

## Community Influences on First-Year Agriculture Teacher Workload

### Introduction

The agriculture teacher shortage persists (Smith et al., 2024). Many authors have assessed why agriculture teachers leave the profession (e.g., Solomonson & Retallick, 2018; Solomonson et al., 2018; Walker et al., 2004), remain in the profession (e.g., Clemson & Lindner, 2019; Solomonson et al., 2018), and factors influencing these decisions. A great deal of this research focuses on teachers and their perceptions on variables impacting retention; some of the retention variables explored within the *Journal of Agricultural Education* include connectivity (DeLay & Washburn, 2013; Moser & McKim, 2020), teacher self-efficacy (Robinson & Edwards, 2012; Hasselquist et al., 2017; McKim & Velez, 2015), work-life balance (Sorensen & McKim, 2014; Sorensen & McKim, 2016; Solomonson et al., 2022), burnout (Croom, 2003; Kitchel et al., 2012; Smith and Smalley, 2018), and teacher margin (McKim & McKim, 2023; Marzolino & McKim, 2024; Marzolino et al., 2024). These studies, and others like them, focus on teacher perceptions and often amalgamate data from teachers to provide steps toward retention solutions. On the periphery are others in the school and community who may impact teacher retention. Some interest holders, such as administrators, have been included in teacher retention literature (i.e., Eck & Smith, 2024; Still & Solomonson, 2024), but other perspectives may also be valuable when pursuing solutions to the teacher shortage.

Examining teacher retention from the perspective of a community adds valuable context to mechanisms driving teacher retention. Many authors have stressed the importance of examining how agriculture teachers and their communities are informing one another. For example, Haddad et al. (2023) posited tensions with community may increase teacher workload. Therefore, understanding how community members are helping or hindering teachers in context may provide valuable insights on practical strategies to work with communities and foster retention. Furthermore, Traini et al. (2019) found early career teachers could have success or balance but not both; notions of success and balance may be co-constructed by teacher and community members, potentially contributing to misalignment. Finally, community influencers and systemic factors may impact how teachers perceive themselves and the job they're doing (Goodwin et al., 2024). As self-efficacy has been linked to job satisfaction (Hasselquist et al., 2017; McKim & Velez, 2015), centering a teacher and their school community may be advantageous to see how these variables shift over time.

Due to the complex nature of teaching agriculture – as well as the many interest holders surrounding agriculture teachers – it is imperative to examine the shortage of agriculture teachers from a community-centered, systemic point of view (Haddad et al., 2023; Traini et al., 2019, 2020, 2021). This includes interviewing key school and community members surrounding agriculture teachers, especially as these individuals may impact how teacher workloads are realized. With these factors in mind, the research team partnered with a first-year teacher, Curtis, to explore how his community context at Towne High School (THS) impacted his workload. This study included interviewing key school and community members surrounding Curtis, especially as these individuals impacted how his workload was realized. The research questions this study sought to answer are:

1. What internal/external forces shape a first-year teacher's workload?
2. How do school community members influence a teacher's workload?

### **Theoretical Framework**

McClusky's theory of margin (1963) guided this case study. McClusky's theory of margin states everyone has a load they must achieve, power with which they may achieve their load, and the difference between power and load is margin. Margin must be available for individuals to learn and achieve additional duties; periods of low margin result in high stress. Periods of moderate to high margin allow for greater learning potential. Community members may be able to influence teacher margin, acting upon load or power to reduce or increase margin. How community members behave and influence workload are important aspects of understanding more about teacher margin and how it manifests in context.

### **Methods**

This case study was designed with high quality case study methodology in mind (Merriam, 1998; Mott & Haddad, 2025). The lead researcher sought to be immersed in the case at hand, seeking opportunities to engage with Curtis and his community. Data were generated across the 2024-2025 school year from many data sources to ensure triangulation. Data sources included documentation, immersion, field notes, Curtis's social media, and semi-structured interviews. Interviews were held via teleconference, phone, or in-person. Curtis was interviewed eight times across the school year, and his interviews averaged 65 minutes. Other adult participant interviews averaged 40 minutes; adult participants in this study were THS administrator, Todd, prior THS agriculture teacher, Luke, four Alumni and Friends members, Diane, Gary, Jen, and Ron, and Curtis's wife, Emma. Four students, Anna, Beth, Matt, and Nick, participated in a 51 minute focus group. Also, 78 of Curtis's TikToks were analyzed; these videos averaged 16 seconds. All participants and locations have been assigned pseudonyms.

Interview data were transcribed and analyzed via inductive, open, and axial coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965) was used to ensure codes were alike. Once the lead researcher assigned preliminary codes, the research team met to compare, negotiate, and verify data (Morse, 2018). The theory of margin (McClusky, 1963) lent vocabulary for analysis and aided in formatting the narrative for this case. This theory was not used to code data deductively.

