

The ELS Conference: Induction Programming for Alternatively Licensed Agriculture Teachers

Jay K. Solomonson, Ph.D.
Illinois State University
Department of Agriculture
301 N. Main Street, 140 Ropp Agriculture Building
Normal, IL 61790-5020
jksolom@ilstu.edu

John Heiser
Facilitating Coordination in Agricultural Education (FCAE)
535 Elm Place
Princeton, IL 61356
jheiser@ilaged.org

Lucas D. Maxwell, Ph.D.
Illinois State University
Department of Agriculture
301 N. Main Street, 147 Ropp Agriculture Building
Normal, IL 61790-5020
ldmaxwe@ilstu.edu

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Introduction

In Illinois, the Educator License with Stipulations (ELS) offers an alternative pathway to the teaching profession. Alternatively licensed teachers play an important role in addressing teacher shortages in high-need areas such as STEM, special education, and career and technical education while maintaining standards for educators in the state. Alternative licensure programs often integrate a combination of intensive coursework, supervised teaching experiences, and mentoring to ensure candidates are well-equipped for classroom challenges (ISBE, n.d.-a). The Career and Technical Educator endorsement is designed for individuals with substantial professional experience in a specific field (ISBE, n.d.-b). Applicants need a minimum of 60 semester hours of coursework and at least 2,000 hours of work experience in the area they intend to teach (ISBE, n.d.-b). According to the most recent National Agricultural Education Supply and Demand Study (2023), 372 individuals (25%) of the new hires in School-based Agricultural Education (SBAE) were certified through alternative licensure pathways. The Illinois Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources Education Report (2024) reported that 26 nontraditionally certified teachers were hired in 2024, resulting in 27% of all Illinois SBAE teachers holding an ELS, slightly higher than the national average. Alternatively licensed teachers often face unique challenges as they transition into the educational environment, often leading to lower retention rates when compared to teachers from traditional teacher preparation programs (Robinson & Edwards, 2012). Given the growing number of alternatively licensed teachers, it is vital that we consider their unique needs for professional growth and development (Stair et al., 2019). Perhaps offering them a tailored professional development program at the beginning of their teaching careers would make them feel better prepared to enter the classroom and, hopefully, more likely to stay in the Agricultural Education profession long-term.

How it Works

As more than a fourth of all SBAE teachers in Illinois are now entering the profession with an alternative license, Illinois agricultural education state staff, and various stakeholder groups determined there was a significant need for these individuals to receive targeted induction training prior to entering the classroom. In 2022, the Illinois agricultural education state staff planned and facilitated its first ELS Conference for alternatively licensed agriculture teachers at Illinois State University. Held in the summer prior to the start of the school year, the ELS Conference focuses on providing alternatively licensed teachers a crash course on pedagogy and everything typically covered in an agricultural education teacher preparation program. Every year, workshop sessions on the 3-circle model, teaching methods, classroom management, facility management, and laboratory safety are covered. Additional topics discussed stem from individual teacher needs, as determined from individual conversations, surveys, and on-site visits from our Illinois agricultural education state staff. These have included topics such as working with students from special populations, differentiating instruction, FFA officer team management, CDE training, and learning the basics of AET. Presenters for the conference have included successful high school agriculture teachers and university agriculture teacher educators. Currently, the participants of this conference transition directly to our state's Beginning

Agriculture Teacher Conference immediately following this event, where they join traditionally licensed teachers for additional onboarding training relevant to all new agriculture teachers. We also now offer a mid-year event to check in with them at the end of the fall semester. Further, this event provides additional training and prepares them for activities typically held in the spring semester.

Results to Date

For the first year of the conference, we had 10 participants (27.8% of our newly hired alternatively licensed agriculture teachers). Since that initial year, the attendance at the conference has grown, with 17 participants in year two (45.9% of our newly hired alternatively licensed agriculture teachers) and 23 participants in year three (62% of our newly hired alternatively licensed agriculture teachers). Of those attending the ELS Conference in the first two years, 21 participants (77.8%) are still in the profession. We are hopeful that the percentage will increase when we determine who has signed contracts for the next academic year. The conference evaluations have also been extremely positive. One participant stated, "I enjoyed the conference because it allowed us to meet with one another; that way, we understand that we are not alone as teachers without a [traditional] license." Anecdotally, another major benefit we have seen over the past three years is our alternatively licensed teachers' confidence and inquisition levels during the Beginning Agriculture Teachers Conference. The Illinois state staff indicated that the alternatively licensed teachers are now more willing to participate and ask questions than in previous years when the ELS Conference was not offered.

Future Plans & Advice to Others

Over the past three years, the ELS Conference has evolved. What started as a stand-alone two-day conference in 2022 has transitioned into a one-day event just prior to the Beginning Agriculture Teachers Conference. This change was due to participant evaluations and an attempt to increase registration numbers. Our future plans are to continue offering this as a one-day event just prior to the Beginning Agriculture Teachers Conference. Our goal is to expand some of the workshop options for the participants in different tracks as numbers continue to increase to help target their unique professional development needs. We also feel the mid-year check-in is extremely important to continue as a follow-up to the conference. We would strongly encourage others to implement this component if hosting a similar event in their states.

Cost & Resources Needed

Our annual cost of executing the ELS Conference and mid-year follow-up event is approximately \$1,500. These costs cover presenter fees, supplies/materials, and food/snacks during the events. The Illinois Agricultural Education Line Item pays for them within the Illinois State Board of Education budget. Local agricultural industry sponsors have also contributed by covering the hotel accommodations, which have averaged \$700/year. It should also be noted that we host these events at locations without a facility rental fee.

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