**ISBE Testimony – Oct 14, 2021**

Good Afternoon. I’m Michael Zecher, a farmer in Mercer County IL, and I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you about the importance of the Ag Education line item in the IL State Budget. I have 20 years of employee management experience in the industrial sector and currently also serve as the Secretary for the IL Leadership Council for Ag Education (ILCAE).

Since 1987, IL Lawmakers have understood the importance of supporting Ag Education programs in our state by designating funds specifically for these programs through a dedicated allocation in the IL State Budget. Since 2017-18 school year, this funding has remained flat at the current allocation of $5,000,000. I believe it is time to increase our investment in Ag Education.

Agriculture in Illinois is a dynamic and resilient industry that encompasses much more than just farming. With over 27 million acres of farmland, it’s easy to see the importance of farming to Illinois overall economy, but IL Agriculture has so much more to offer. We also have more than 3,000 food processors and packaging companies within our state, in addition to biofuel production facilities, grain processors, equipment manufacturers, data scientists, accountants and a myriad of other careers. One in four Illinois jobs is directly connected to Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources (AFNR).

During the past 5 years, according to ISBE enrollment reports available through your web site, enrollment in IL schools has **declined** by 5.6% (from 1,932,510 enrolled in grades K-12 in 2016-17 to 1,824,011 in 2020-21), enrollment in Ag Education programs throughout our state continues to increase. Over this same time period, **student interest in Ag Education is at an all-time high**. The number of schools offering Ag Education programs has increased by 9.8% (from 327 to 359), student enrollment in Ag courses in grades 6-12 has increased by 16.9% (from 31,655 to 37,000), FFA membership has increased by 24.8% (from 17,535 to 21,885), and the number of dedicated Ag Teachers has increased by 15.5% (from 413 to 477).

During a time of overall declining enrollment in IL schools, what has caused the dramatic increase in participation in IL’s Ag Education programs? I believe it is directly attributable to the fact that Ag Education in IL provides a unique means of developing our young people into leaders for tomorrow. Through a three-pronged approach that includes classroom education, hands-on real live practical experience and FFA engagement, Ag Education students develop skills and abilities that prepare them for both further education opportunities AND to enter the workforce as valuable contributors to Illinois’ economy. In 2019-20, IL Ag Education students reported total net earnings from their hands-on Supervised Ag Experience programs of over $13 million.

In order to support out-of-the-classroom learning opportunities for students, Ag Teachers don’t just work normal school days. Funding from the state budget through “Three Circle” grants has provided extended summer employment contracts for 258 Ag Teachers to provide the additional supervision required. Currently, 60% of Ag Teachers in Illinois have 12-month employment contracts.

In addition to this, the current allocation from the state budget:

* Supports a dedicated team of regionalized professional “coaches” who assist Ag Teachers in developing successful programs within their home schools by utilizing proven techniques collected from successful programs throughout the state.
* Provides incentive grants to provided necessary equipment and other resources for schools
* Supports Ag Teacher development programs at our state’s teacher training institutions
* Supports the Illinois FFA Center allowing them to enhance leadership development opportunities and better connect with and serve the growing number of members.
* Provides professional development workshops for Ag Teachers

But more can yet be done. At our September ILCAE meeting, farmers, ag business professionals and ag educators from the secondary, community college, and university levels jointly identified several new opportunities that we would like to pursue, including:

* Increasing funding for schools beginning Ag Education programs
* Increasing funding to expand the reach of Ag In The Classroom programs in elementary schools to better educate IL citizens on nutrition, where there food comes from, and how it gets to their local grocery store.
* Providing funding to reach students in schools that do not offer Ag Education programs to encourage them to consider a career in agriculture as a means of addressing the employee shortages reported by many ag-related employers in the state.
* Increasing support for Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences (MANRRS) student chapters.

I have personally seen how an Ag Education program has impacted my life. **I’LL EXPAND THIS**

Thank you very much for the privilege of speaking to you today. I encourage you to support our request for an increase in funding for IL Ag Education programs.

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**THREE MINUTE VERSION**

Good Afternoon. I’m Michael Zecher, a farmer in Mercer County IL, and I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you about the Ag Education line item in the IL State Budget. Since 2017-18 school year, this funding has remained flat at the current allocation of $5,000,000. I believe it is time to increase our investment in Ag Education.

During the past 5 years, K-12 enrollment in IL schools has **declined** by 5.6%. Over this same time period, **student interest in Ag Education is at an all-time high**. The number of schools offering Ag Education programs has increased by 9.8%, student enrollment in Ag courses in grades 6-12 has increased by 16.9%, FFA membership has increased by 24.8%, and the number of Ag Teachers has increased by 15.5%.

During a time of overall declining enrollment in IL schools, what has caused the dramatic increase in participation in IL’s Ag Education programs? I believe it is directly attributable to the fact that Ag Education in IL provides a unique means of developing our young people into leaders for tomorrow and we sincerely appreciate the IL State Legislature’s support for our program.

Current funding is well utilized in our state. The current allocation from the state budget:

* Provides funding in support of extended summer employment contracts for 258 Ag Teachers to provide the additional supervision required. Currently, 60% of Ag Teachers in Illinois have 12-month employment contracts.
* Supports a dedicated team of regionalized professional “coaches” who assist Ag Teachers to developing successful programs within their home schools
* Provides incentive grants to provided necessary equipment and other resources for schools
* Supports Ag Teacher development programs at our state’s teacher training institutions
* Supports the Illinois FFA Center allowing them to enhance leadership development opportunities and better connect with and serve the growing number of members.
* Provides professional development workshops for Ag Teachers

But more can yet be done. At our September Illinois Leadership Council for Ag Education meeting, farmers, ag business professionals and ag educators from all levels jointly identified several new opportunities that we would like to pursue, including:

* Increasing funding for schools beginning Ag Education programs
* Increasing funding to expand the reach of Ag In The Classroom programs in elementary schools to better educate IL citizens on nutrition, where there food comes from, and how it gets to their local grocery store.
* Providing funding to reach students in schools that do not offer Ag Education programs to encourage them to consider a career in agriculture as a means of addressing the employee shortages reported by many ag-related employers in the state.
* Increasing support for Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences (MANRRS) student chapters.

Thank you very much for the privilege of speaking to you today. I encourage you to support our request for an increase in funding for IL Ag Education programs.