### **Findings & Discussion**

There were a variety of ways school and community members impacted Curtis's power, load, and margin as a first-year teacher. To explore these further, categories of power and load are explored before revisiting the research questions and ancillary codes which inform them.

#### **Power**

Power was a variable which fluctuated throughout the school year for Curtis. There were many ways Curtis set about *Finding Power*. One of the ways Curtis found power was through his excitement about future courses, sharing, "I'm really excited about that class [Conservation]. It's just my passion." Power was also found as Curtis was able to share other things he loved with his students, like parliamentary procedure. It was clear from the student focus group Curtis's love for this leadership development event had sparked interest in students. Power was also derived from *Pride in Students*, with Curtis sharing how much it meant when students engaged with course material intentionally: "I appreciate the ones that are actually trying and asking questions."

Students were able to influence Curtis's power, though Curtis's supporters had the opportunity to do so as well. There were many examples of a *Supporter Bolstering Power*. Ron, an alumni member and the school board president, shared,

“[Jen and I] sit on this advisory board, so we support him that way. Being on the school board, I, I always tell him, I am a lever for you to pull. So, when you need something through the superintendent, through the board, through finances, through whatever, all you do is call me, and I will pull that lever for you, and we'll make that happen.”

Ron, Jen, and other advisory board members helped Curtis to get his conservation course on the books for the upcoming school year. While this didn't align with Ron's personal interests in agribusiness, he shared he was supportive of Curtis having an outlet for his passion, thus he encouraged a conservation course being offered at THS. Beth attended the advisory board meeting when this change was being discussed, sharing with the committee what it would mean to students to have this opportunity, and the board – including Todd – approved this decision. In this way, Curtis's power was also bolstered by his community.

### **Load**

While there were ways supporters influenced Curtis's power, there were more ways they influenced his load. There were many examples of a *Supporter Taking Load*. Ron shared, “[Jen and I's] goal is to take things off of his plate. And that's a, in my mind, a huge thing for me, an ag teacher myself.” Jen helped Curtis by coaching many contest teams, sometimes when Curtis was busy being interviewed by the lead researcher. Other supporters, like Diane, wrote grants for the program. Via these activities, supporters were able to concretely lessen Curtis's workload. This was largely done because Curtis's school community understood the *Load from Program Management*. Ron shared, “[t]he blessing and the curse of FFA and agriscience education is that it is a freakin' monster. They add things every year and hardly ever do they say, oh, by the way, we're going to take this away.” Having led a program himself and gotten a great deal of support from his wife, Jen, Ron understood the pressures of a burgeoning load and sought to help. Fortunately for Curtis, supporters like Ron, Jen, and Todd were all familiar with SBAE programming and had the capacity to support him in this way. Emma also understood the challenges associated with this, working to support Curtis how she could at school and at home. While people were there for Curtis, he still lived with a *Fear of Messing Up*. When sharing about a mistake he'd made, he said, “It would be like, oh, man, I made a mistake. Now somebody is going to come yell at me. And, you know, we expect better and all this stuff.” While this scenario didn't happen, he was imagining it may have, and dealing with residual feelings in association.

While supporters were able to help Curtis with his load, he was also trying to figure out how to manage his load himself. He did this by implementing *Load Reduction Strategies*. Some of these strategies related to becoming more efficient by utilizing technology in the classroom, but others related more to coping with the burden of emotional load. He shared,

“I mean, every teacher in their first couple of years has these grand ideas of how they're going to do things, but after the first marking period, I was like, why am I wasting my time and effort trying this? Like, I can only make kids care so much and I'm not giving up on them, but like, the missing work kills me.”

Working with students who were unmotivated or acting out led to the code *Students Adding Load*; Curtis shared, “If I try to make you guys do anything you're going to throw a hissy fit anyways,” demonstrating the load accompanying student protesting in the classroom. Navigating

relationships and negative attitudes while teaching was taxing for Curtis, especially when his natural inclination was to be easygoing and good humored. Fortunately, Curtis and his supporters felt *Students Need to be Responsible*. By the end of the year, Curtis was making statements which were a lot like Diane's: "[Curtis] can only encourage so much - if [students] aren't interested to go the extra mile, to do the contest, to do the skills, to do the extra legwork, they're only going to get so much out of it." Students are supported and encouraged by Curtis and supporters, but they are the ones with the onus on them to improve and participate.

Emotional load was a big challenge for Curtis. Two instances of emotional load were derived from *Tensions with Agriculture Teachers*. At one point, Curtis shared, "I think [other agriculture teachers in the region] are all mad at me right now." This perception weighed on him, though he discussed how he was justifying this perception by foregrounding student leadership desires. Despite these tensions, and complicating this code, were great relationships with other agriculture teachers, wherein Curtis could give them a call and they would do everything they could to support him. This was especially evident when the THS sows were farrowing and Curtis shared stories of how much a teacher in a neighboring district aided him throughout the process.

