

Middle School Mania: Expanding FFA Opportunities for Younger Students

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Introduction & Need for the Idea

Middle school agricultural education programs have experienced substantial growth in recent years, reflecting increased recognition of the importance of early career exploration and leadership development opportunities for younger students (Englin et al., 2025). Middle school represents a formative stage in student development, during which students begin shaping academic interests, career aspirations, and perceptions of belonging (Godbey & Gordon, 2019; Verhoeven et al., 2019). As school-based agricultural education (SBAE) programs continue to expand at the middle grade level, participation in National FFA Organization activities has likewise increased (Englin et al., 2025). In Illinois alone, more than 5,000 students in grades 7–8 participated in FFA activities during 2025, with 56 middle school FFA chapters engaging in Career Development Events (CDEs) (FCAE, 2025).

Despite this growth, opportunities specifically designed for middle school FFA members remain limited. Many existing FFA leadership conferences, CDEs, and experiential activities are designed primarily for older students, creating gaps in age-appropriate programming for middle-grade members. Recent literature emphasized that middle school agricultural education programs serve as critical entry points into broader agricultural education pathways by fostering student engagement, responsibility, and preparation for future participation in high school programs and agricultural careers (Eck & Davis, 2024; Tucker & McHugh, 2022). As participation in middle school agricultural education continues to expand nationwide, there is a growing need for innovative FFA activities and leadership experiences intentionally designed to meet the developmental, exploratory, and educational needs of younger students. Providing meaningful and accessible experiences for this demographic can strengthen student motivation, enhance leadership development, and support long-term recruitment and retention in our agricultural education programs.

How it Works

Middle School Mania was designed to provide a meaningful, engaging, and less intimidating competition experience for middle school FFA members. During the event, students compete in microversions of traditional FFA CDEs while participating in a team-based challenge. Opportunities are intentionally built into the beginning and end of the event to encourage networking and interaction among middle school FFA members from different schools. The event allows students to experience agricultural competitions in a more approachable format while gaining early exposure to agricultural career opportunities and FFA activities.

To support statewide implementation, the Illinois Association of Vocational Agriculture Teachers (IAVAT) Middle School Committee developed a digital resource folder containing all materials necessary to host a Middle School Mania event. Committee members collaborated to create modified versions of seven FFA CDEs, including Agronomy, Agricultural Mechanics, Horticulture, Food Science, Dairy Foods, Meat Evaluation, and Veterinary Science. In addition, the committee created FFA trivia activities, team-based challenges, event templates, scoring rubrics, promotional materials, and a comprehensive “how-to” guide for event hosts. These resources were shared throughout the state and highlighted during professional development opportunities for middle school agriculture teachers.

At a typical Middle School Mania event, participants rotate through five competition stations selected by the host site. Competition stations generally last between 10 and 15 minutes, while team-based challenges may range from 20 to 30 minutes, depending on the activity. High school and college students frequently assist with the event by serving as station facilitators and group leaders. Awards are often presented to top individuals and teams, further enhancing student excitement and engagement.

Results to Date

Since the development and promotion of the Middle School Mania resource materials, multiple events have been successfully hosted across Illinois. In the past year alone, five Middle School Mania events were held. A total of 27 schools participated, with 246 middle school FFA members competing in the events. Additionally, several middle schools and community colleges have expressed interest in hosting future Middle School Mania events, demonstrating continued momentum and enthusiasm for the initiative.

Anecdotally, teachers and event organizers have observed increased excitement and participation among middle school FFA members following involvement in Middle School Mania events. Students appear more willing to participate in additional FFA activities and competitions after having a positive introductory experience in a less intensive setting. The events have also provided valuable leadership opportunities for high school and collegiate agricultural education students who assist with event facilitation. Collectively, these outcomes suggest that Middle School Mania has helped create stronger engagement pathways for younger members while fostering enthusiasm for continued involvement in FFA.

Future Plans & Advice to Others

Future plans for the project include expanding opportunities so that each IAVAT district hosts at least one Middle School Mania annually. Additionally, the committee plans to continue reviewing traditional FFA CDEs and developing additional microversions to expand the variety of competition options available within the resource folder. This continued expansion will keep events fresh, adaptable, and engaging for participating students.

For others interested in implementing similar middle school competition experiences, collaboration with area colleges is strongly recommended. They often provide excellent facilities and enthusiastic students who can assist with hosting responsibilities, event facilitation, and student engagement. These events can also serve as valuable fundraising and leadership development opportunities for collegiate agricultural organizations. Further, organizers should provide participating teachers with study materials and clear guidance regarding modified CDE expectations.

Cost & Resources Needed

The primary resource needed to implement a Middle School Mania event are ten volunteers and the digital materials folder developed through collaboration between the IAVAT Middle School Committee and the FCAE project. The folder is available free of charge and includes event directions, student materials for each CDE, banner templates, team-based challenge activities, rubrics, sample promotional materials, and student engagement activities.

Costs associated with hosting a Middle School Mania event vary depending on the host location and event structure. Previous events have been hosted at schools, community colleges, and Farm Bureau facilities, often resulting in minimal or no facility costs. The primary expenses are consumable materials for the competition stations and prizes for participants. Most events include at least four micro CDEs and one team-based challenge, resulting in approximately \$100–200 in consumable supply costs. Team banners generally cost \$20–30 each, while individual prizes typically remain under \$50 total. Additional optional expenses may include snacks, drinks, and decorations. To offset costs, most host sites charge \$5–\$10 per participant, keeping events affordable while creating fundraising opportunities for host organizations.

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