

Ag Teachers Fight Illiteracy

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Lauffer is also president of the Pennsylvania Vocational Agriculture Teachers Association (PVATA), a relatively small, self-explanatory teachers' organization.

For some time, Lauffer has been working through the organization to bring attention to the lack of agricultural literacy. He said it seems ridiculous that a high school graduate does not know from where their food and fiber come, and, in general terms, what practices are required to provide those two basics of survival.

As president of PVATA, Lauffer has been putting in extra time to bring attention to that lack of very basic education.

The most pressing goal Lauffer said he hopes can be achieved is to get the state Department of Education to acknowledge that agriculture (or agri-sciences) should be recognized as a valid course of study and that agricultural information should be infused into all aspects of the curriculum.

However, when the 22-member State Board of Education, an agency of the Department of Education, wrote up regulations which mandate a list of "must haves" in each school's curriculum, they left out any mention of agriculture.

Not one word.

In a letter to the board, after reviewing its draft revisions to chapters 3, 5, and 6 of those regulations, Lauffer commented about the lack of agricultural education.

"In reviewing the draft revisions to Chapter 5 and 6 a major concern is the lack of any language that specifically encourages the development and/or improvement of agricultural education in Pennsylvania," he stated in the position paper.

In the letter, Lauffer cites a three-year study by the Research Board of the National Academy of Sciences, published in 1986, called, "Understanding Agriculture, New Directions for Education."

"The study noted that most American know very little about agriculture, its social and economic significance in the United States and particularly its links to human health and environmental quality."

According to Lauffer, the academy of sciences report "made two key recommendations. First, that agriculture education programs be upgraded to prepare students more effectively for the study of agriculture, and second that, beginning in kindergarten and continuing through 12th grade, all students should receive some systematic training about agriculture which may be integrated into existing science, math, history and/or social studies classes."

In light of the study, the lack of the mention of agriculture in the board's regulations for curriculum does not sit well with Lauffer and others in PVATA.

"We live in a society that obviously depends for its very existence on the most sophisticated, productive and efficient food and fiber production, processing and delivery systems ever known to man. Our concern is that 'man' knows very little about this system.

"Agriculture is the number one industry in the state of Pennsylvania, yet nowhere in the Chapter 5 and 6 regulations do we even see a mention of the word agriculture.

"Agriculture is one of the few areas of technology in which our nation is still considered the world leader. Is it appropriate for us to take that world leadership for granted and wait until we are in a scientific and economic crisis to realize the importance of agriculture and agricultural education?"

The PVATA position paper states, "We sometimes hear the argument that the farming population or those who are engaged in the production of food and fiber is declining. That is exactly our point. It is becoming even more critical that we all develop an awareness of agriculture."

The letter also states, "The days of farmers producing maximum yields with little regard for related impacts are a thing of the past. The technological advances in agriculture are unsurpassed by any other applied science.

"Modern agricultural production is a complex science of management that defines optimum production in light of economic feasibility, social acceptance and environmental soundness. We can

not in good conscience allow an increasingly agriculturally illiterate society to emerge from our school systems."

What PVATA members request are specific changes to the regulations to include agricultural science as a distinct and recognized course of study in primary and elementary education, middle level education and high school education.

For the regulations which address vocational-technical education, PVATA seeks to add wording which would recognize student "... participation in vocational student organizations to develop leadership skills and positive attitudes be considered as an integral part of the vocational technical program."

Or, in other words, to recognize the educational value of participation in organizations such as FFA and 4-H.

That wasn't the only letter written. There were several, the latest dated Dec. 20, 1991. And three times Lauffer testified before the board about the importance of agricultural study in the curriculum.

During a Jan. 9 meeting, the state Secretary of Education Donald M. Carroll Jr., who is the chief executive officer of the board, said that the board did not want to mandate agricultural education, and that the word "agriculture" had been entered in the regulations, though not the way PVATA had requested.

Lauffer, responding to why "agriculture" should be expressly addressed as part of a primary school curriculum, said, "When was the last time you went into a restaurant, carefully studied the menu and then ordered something that wasn't on the menu?"

However, for all his efforts, he said the State Board of Education has apparently cast a deaf ear. He wrote as much in a letter to Sheila Miller, executive director of the Senate Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee. Miller has promised help.

Lauffer said that PVATA, though very small, has not been quiet.

In addition to Miller, they have contacted and received support from the Agricultural and Rural Affairs committees, and the Education committees in both the House and Senate.

Responding almost immediately were the chairman and vice chair of the House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee, Rep. Kenneth Cole, D-Adams, and Jess Stairs, R-Westmoreland, respectively.

In a joint letter to the chairman of the board, Sister M. Lawreace Antoun, Cole and Stairs stated that are seeking, "... favorable consideration of expanding the mandates of the current State Board of Education regulations to include agriculture industry, agriscience and ag awareness within a school district's curriculum or content. We write this jointly because we believe the matter deserves a bipartisan effort."

Also, during a meeting, PVATA members literally reached into their pockets to hire lobbyist Frederick C. Brown, of Harrisburg.

According to Brown, the status of lobbying efforts was "in the ball park" as of Thursday.

