

**Cultivating Champions: Growing Administrator and Guidance Counselor Support for
Agricultural Education Programs through a Professional Development Series**

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Introduction

School administrators and counselors play a crucial role in shaping educational priorities, allocating resources, and supporting programs that promote student achievement. Within school-based agricultural education (SBAE), administrator support has consistently been identified as a key factor influencing program quality and long-term program sustainability (Easterly et al., 2023). Administrators who understand the value of agricultural education are more likely to provide resources, advocate for program growth, support experiential learning opportunities, and align SBAE initiatives with broader school goals (Easterly et al., 2023; Eck & Smith, 2024). Researchers have shown that administrators generally hold positive perceptions of SBAE programs and recognize their contributions to student achievement, leadership development, and community engagement (Easterly et al., 2023; Rayfield & Wilson, 2009). Despite these positive perceptions, many school leaders have limited experience with SBAE programs and often lack formal preparation regarding the integral nature of agricultural education, including classroom and laboratory instruction, Supervised Agricultural Experiences (SAE), and FFA activities (Rayfield & Wilson, 2009).

As schools increasingly emphasize career pathways, workforce readiness, and college- and career-readiness, SBAE programs are uniquely positioned to help school districts achieve these priorities. However, meaningful support from administrators and counselors requires a deeper understanding of how SBAE programs contribute to school improvement efforts. Agriculture teachers have expressed a desire for administrators and counselors who understand the unique instructional components of SBAE programs and provide meaningful support for these learning experiences that extend beyond the traditional classroom (Paulsen & Martin, 2014). Further, school leaders have expressed interest in professional development opportunities to better support SBAE programs and identify where school and program goals intersect (Easterly et al., 2023). In response to this need, Illinois agricultural education state staff developed a School Administrator and Guidance Counselor Workshop Series to provide practical insights into high-quality SBAE programs that align with school improvement initiatives.

How it Works

The Illinois Administrator and Counselor Professional Development Series was established during the 2023-2024 school year to increase awareness and understanding of agricultural education, FFA, and Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources (AFNR) career opportunities for school administrators and counselors. The series combines in-person and virtual professional development opportunities to address current issues and topics relevant to school leaders.

During the first year, the series included three in-person workshops and one virtual session. Two regional workshops focused on AFNR career pathways and opportunities available through agricultural education and FFA programs, while the virtual workshop addressed NCAA approval of agriculture courses. The year concluded with an in-person event at the Illinois FFA State Convention, featuring breakout sessions tailored for administrators with varying levels of experience working with agricultural education programs.

Since its inception, the series has evolved to incorporate more virtual offerings while maintaining strategic in-person events. Topics have included college and career readiness, agricultural education course planning, state agricultural education grants, support for beginning agriculture teachers, alumni engagement, FFA student participation, team-building activities, and workforce demand in the AFNR industry. Presenters have included secondary agriculture teachers, school administrators, counselors, industry representatives, community college faculty, and university agricultural education faculty.

To enhance engagement and attendance, the series intentionally incorporates student involvement through chapter showcases, student presentations, and personalized invitations delivered by FFA officers to administrators and counselors. These strategies have helped strengthen connections between school leaders and local agricultural education programs while highlighting student success and program impact.

Results to Date

Since its implementation, the Administrator and Counselor Professional Development Series has experienced consistent participation and growth. During the 2023-2024 academic year, four workshops attracted a total of 129 participants. In 2024-2025, the series expanded to six workshops, resulting in 209 duplicated attendees. During the 2025-2026 academic year, the program included eight workshops and served approximately 200 participants.

Participant evaluations and individual feedback have indicated a strong interest in learning more about agricultural education programs and strategies to support agricultural teachers and students. Attendance trends suggest that both virtual and in-person formats offer valuable opportunities to engage school leaders across the state and deepen their understanding of agricultural education programming and student development.

Future Plans & Advice to Others

For the 2026-2027 academic year, Illinois agricultural education state staff plan to expand the series to 11 workshops, including four in-person events and seven virtual sessions. Future programming will continue to address timely issues facing administrators, counselors, and agricultural education programs while emphasizing strategies to support agriculture teachers and student success. We also learned several things from the first three years of implementation. First, workshop topics should align with issues participants are actively addressing. For example, course planning and sequencing workshops are most effective when offered during counselor scheduling periods. Next, scheduling is critical to attendance. Virtual sessions offered during the mid-afternoon consistently produce the strongest participation, while in-person events are most successful when they conclude by early afternoon. Effective communication is also essential. Multiple reminders, including calendar invitations and follow-up communications, have significantly improved attendance rates. Finally, participation is enhanced when attendees can connect personally with the program through student involvement, colleagues' presentations, or partnerships with well-known educational institutions.

Cost & Resources Needed

Funding for the Administrator and Counselor Professional Development Series is provided through our state Agricultural Education Line Item. The primary expenses associated

with the series include presenter support, participant meals, and workshop materials. Total expenditures were \$3,748 during FY24, \$3,327 in FY25, and \$1,318 in FY26. The reduction in FY26 costs was largely attributed to the decision not to provide lunch during the state FFA convention. In addition to financial support, successful implementation of the series requires collaboration among agricultural education state staff, secondary agriculture teachers, counselors, administrators, industry representatives, and postsecondary partners. The willingness of these stakeholders to serve as presenters and advocates has been critical to the continued growth and success of the program.

References

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