers or who have a sincere interest in improving their agricultural knowledge and literacy are fair game for the agriculture teacher's recruitment efforts. Not all students are academically gifted, but that should not be the determining factor in recruiting the student.

Communicate with the Guidance Counselors

Develop a good working relationship with guidance counselors. Show them examples of the rigor in the courses you teach. If guidance counselors do not know that the Agriscience program is a quality learning experience for students, then the teacher has no cause for complaint about the influence of the guidance department in student enrollment. Effective teachers are proactive in working with guidance counselors.

Set the Tone Early

Effective teachers send a letter to incoming students to welcome them into the program. This letter should send the message that the Agriscience class will be interesting and exciting,

but will require the very best efforts of students. This letter should also point out that FFA membership and participation in the SAE program are also expected of every student. Parents will see this letter and most likely will be more willing to be partner with you in their child's education.

How We Are Measured

A former principal of one of the authors once said, "Agriculture teachers are only as strong as their weakest link." We are often measured by the actions of a very few poor teachers in the profession. Legislators, school board members, policy-makers often point to the few teachers who do not perform adequately in the classroom and use them as examples of how agriscience programs fail to achieve their purpose. They use our "weakest links" to describe who we are. The principal whose current Agriscience program is a dumping ground for every misbehavior problem in the school might just expect the same from your program when he or she becomes your principal. We are in the age of accountability in education. It is the challenge of the Agriscience teaching profession to encourage every teacher to establish a legacy of quality instruction and a professional and responsible attitude toward the students we serve.

References

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Footnote

¹ This is an actual teacher whose name has been changed to protect his identity.

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Avoiding Dumping Ground Status

1. Provide good teaching
2. Individualize your instruction
3. Use challenging and rigorous instruction
4. Recruit good students
5. Communicate with guidance counselors
6. Set the tone early