

A Global Professional Development Model for Agricultural Educators

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Introduction/Need for Innovation or Idea

Agricultural education continues to face challenges related to teacher burnout, professional isolation, and long-term teacher retention; teacher support and professional development are among factors associated with agricultural educators' decisions to remain in the profession (Roberts et al., 2016). Although many professional development opportunities provide valuable content, few offer immersive, agriculture-specific learning that renews teachers' sense of purpose, strengthens professional community, and broadens global perspectives. Building on evidence that agriculture-focused global immersion can have lasting professional impacts (Sorensen et al., 2024), this model provides in-service agricultural educators with field-based experiences connecting them to agricultural systems, local educators, and culturally grounded learning.

How It Works/Methodology/Program Phases/Steps

The professional development program consisted of a week-long immersion in Puerto Rico designed for school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers to expand their understanding of agricultural education, agricultural production, and Puerto Rican culture. Faculty members designed and implemented the program by developing the itinerary, coordinating partnerships, establishing the budget and participant fees, recruiting participants, and conducting a virtual pre-departure orientation. During the program, participants engaged in agricultural industry tours, school and university visits, professional learning with local educators, and place-based cultural experiences highlighting Puerto Rico's agricultural systems and communities. Structured reflection was incorporated throughout the week, and participants completed evaluations following the program to guide future offerings.

Results to Date/Implications

Across three consecutive years, $n = 43$ SBAE teachers participated in the Puerto Rico professional development program. Results reflect post-program evaluations and open-ended participant feedback, which suggested three primary outcomes. **First**, participants described the experience as professionally rejuvenating, reporting renewed motivation and purpose after reconnecting with why they entered the profession. Rather than seeing the trip as simply travel, participants described it as a meaningful reset that reminded them of the broader value of agricultural education and their role within it, consistent with research linking high-quality PD to strengthened commitment and identity (Avalos, 2011).

Second, participants described stronger professional community through sharing ideas, discussing common challenges, and continuing collaboration after the trip. Participants bonded through shared experiences and reflection, recognized common professional challenges, and continued collaborating after the program. These relationships appeared to reduce feelings of isolation and create a stronger sense of belonging within the profession, echoing findings that collaborative PD structures can foster supportive professional networks (Desimone & Garet, 2015).

Third, participants described the experience as authentic professional learning because direct engagement with producers, educators, and unfamiliar agricultural systems provided practical examples they could bring back to students. Exposure to different commodities, environments, and resource conditions helped teachers think beyond their local context and connect classroom learning to global agriculture. Participants reported incorporating stories, photographs, and examples from the experience into their classrooms to make instruction more engaging and relevant. Taken together, these outcomes suggest global immersion may be a valuable model for supporting teacher renewal, reducing isolation, and improving curriculum relevance in agricultural education (Sorensen et al., 2024).

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Building on the success of the Puerto Rico program, future efforts will focus on expanding global professional development opportunities for school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers while maintaining the program's emphasis on strong local partnerships, experiential learning, and structured reflection. Participants have expressed interest in additional international destinations, particularly throughout Europe and other regions with distinct agricultural systems and cultural perspectives. In addition to serving practicing educators, future iterations of the model will explore providing similar global immersion opportunities for high school agricultural education students and their advisors. Extending these experiences to secondary students may strengthen agricultural literacy, global awareness, and interest in agricultural careers.

Educators or leaders seeking to replicate this model should build relationships with local producers, schools, colleges, and community partners; align experiences with curriculum and program goals; and clearly communicate that the experience is rigorous professional development rather than tourism. Maintaining some flexibility in the schedule is also important so participants have time to reflect individually and process the experience collectively. Programs may also consider collecting participant feedback and examples of classroom implementation to refine the model over time and document its influence on teaching practice and student learning.

Costs/Resources Needed

The model requires travel coordination, strong local partnerships, and access to agricultural and educational sites. Participants pay a program fee (typically about \$2,000, depending on cohort size) plus round-trip airfare. The program fee covers lodging, local transportation, guided tours, professional development activities, entrance fees, and most meals. Participants often fund the experience themselves, although many receive support through school district professional development (PD), Career and Technical Education (CTE) funds, grants, or other professional learning resources. Long-term success also depends on trusted local partners who provide meaningful access to agricultural operations, schools, universities, and community-based learning experiences.

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