

It's back to school and Ag in the Classroom continues its success of reaching students

Helping teachers teach kids about agriculture

September 1, 2010... As the doors to school open next week, Oregon agriculture is once again determined to see more education about one of the state's leading industries follow the kids and teachers into class. Oregon's chapter of Agriculture in the Classroom achieved a milestone last year by reaching 100,000 students, but is looking to go even further this school year.

"I think it's more relevant than ever to provide accurate information to students about agriculture," says Tami Kerr, executive director of Oregon Agriculture in the Classroom (AITC). "Since all students eat food and wear clothing, they already have a very natural connection to the very real world of agriculture. Each year, more teachers are learning about our program and the resources we have to help them. The growth in our program shows that students and teachers are both interested in agriculture."

Oregon AITC is a non-profit educational foundation that provides resources to teachers that helps them incorporate agriculture into their daily lesson plans.

"The purpose of Ag in the Classroom remains helping young people gain a better understanding of agriculture— the source of our food and fiber— and its impact on our economy and daily lives," says Kerr. "Our goal is to provide the curriculum and reference materials into the classroom so teachers can use agriculture to teach English, math, science, and social sciences. The biology and hands-on nature of agriculture lends itself to teaching many subject areas in a way that intrigues kids."

A national effort founded more than 25 years ago, Agriculture in the Classroom was originated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Oregon's chapter has grown tremendously in recent years. The number of students reached by the program has climbed from 3,000 in 1999-2000 to the 100,000 student mark this past school year. Program materials are being used in all 36 counties. AITC in Oregon has developed some material for the upper grades, but remains focused primarily on kindergarten through sixth grade.

"We have developed many hands-on activities that help kids retain the information," says Kerr. "Our older board members remember a time when school activities involved making butter or growing a garden. That left quite an impression on them. We would like to have the same impact on today's students."

Exciting hands-on activities developed by AITC for the classroom range from plant experiments to a yeast "blowup" and building an earthworm condo. Kids learn about such things as agricultural careers, agricultural geography, and food nutrition.

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AITC has produced a fourth grade student history book focusing on Oregon's people, natural resources, and agriculture called *Get Oregonized*. Some teachers use the entire book from front to back, while others select specific portions to supplement their regular lesson plan. Also available is a newly revised *Grown in Oregon Commodity Map*, which helps students learn what grows where in the state. A free loan library allows teachers to check out videos, kits, instructional units, and various books organized by subject.

This year, AITC has produced a new unit on Oregon soils and another unit on geography and mapping, which builds on the commodity map updated a year ago.

Agriculture in the Classroom also has a strong presence in such events as Ag Fest, held annually at the State Fairgrounds in April, where the interface between city kids and the farm is strong. AITC is involved in other activities designed to get young students interested in learning more about agriculture. An annual calendar contest in which students from public, private, and home schools submit artwork depicting Oregon agriculture has been a huge success. Selected entries are published in a calendar that is available for purchase.

Another successful resource available in the spring for classroom use is AITC's Literacy Project. Community volunteers read from a selected text, and participate afterwards in a related classroom activity that shares their experience in agriculture with students. This year's book, *Til the Cows Come Home*, was read by more than 375 volunteers reaching 13,719 students in grades K-5 throughout the state, a 25 percent increase from 2009. The underlying message of the book is that everything in agriculture is used, and nothing is wasted.

All of these resources are available to both urban and rural schools. Kerr says just because a youngster lives in a small town doesn't guarantee they know or truly appreciate agriculture.

"My family is from Tillamook and I grew up on a dairy farm," she says. "You would think most of the students in Tillamook would have a pretty strong understanding of the dairy industry, but that isn't necessarily the case. And those who understand the dairy industry might not see the connection to the grass seed or nursery industries, or any other commodities important to our state. So this kind of education is needed across Oregon."

The Oregon Department of Agriculture is an enthusiastic supporter of Agriculture in the Classroom.

"Two or three generations ago, it probably didn't seem necessary to create a program to teach kids about the importance of agriculture since most of them lived on the farm," says ODA's Brent Searle, special assistant to the director and AITC board member. "That's not true anymore with more children today having visited a zoo than a farm. It's all the more reason why we need a program like Ag in the Classroom. We believe its activities and resources will help Oregon's young people appreciate agriculture now and in the future."

Hopefully more students will know a lot more about agriculture at the end of this new school year than they did at the beginning. If so, Agriculture in the Classroom will have played a big role.

For more information about AITC, visit <<http://aitc.oregonstate.edu>> or contact Tami Kerr at (541) 737-8629.