

A National Review of State Standards Relevant to Agriculture Teacher Performance and Program Quality

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Introduction and Need for the Study

Decision-makers have increasingly used quality standards to improve school and student performance outcomes (Donaldson & Woulfin, 2018). These trends have appeared to influence how teachers view success in secondary agricultural education (Stair et al., 2016). Perhaps the most common way teachers have been evaluated is through teacher performance and program quality measures adopted by state agricultural education leaders (Graham & Edwards, 2018). As a result, considerable variability has existed regarding how secondary agriculture teachers and programs have been evaluated historically. To this point, little is known about whether disparities in quality standards might influence critical decisions regarding hiring, pay, promotion, and dismissal. Further, if evaluation systems give greater priority to specific performance indicators, then quality standards used for assessment likely influence resulting behaviors and practices, including teacher satisfaction and burn-out. Understanding the criteria by which secondary agriculture teachers and programs have been evaluated warranted investigation. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to describe commonalities and differences among state standards relevant to agriculture teacher performance and program quality.

Conceptual Framework

Cognitive sensemaking served as the conceptual framework for this investigation (Coburn, 2006). When creating policy, such as quality standards, decision-makers often draw on their beliefs, experiences, social interactions, and worldviews to organize their ideas into a cognitive framework that guides their logic (Coburn, 2001). This process is particularly amplified when decision-makers draw on the aforementioned factors to construct quality standards to evaluate performance (Coburn, 2006). In the current study, we used this lens to examine how decision-makers framed teacher performance and program quality to evaluate success.

Methods

This investigation used a content analysis to fulfill the purpose (Patton, 2002). To accomplish this, we contacted state agricultural education leaders ($N = 50$), as identified by the National FFA Roster System, via email requesting the standards, metrics, and quality indicators their state used to evaluate secondary agriculture teachers and/or programs. Participants were asked to provide their state's standards and complete a short questionnaire. To gain a holistic perspective of the documents and create shared understanding, five researchers examined the submitted standards from three states. After inductively coding each state individually, researchers met to discuss emergent concepts and negotiate a collaborative coding structure (Schreir, 2012). All state documents were then digitally organized and divided equally among researchers for in-depth analysis. Each document was analyzed using descriptive codes to identify links to the National Program Quality Standards for Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resource Education (2016) as well as relevant organizational elements used by state leaders to indicate teacher performance and program quality.

Results

Forty-seven state leaders responded to our email of which 32 provided documents or links to documents. Five states indicated they used the National Quality Program Standards as their state standards. Of the states that provided documents or web links, 21 were designed specifically for secondary agriculture teachers as opposed to documents for teachers in general or all CTE programs. Document length ranged from one page (Tennessee) to 124 pages (Arizona). There was great variety in the number of main quality standards and secondary quality standards ranging from 15 total metrics (main and secondary) for Tennessee to 149 total metrics for Wisconsin. Within the documents, the top five emergent standards were 1) *Curriculum and Program Design* (104 standards across 17 states), 2) *Instruction* (59 standards across 17 states), 3) *Facilities and Equipment* (90 standards across 17 states), 4) *Leadership and Personal Development through FFA* (86 standards across 17 states), and 5) *School and Community Partnerships* (53 standards across 17 states). A majority of the documents were organized into a rubric or rating system with varying scales and degrees of detail. Thirteen documents were designed to be used on an annual basis by the individual agriculture teacher with the assistance or guidance from an administrator (e.g., CTE director, principal), advisory committee, or state staff. Only one state, Illinois, delineated quality standards by experience of the teacher. For the remaining 36 states, the documents implied all agriculture teachers, regardless of experience or preparation in agricultural education, must meet the same qualifications. Eleven states required documentation in addition to the completion of the evaluation form. This included documents such as letters, event registration lists, record books, SAE visitation logs, curriculum, Programs of Activities, budgets, and meeting minutes. The purpose of these documents is to provide evidence the agriculture teachers and programs are meeting the listed requirements.

Implications, Conclusions, Recommendations, Impact on Profession

When viewed through the lens of cognitive sensemaking (Coburn, 2006), results from this study illuminated that great variety existed by which secondary agriculture teachers and their programs are evaluated. Quality indicators varied greatly from state to state. It also emerged that secondary agriculture teachers have numerous responsibilities, many of which go beyond classroom instruction. This is not surprising given existing literature that echoes this sentiment (Roberts et al., 2006; Train et al., 2019). These standards also indicated an imbalance in the total agricultural education model. Future studies should engage in an in-depth analysis of the content of each document to better understand the philosophical and logical underpinnings (Coburn, 2006). For practitioners and state leaders, we recommend critical examination of standards and evaluation. The number of standards and required documentation should be analyzed with respect to teacher experience and preparation. Distinctions should be made of *who* (e.g. individual vs. program) is being evaluated and *what* are the rewards or consequences of evaluation.

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