ksAgEducationGrowth-fwk / with file photo Pontiac students

On a roll: Ag education expansion continues in Illinois  
More schools,

more teachers

focus on ag

By KAY SHIPMAN

FarmWeek

Agriculture education growth shows no signs of slowing with school districts opening agricultural programs or expanding existing ones by hiring another ag teacher, according to new data from Facilitating Coordination in Ag Education (FCAE).

Students’ and districts’ interest in ag ed remains strong despite agriculture’s current situation, said Dean Dittmar, FCAE coordinator.

“The ag industry is in a little challenge now. But the agriculture, food and natural resource industry? Students clearly want to be a part of that,” Dittmar told **FarmWeek**. “As we tell parents and stakeholders, the message is getting across. There are meaningful, good paying jobs in food and fiber, ag technology and research.”

For the 2019-20 school year, 354 schools are offering agriculture courses, a 3% increase over the previous year.

The 10 schools that opened agriculture programs include Rolling Meadows High School; Liberty Middle School and Lincoln Middle School, Edwardsville Community Unit District; Pleasant Hill Junior High School; Warsaw-Nauvoo Colusa Middle School; Argenta-Oreana High School, Argenta; Clinton Junior High School; Meridian High School, Macon; Salt Fork Junior High School, Sidell; and Robert A. Jamieson School, Peoria School District 150.

Dittmar attributed part of the growth in junior high school programs to new startup grants available this year. “What we’re trying to do is break ground (with junior high programs),” he said.

On top of the schools opening ag education programs, a healthy number of schools hired additional teachers to expand existing programs, a 3% increase over the previous year.

The 10 schools that hired an additional ag teacher included Central High School, Burlington; Gary Comer Youth Center, Chicago; Herscher High School, Herscher, Tri-Valley High School, Downs; Farmington Central High School, Farmington; Pleasant Hill High School, Pleasant Hill; Eisenhower High School, Decatur; Pana High School, Pana; Carlyle High School, Carlyle; Columbia High School, Columbia; and Harrisburg High School, Harrisburg.

Dittmar anticipates growth to continue with state financial support funding Growing Agriculture Science Teachers (GAST) grants to eligible secondary institutions. The goal is to address the shortage of ag science teachers. Individual grants have increased from $100,000 to $300,000, according to Dittmar.

Simultaneously, an ag education line item within the state budget helps support extended contracts for ag teachers. Contracts of 11 to 12 months reflect ag teachers’ additional work and responsibilities, including year-round FFA and students’ supervised agricultural experience projects, Dittmar noted. Teachers must document 400 additional hours of instruction beyond the regular school period.

In the beginning, only 5% of Illinois high school ag teachers had 12-month contracts, but now more than 60% do, Dittmar said. Statewide, the average high school ag teacher’s contract has grown from 10 months to 11 months, he added.

Looking forward to ag teacher ed graduates, Dittmar said 25 are expected to graduate in May 2020 from the state’s four universities. In 2021, the universities anticipate ag ed graduates will number in the mid to high 30s.

Those graduates will be in high demand if current trends continue. In May 2019, 17 Illinois ag teachers retired and another 25 left the teaching profession.

Statewide, Illinois reported 79 ag teacher vacancies with 76 of those being filled. Three remained open.

Dittmar pointed to the support to recruit ag science teachers and for extended teacher contracts. “Universities, community colleges and high schools can use this information to show (ag) teachers are compensated,” he said.

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