

“AgriKids Day: Bringing Agricultural Programming to an Urban Elementary School”

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Introduction & Need for Innovation of Idea

The challenge school-based agricultural education programs face of appropriately serving the needs of diverse populations (Bird et al., 2013) is growing. This coupled with programs such as FFA and 4-H’s inability to largely recruit minority students, including African Americans, due to their limited presence in urban schools (Fraze et al., 2011) is a complex problem faced by many Extension personnel. These factors, along with the related literature gaps, presented a need for developing this innovative event, “AgriKids Day”, to create more opportunities for inclusive integration of agricultural programming to these populations. Henry et al. (2014) discovered that prior to participating in agricultural programs urban students had an inaccurate impression of agricultural ideals as a result of a larger spatial gap from agricultural practices and absence of personal agricultural connections. Jean-Phillipe et al. (2017) determined that short-term agricultural programs generated positive opinions of agriculture and increased agricultural knowledge. This event bridged ideas from previous research to provide a short-term agricultural program to a predominantly African American elementary school in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. This school had approximately 500 children enrolled in Pre-Kindergarten to 5th grade. Their enrollment was 81% Black and over 90% of their students were considered economically disadvantaged. Formal agricultural programming was not available at their school, and they had minimal interaction with Extension programs throughout the state. AgriKids Day was a one-day event designed to educate students with limited agricultural knowledge and spark their interest in agricultural programs.

How It Works

The event was inspired by the lack of agricultural programs in many schools, with a vision to create an innovative approach to engage new students. An 1862 Land-grant Extension state specialist initiated a non-traditional agricultural awareness event by partnering with an urban elementary school in December 2023. Following approval from the school principal and district superintendent, comprehensive planning began. The Extension team spent January-April 2024 corresponding with local school administrators and staff to plan event logistics, educational booths, and activities. This team recruited participants from local agricultural organizations, state Land-grant universities, and producers to host educational stations. Prior to the event, a Zoom meeting was held to brief all participants on logistics, and volunteers were purposefully assigned to various areas to ensure smooth processes during the event. This event consisted of educational booths, animal interactions, and activities for youth to enjoy while learning more about the many facets of the agriculture industry, livestock, crops, nutrition, and natural resources. Following the event, appreciation notes and evaluations were distributed to all booth operators, school staff, and volunteers to gather feedback for future improvements.

Results to Date

The entire school of over 500 students was reached during this event, many of whom were minority and/or economically disadvantaged. It was evident that the students gained a new understanding of agriculture through the event’s activities, and chatter amongst the classrooms verified their excitement. There were over 20 educational booth participants including Oklahoma

State University & Langston University Extension educators, the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry, local nonprofits and agricultural producers. There were many hands-on activities including STEM exercises, seed planting, water and soil demonstrations and interactions with horses, cattle, goats and sheep. There were approximately 30 student volunteers from Oklahoma State University & Langston University who aided in the facilitation of the event. Overall, there was positive feedback from the education booth participants, volunteers, school faculty, staff, and students. One of the remarks that resonated profoundly was from an educational booth participant representing the Oklahoma Soybean Board. They stated, “I have done many of these Ag Day type events at schools across Oklahoma. These were without a doubt the best students I have encountered in an elementary Ag Day event. Someone, or several someone’s, at the school has created a culture that is systematic and systemic.” This remark demonstrates this elementary school as an ideal choice for hosting an agricultural event and further emphasizes the need and value of agricultural program initiatives to enhance engagement with nontraditional populations.

Advice to Others

When organizing an event for several hundred elementary school students, it is first crucial to receive approval for the event from the school system’s administration team and superintendent. Frequent and consistent communication with the school as well as engagement with and support from the school’s local county extension office are very beneficial. It is also important to plan a variety of activities to keep the students engaged for the duration of the event. The context of these activities should complement the students’ knowledge and comprehension levels. Authentic relationship building was stressed in this event’s preparation and was found to be essential. Relationship building with populations not ordinarily engaged with agricultural programming, local businesses and organizations can provide valuable foresight and expertise for potential future endeavors. Furthermore, individuals should also lean into personal networks they have already established, as they can help with extending potential program aspects. Additionally, allowing for the expertise of Extension personnel to help with guiding the vision of the event is another benefit toward increasing impact.

Costs & Resources Needed

This was a large-scale event and required weekly planning meetings and ongoing coordination of several individuals, including the Extension State Specialist, a Graduate Assistant and an Undergraduate Assistant. Funding from a \$4,500 internal Extension grant covered the following expenses: educational materials, participant activities, professional services utilized to provide support for the facilitation of the event, the undergraduate assistant’s stipend and event materials needed to support the vendors and volunteer management. The majority funds were utilized to cover the undergraduate student stipend and booth rental materials. The school served as the event host location, but the goal was to minimize their financial contribution to the event’s overall costs.

References

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