

Bringing Agriculture Back to the Classroom

By Senator Fred Akshar

Since first being elected in 2015 to represent the people of the 52nd Senate District in Broome, Tioga and parts of Chenango and Delaware counties, it's been a steady and steep learning curve. My 15 years working in law enforcement educated me on our community's needs in a single discipline, but my new job enabled me to learn more about the many industries and disciplines that make up our diverse state and the challenges they face.

Being raised in rural Afton, N.Y., I grew up knowing that agriculture is a way of life and an important economic driver for rural families across our state, but I didn't know just how big an industry agriculture was for New York (\$38 billion-dollars-a-year-big). I didn't know that the average age of a farmer is over 55 years old. While many of our hardworking farmers may look forward to retirement, losing them could be devastating for the industry without a new next generation ready and willing to step-up.

I respectfully offer that too often, we teach our young people that in order to be successful, they must go into a high-tech manufacturing or computer-programming field. I offer that all our kids need to be successful is opportunity, and part of that opportunity is teaching them that not every career choice needs to be in high-tech manufacturing. It's teaching them that many of the jobs of the future are directly connected to agriculture, which is much more than milking goats or bailing hay. It's production, transportation, distribution and more. This is the first step in sustaining and growing the future of food production in our region and across our state.

If we get our kids interested in agriculture today, we'll naturally have a workforce ready for tomorrow.

Understanding the problem and doing something about it are two very different things. That's why in January 2017, I was proud to partner with BOCES, Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) and local school districts to start bringing agricultural education back into the classroom. Together, we launched a pilot program into five school districts (Harpursville, Maine-Endwell, Owego Apalachin, Union-Endicott and Windsor) to educate our local children on the importance of agriculture, where their food comes from and the career opportunities associated with the ag industry.

CCE administered agricultural classes and curriculum. An Agricultural Educator visited each school regularly throughout the school year, providing 14 lessons per month for each school. Each school's curriculum was customized to suit the needs of individual school districts, with classes ranging from learning about the science and technology of agriculture to touring local farms to growing food at school gardens.

The feedback from the first semester of the program was incredible. Children who had never seen a cow up close were now learning about the dairy industry. Others were growing and eating their own vegetables for the very first time. The excitement and enthusiasm from the program was electric.

After such a successful pilot semester, we decided to double the size of the program for the fall of 2017, expanding to Bainbridge-Guilford, Chenango Valley, Deposit, Greene and Tioga Central for a total of ten school districts.

In addition to the expansion, two schools received \$350,000 each to construct new agricultural laboratories to help bring agricultural education to life for local students in innovative and unprecedented ways.

From the start, I've pledged my commitment to supporting quality education for the children in our community. I've also pledged to be a loud, energetic voice for our farmers and local agriculture. Today, I'm proud to be a part of a team of dedicated partners who share our vision and want to invest in our community's future. I can't wait to see where this partnership goes next.