Legal Eagles: Cultivating Knowledge about Teacher Liability in School-based Agricultural Education Laboratory Settings

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Introduction

The inclusion of laboratory settings is a characteristic of the vast majority of school-based agricultural education (SBAE) programs (Shoulders & Myers, 2012). Laboratories have historically included many types of facilities (e.g., agricultural mechanics, greenhouses, etc.) and have long been considered a vital portion of SBAE programs (Twenter & Edwards, 2017). SBAE laboratories are designed to be used as a medium through which to connect classroom content to real-world application (Phipps, Osborne, Dyer, & Ball, 2008). Moreover, laboratory settings provide SBAE teachers opportunities to apply hands-on, minds on teaching strategies to develop students' abilities and skills (Phipps et al., 2008; Talbert, Vaugh, Croom, & Lee, 2014).

Regarding laboratory instruction, many teachers report that laboratory-based content is important to teach (Shultz, Anderson, Shultz, & Paulsen, 2014), potentially indicating that laboratory spaces are well-used in many SBAE programs. SBAE laboratories demand much attention and management to remain viable as learning environments (Saucier, Vincent, & Anderson, 2014). Moreover, teaching in laboratories can present additional liabilities not commonly found in other areas of a school (McKim & Saucier, 2011). These additional liabilities could include burns from welding in an agricultural mechanics laboratory, lacerations from sharp blades when pruning plants in a greenhouse, a crushed foot from working with cattle in a livestock handling facility, and so forth. Thus, teachers should be prepared to address liability concerns related to teaching in SBAE laboratory settings (McKim & Saucier, 2011).

Teacher liability has historically been an issue associated with SBAE, particularly in relation to teaching in laboratory settings (e.g., machinery care and use, etc.). For example, Reneau and Poor (1983) found that teachers often were not aware of many issues related to legal concerns and protection. More recently, Hainline, Burris, Ritz, and Ulmer (2017) identified that, from the perspectives of school district attorneys and superintendents, factors related to SBAE laboratories (e.g., student safety, risk assessment, etc.) are of considerable concern for teacher liability. As modern society has become more litigious in the past decades (Imber & Gayler, 1988), greater emphasis has been recommended on ensuring that teachers are aware of their own liabilities, rights, and legal recourse options (Paul, 2001). Considering that teaching in laboratory settings can present all sorts of hazards that, in turn, provide liabilities for SBAE teachers (McKim & Saucier, 2011; Saucier et al., 2014), perhaps training on the subject (i.e., teacher liabilities and responsibilities) would be useful for teachers at all experience levels.

How it Works

During the Fall 2017 semester, the Methods of Teaching Agricultural Mechanics (AgEdS 488) course instructor at Iowa State University (ISU) developed a variety of written scenarios that related to teacher liability in SBAE laboratories. The course instructor, who is also an author of this abstract, has considerable experience and expertise in educational law as it relates to SBAE and is thus qualified to conduct the activities described in this abstract. The scenarios, each typed on individual sheets of paper, were distributed during a regular course meeting that

focused on teacher liability in SBAE laboratory settings. Ten (N = 10) course students participated and were paired together, creating five pairs of students. One scenario was given to each pair. Each scenario asked students to determine if the scenario's teacher was liable for the issues that resulted within the hypothetical chain of events. Students were also responsible for determining how to minimize potential liability risks presented within each scenario. These scenarios included, but were not limited to, topics related to equipment maintenance, student discipline, student supervision, and so forth, each of which were common issues associated with teaching in SBAE laboratories (McKim & Saucier, 2011). After the students read through their own scenarios and addressed each of the questions, the instructor conducted a thorough, student-led discussion of each scenario. The students read their own scenario aloud and presented their responses. Afterward, the instructor engaged all the course students in the discussion, asking each of them their thoughts on the subject before revealing the actual legal answer and recourse to the scenario. This process was repeated for all five scenarios.

Implications

Throughout the duration of the activity, there was much thought-provoking discussion as it related to each scenario. Anecdotally, the students reported that they were not aware of how the legal system functioned as it related to educational law. They also expressed ignorance about their legal rights, protections, and recourse options that they had as professionals. Additionally, the students reported that the scenarios were realistic and could apply to a wide range of SBAE settings, and that such discussions on teacher liability should be occurring within teacher preparation coursework. These concepts echo the findings of Reneau and Poor (1983), indicating that teachers' awareness of educational law and its applications have remained an issue for teachers, and teacher candidates, in the past decades and to this day. As Saucier et al. (2014) described, teaching in laboratory settings can present numerous challenges. Teachers should be aware of educational law (Hainline et al., 2017; Paul, 2001), particularly in the context of teaching in SBAE laboratory settings.

Future Plans & Advice to Others

Based on the feedback from the students described in this abstract, the AgEdS 488 course instructor plans to continue adapting, and building upon, this activity into future sections of this portion of the course. In addition, the course instructor plans to initiate research and professional development (PD) activities focused on educational law as it applies to SBAE teachers and programs in Iowa. We recommend that teacher preparation program faculty consider integrating similar practices into existing coursework. We do caution that teacher educators should either have expertise in educational law or work closely with an individual who does (e.g., a school board attorney, etc.) throughout the process of implementing this type of activity. Doing so may help to avoid perpetuating myths about teacher liability. We also recommend that those responsible for coordinating PD activities for inservice teachers consider conducting similar activities focused on educational law for the SBAE teachers in their respective states.

Costs

Printing resources, time, and faculty salary served as the principal costs for this activity.

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