

Agricultural Educator Survey Summary Future of Farming Project, October 2008

Future of Farming sent a request to approximately 280 members of the Washington Association of Agricultural Educators, asking them to fill out an online survey. Thirty-five percent of them completed the survey. All of the respondents identified themselves by their Future Farmers of America (FFA) district. The range of responses was similar in each district. An average of 38% of educators in each district responded, ranging from 18% of District 2 educators to 56% of District 6 educators. District 1 had the largest number of respondents, district 5 the fewest.

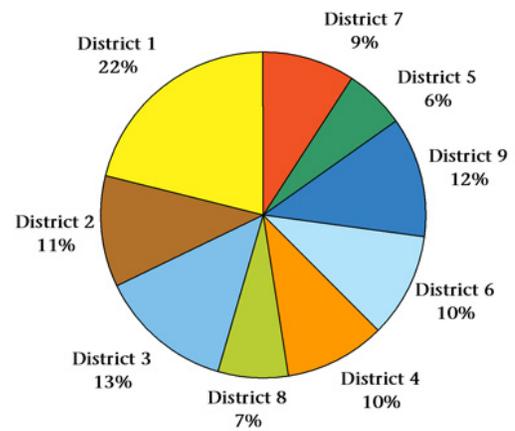


Figure 1: FFA Districts and the percentage of educators that responded from each district

Figure 2: Percentage of responses from each district

Table 1: Program components and courses taught according to survey

Plant Sciences	74%
I have an industry advisory group	73%
I design and run a Vocational Agriculture program	60%
Animal Sciences	59%
Technical Trade Courses	48%
Agriculture Business and Management	36%
Forestry	29%
Natural Resources/Environmental Science	15%
Mechanics/Welding	12%
Nursery/Floral	11%
Agricultural Science	7%
Shellfish/Aquaculture	6%

Opportunities for Agriculture Education Students

Nearly half (45%) reported that the economic opportunities for their students in the future were excellent. Eighteen percent foresaw skilled labor as being the biggest economic opportunity. Only 11% reported that the opportunities for their students were few.

Skills for Agriculture Industry Employment

When asked what specific skills students needed to take advantage of those opportunities, the most frequent answers (40%) were “soft skills” such as leadership, communication and interpersonal skills, and the ability to think and learn. Work ethic was the most frequently mentioned “soft skill.” Applied skills and skills specific to particular industries or technologies were mentioned by only about 25% of respondents.

Challenges to Agriculture Education Programming

A variety of challenges were reported. The most common challenge was the inaccurate perception of agricultural and other career and technical education opportunities. Many educators felt that too many students, parents, administrators, school counselors, and members of the public believe that agriculture is all “cows and plows” and therefore students should be discouraged from pursuing it as a career option. The current emphasis that all students should be college-bound and should focus on academics rather than applied skills was frequently mentioned.

The second most commonly reported challenge was that graduation requirements and the policies around the mandatory assessment tests (WASL) were limiting student options and taking students away from career and technical education classes. Several reported that “CORE 24” (twenty-four required academic core courses for high school students) limited student electives so much that many were not able to take career and technical or agricultural classes even if they wanted to. Students that fail parts of the WASL are required to take remedial classes instead of electives such as career and technical education. Several educators reported that special needs kids (developmentally disabled, at risk, and non-English speakers) were often “dumped” into their classes.

A third challenge was funding. As budgets tighten and requirements increase, career and technical programs and other “electives” are often the first to lose funding. The fourth most commonly reported challenge was motivating students and instilling a strong work ethic.

Future Food Producers

When asked who would produce our food 20-30 years from now, 38% believed that very large farms were the food producers of the future. 11% thought that our food would come from overseas, 11% thought that future food producers would be small or micro farms, and 11% thought that medium-sized farms would disappear and only very small and very large farms will remain. 10% believe that their current students would be the producers of tomorrow.

What can the State do?

The response to this question was unified: prioritize agricultural education, increase funding, and change the graduation requirements that penalize students that are not college-bound. Approximately 25% of Washington students do not graduate from high school, and of those that do, 40% do not attend college in the first year after graduation. More than half of Washington high school students do not go to college. Educators believe that cutting back on career and technical education programs that help these youth succeed without going to college means the school system is not serving more than half of its students.

Appendix A: Survey Questions

1. What is your FFA District, or, if you are not associated with FFA, what is your county name?
2. Please check all that apply:
 - I teach Animal Sciences
 - I teach Plant Sciences
 - I teach Agricultural Business and Management
 - I teach Forestry
 - I teach Shellfish Farming
 - I teach technical trade courses
 - I design and run a Vocational Agriculture program
 - I have an industry advisory group
 - Other (please specify)
3. What is your vision of agricultural education?
4. Who do you think will be the producers of food 20-30 years from now?
5. How should curriculum evolve over that timeframe to meet future agricultural industry needs?
6. Please describe your students, in terms of age and background. Who are they? Do you think your student populations are changing? If so, how?
7. What are the economic opportunities that you see in the future of your students?
8. What specific skills do your students need to take advantage of these opportunities? How have you identified these skills as important (industry feedback? Other?)
9. What challenges do you face as you prepare your students for successful entry into the agricultural industry?
10. Do you see unmet needs within agricultural education in Washington State? If so, what are they?
11. Think about the current political and economic moment, the needs of agriculture as a powerful economic driver in our state, and your needs as an educator. Please recommend specific actions that our state can take in order to assure that students entering the agricultural sector are prepared and successful.