### **Revisiting the Research Questions**

There were many forces – internal and external – shaping Curtis's workload. Internal factors shaping Curtis's load were his own goals, motivation, passion, and personality. *Bearing Load with Humor* was a strategy Curtis employed, often using sarcasm and humor as a coping mechanism. "Yep, sarcasm as a classroom management strategy? *No, never.*" This provided an outlet for him throughout his first year and shaped how he experienced his workload. Externally, students, supporters, society, staff, agriculture teachers, and his school all informed how Curtis's load manifested. *School Based Load* was present and created some stress for Curtis, especially with some change in budgets: "Like, I understand that the state budget reduced CTE money by 20%. Where's the other [\$2400]? So, I don't know what that'll entail." *Society Based Load* was also experienced by Curtis, especially where parents were involved. A major frustration was with some parents lack of involvement in their child's schooling, with Curtis sharing, "It's just that that group of kids, those families that are there, there is no push at home. There is no self-preservation in mind. They are just here." This issue often compounded Curtis's load generated by students. While these challenges may have more staying power, others were expected to dissipate with more experience. The *Lack of Predictability* of the program calendar is expected to improve by Emma, who shared, "But like in general, I think that he will be able to just work with the workload more. I don't necessarily think it will become any easier as time goes on. Maybe more like predictable and understood."

Of course, navigating the workload of an agriculture teacher isn't easy. Curtis experienced a great deal of *Boundary Friction*, sharing, "I learned how to say no, and now I'm bad at it again." He went into his first year knowing there was a need for boundary-setting, but found himself backtracking on those boundaries for a variety of reasons. Even with the help of high-caliber supporters, he was still experiencing challenges with boundaries throughout the school year. Yet, the results of these relationships led to *Anticipating a Positive Future* and thoughts of *Longevity*. Matt shared, "And [Curtis is] trying to encourage more people to get involved and more people to join. And he's like, he's getting a middle school class for the middle schoolers so they can get involved, like earlier than just freshman year." Curtis said, "I literally was telling... a couple of

the alumni people after the meeting last night, I said, this is, I feel like, going to be a great group of freshmen.” After his first year, Curtis was planning to stay at THS and in the profession.

### **Conclusions & Recommendations**

This case study focused on one first-year teacher within his localized community context. Therefore, findings from this study may be transferable to other contexts but may not always translate directly to different locales. Furthermore, the research team feels this is an extreme/deviant case (Flyvbjerg, 2006), which may not be easily replicated in other communities. Regardless, the insights drawn from Curtis’s story are plentiful.

For Curtis, synergies between himself, interest holders, and his community were incredibly beneficial. Supporters bolstering his power, taking his load, and working hard to ensure he felt he belonged all played a role in assisting Curtis with maintaining more margin in life. Traini et al. (2019) highlighted tensions between success and balance for early career teachers; when asked his opinion on this, Curtis responded he felt he had both – and this was not something he did alone. His high-caliber support system was working alongside him to help him feel this way, providing advice, support, and assistance when they could. There were still tensions between Curtis and his supporters, especially when things weren’t going as he’d expected them to, but this is likely something which can be remedied with time and secure relationships between Curtis and his school community.

As previously mentioned, when conducting work on teacher retention, a great deal of studies focus on teachers, what they’re doing, how they feel, and what they need (Haddad et al., 2023). A focus on teachers excludes other key interest holders who play a role in teacher retention and longevity, too. While administrators, Alumni and Friends members, students, parents, and others are not as easily accessible to researchers as teachers may be, it is important to consider community context as we explore solutions to the teacher shortage. With more contextual explorations, we may be able to determine the stories these systems tell us, allowing for better teacher preparation when entering certain community archetypes and working within them. Therefore, we recommend researchers continue to examine how context and school community supporters (or adversaries) impact teacher retention and longevity within the profession.

For practitioners, the most important takeaway from this study is to make connections within your community and try to leverage interest holders to help you maintain a healthy (or healthier) amount of margin in life. This may be challenging, especially when new to a school or community, but it may be worth the effort. Furthermore, delegating responsibilities means being comfortable with less direct control, which can be challenging when teachers feel responsible (sometimes solely responsible) for their programs. We recommend students, alumni, administrators, parents, and other supporters consider finding ways to anticipate teacher needs, offer supports, and bolster teacher power. What can you do to make a teacher’s day to day a little bit better? When split among different parties, the workload of teaching agriculture may become more manageable, especially when there is only one teacher leading the program.

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