"I characterize it that we're in the ball park," Brown said. "That is, with the Independent Regulatory Review Commission, based on the legislative support that has been

The State Board Of Education

HARRISBURG (Dauphin Co.) — Efforts to infuse agriculture into mainstream education statewide are placed before the State Board of Education, but many people are unfamiliar with what the board is and what their job is.

A general description of the board and its activities, an agency of the State Department of Education, is provided in the 1991-92 edition of the Pennsylvania Manual, volume 110:

What They Do

The board has the power and duty to review and adopt regulations that govern educational policies and principles and establish standards governing the educational programs of the commonwealth, upon recommendation of its councils.

What It Is

The State Board of Education is the regulatory and policy-making board for basic and higher education in the commonwealth.

There are 22 members of the state Board. Seventeen members are appointed by the governor and confirmed by the state Senate for six-year terms, and they serve without pay.

Four members of the board are members of the General Assembly. They serve as long as they hold majority and minority chairs of the House and Senate Education Committees.

The chairperson of the Professional Standards and Practices Commission (PSPC) is a non-voting member.

Ten members comprise the Council of Basic Education, with 10 also on the Council of Higher Education, with the chairperson of the board and each council designated by the governor.

The 22 members of the board also serve as the State Board for Vocational Education.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education provides administrative services for the board and the Secretary of Education is the chief executive officer of the board.

The current Secretary of Education is Donald M. Carroll Jr., of Mechanicsburg, a career education specialist who was appointed by Gov. Robert Casey in 1989 and reappointed in 1991.

The (board) is supported by a staff consisting of an executive director, an administrative officer and a secretary.

Related Agencies

Regulations and policies adopted by the board are subject to review by the Independent Regulatory Review Commission.

The five-member commission was created in 1982 to review all proposed and existing rules and regulations created by all state agencies, commissions, boards, departments and authorities, except for the Legislation, the fish and game commissions, local governments and the judicial system.

The chairman of the commission is appointed by the governor and the current chairman is Thomas P. Comerford, of Scranton, also Gov. Casey's hometown.

offered and will continue to be offered by other ag leaders in the General Assembly, I think we stand a 50-50 chance of improving the status of agriculture with respect to the school curriculum."

Brown and Lauffer have been working closely to stay on top of things. They have been attempting to penetrate what they said they perceive to be an ingrained stereotype of agriculture which would have only those interested in running a family farm receive instruction in agriculture.

Brown said that some people are beginning to understand that the steel industry and every other manufacturing industry in the state is second to agriculture now, not the other way around.

And they are beginning to understand that the skill and educational levels required to work in agriculture and agricultural support businesses are not being met by the majority of those entering or in the work force.

In fact, according to a Penn State University instructor, Kenneth Kephart, certain agricultural job opportunities abound in Pennsylvania — for those qualified to fill them.

Brown said that people in Harrisburg are starting to look at the possibility of agriculture as part of the regular school curriculum a little differently.

"Initially (the suggestion of agriculture be offered as part of a curriculum) might have been 'pooed-pooed' somewhat.

"I think Bob (Lauffer), when he spoke to the state board back in January and said, 'How many times have you gone into a restaurant and ordered something not on the menu?' I think that got the attention of many of the state board members," Brown said.

Brown also said that, because some of the regulations considered

by the board are supposed to allow school districts the flexibility in creating curriculum, agriculture and agricultural sciences are not included in the curriculum regulations, a district's won't have the flexibility to provide these courses.

"I'm pretty optimistic that there will be some improvement in the status of agriculture. I think that if we move ahead one notch, we will benefit the industry."

On Thursday, Feir said that the state board is attempting to move into different directions with the state mandates.

"In reality, what the board is doing with the proposed change in curriculum regs is reducing a lot of the kind of specificity that (PVATA) would like inserted. In a sense it's moving in a different direction with the regs in general.

"The real answer is I don't know what the board is going to do. The board members will have to make decisions on a lot of things. We had a discussion about (agriculture) at the last meeting (Jan. 9). There were a couple of members who suggested not requiring specific teaching, but requiring some information about food processing and related industries.

"The messages that we got from Bob Lauffer and others has been expressed clearly, and in the end I think we will satisfy that to some extent."

Board Of Education Reviews School Regs

HARRISBURG (Dauphin Co.) — The Pennsylvania State Board of Education Committee has planned to accept public comment on Thursday, Feb. 27, on proposed regulations which would affect school curriculums, among other things.

The meeting is scheduled for 9:30 a.m., in the Susquehanna Room of the Education Building at 333 Market St., in Harrisburg, which is on the 12th floor.

According to a notice published by Robert Feir, executive director of the board, "The purpose of the meeting will be to review comments and testimony regarding proposed revisions of Chapter 3, 5, and 6, which were received during the public comment period; to develop recommended changes in the proposed regulations for adoption by the State Board of Education at its meeting March 11-12, 1992; and to develop proposed student learning outcomes to recommend to the board for consideration in lieu of those proposed in September 1991.

The efforts of the Pennsylvania Vocational Agriculture Teachers Association to change the regulations to include agricultural sciences and refer to agriculture within the regulations are among the issues to be considered by the board.

The meeting is open to the public and comments are to be accepted starting about 9:35 a.m. Depending on the number of those wishing to comment, the committee may limit individual comment time, in order to conclude public comments by 11 a.m.

Copies of the documents to be considered are to be available at the meeting.

The board intends to adopt revisions of the codes on March 11 and March 12.

