

**Examining Illinois Agriculture Teachers Perceptions of Compensation and the 3 Circles Grant**

Dr. Steven M. Still  
Southern Illinois University  
157A Agriculture Building  
Carbondale, IL 62901  
618-536-7733  
Steven.still@siu.edu

Dr. Jay K. Solomonson  
Illinois State University  
140 Ropp Agriculture Building  
Normal, IL 61790  
309-438-8084  
jksolom@ilstu.edu

Mr. Blake Uchitjil  
Southern Illinois University  
154 Agriculture Building  
Carbondale, IL 62901  
618-536-7733  
buchitjil@siu.edu

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### **Introduction/Need for Research**

The American Association for Employment in Education (2018) has reported an overall shortage of teachers in the United States. Exacerbating the problem, teachers leaving the profession now account for 90% of the demand with 19 to 30% of teachers leaving the profession in their first five years (Castro et al., 2018). The field of Agricultural Education has not been immune to the teacher retention problem (Foster et al., 2020). Specially in Illinois, school districts have failed to fill their teaching vacancies for nine out of the last ten years as large numbers of agriculture teachers annually exit the profession (FCAE, 2021). Among the top attrition influences for agriculture teachers are family and personal factors, excessive out-of-classroom expectations, lack of administrative support, poor working conditions, and low compensation (Solomonson et al., 2018, Tippens et al., 2013). Johnson and Birkeland (2003) suggested low compensation undeniably contribute to teacher attrition, while Warnick et al. (2010) reported adequate compensation as a significant factor for agriculture teachers to remain in the profession.

To address the compensation issue and help alleviate the agriculture teacher shortage in Illinois, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) formed a task force, culminating in support for a proposed grant aimed at funding a three-month extended contract for Illinois agriculture teachers. The goal of the grant is to compensate agriculture teachers for an additional 400 hours, while creating a stronger agriculture program based on the 3 Circle model (Illinois State Board of Education, n.d.). Interestingly, since its inception in 2018 40% of Illinois agriculture teachers are still not receiving the grant with 12% receiving no extended contract (Illinois Annual Ag Ed Report, 2020). It is currently unknown why these school districts do not take advantage of the grant program. The purpose of our study was to determine Illinois agriculture teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards their compensation, the Teacher 3 Circles Grant Program, and if differences existed between those receiving the Teacher 3 Circles Grant and those not receiving it. The need for our study was directed by the AAAE National Research Agenda, Research Priority 3: Sufficient Scientific and Professional Workforce that Addresses the Challenges of the 21st Century (Roberts et al., 2016).

### **Conceptual Framework**

We adapted the compensation construct of Solomonson et al's (2018) Agriculture Teacher Retention or Attrition model as the conceptual framework for our study. Our adapted model postulates that an agriculture teacher's compensation, consisting of their salary, benefits, and extended contract and/or stipends, can be a contributing factor to an agriculture teacher's decision to remain in or leave the teaching profession. This model was developed from previous teacher retention and attrition research (Tippens et al., 2013) and Human Capital Theory (Grissmer & Kirby, 1987). While this study primarily focused on additional compensation through an extended contract, it should be noted that our study was part of a larger project investigating a holistic view of agriculture teacher compensation.

### **Methodology**

This descriptive study was designed to determine agriculture teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward their compensation, the 3 Circles Grant Program, and if differences existed

between those receiving the grant and those not receiving it. Using SurveyMonkey, we developed our instrument consisting of three sections. Section one was composed of questions related to salaries, benefits, and compensation. Section two examined participants' perceptions and attitudes pertaining to the 3 Circles Grant. Section three collected demographic data. Before distributing the instrument, we had a panel of experts review the instrument for validity and we were granted IRB approval. We also conducted a pilot of 40 teachers to determine reliability of the instrument. Reliability estimates on the instrument were deemed "excellent" (Nunnally, 1978).

Using a census design, our research team sent the electronic questionnaire to all current agriculture teachers in Illinois to address the research questions. Data was collected over a six-week period during the summer of 2021 with multiple reminders to our population. Our efforts yielded a response rate of 34.3% ( $n = 148$ ). Non-response error was determined by comparing responses from early and late respondents, which found no significant differences between groups. Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS®) program version 26.0. Frequencies, percentages, and Chi-square test were used to analyze data.

### Findings

Overall, 73.6% ( $f = 109$ ) of our respondents indicated they felt they were fairly compensated for their teaching responsibilities, yet only 55.4% ( $f = 82$ ) felt fairly compensated for their time with FFA and SAE responsibilities scheduled outside of their regular teaching contract. Further, we examined responses between those agriculture teachers receiving the [GRANT] and those that did not. Seventy-three percent ( $f = 119$ ) of agriculture teachers receiving the grant reported it was a major factor in their decision to stay in their current teaching position, while 76% ( $f = 25$ ) of respondents not receiving the grant indicate it is something they want in their contract. We also found 84% ( $f = 103$ ) of agriculture teachers receiving the grant and 82% ( $f = 21$ ) of teachers not receiving the grant felt they were fairly compensated for their teaching responsibilities during contract hours. We conducted a Chi-square test and found no significant difference between groups as they relate to their teaching compensation during contract hours,  $X^2(1) = .042, p = .84$ . However, when examining perceptions of fair compensation for FFA and SAE responsibilities outside of contract time, the Chi-square test revealed a significant difference as 92% ( $f = 113$ ) of agriculture teachers receiving the grant and only 73% ( $f = 18$ ) of teachers not receiving the grant felt fairly compensated for their FFA and SAE responsibilities,  $X^2(1) = 9.144, p = .00$ .

### Discussion, Implications, & Recommendations

As 73% of agriculture teachers indicate the 3 Circles Grant is a major factor in their decision to remain in their current position and 76% of teachers not receiving the grant indicate it is something they want in their contract, it could reasonably be assumed that increasing the number of schools participating in the grant program would have a positive impact on teacher retention in Illinois. Further, as we know only 55.4% of teachers felt fairly compensated for their time with FFA and SAE responsibilities and there was a significant difference in this area between those receiving the grant and those not, school districts should reevaluate how agriculture teachers are compensated outside of contract hours, especially if they are not participating in the grant program. We strongly recommend that ISBE continue to support the grant program and encourage all school districts in Illinois to participate in it.

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