

Teacher Feature

Al Withers, MAITC Program Director



Why should students be agriculturally literate?

My first reaction is to simply say ‘because they eat and wear clothes’ every day! A more complex answer centers on them being the future! They will be our future leaders, policy-makers and career workforce. It’s important they are taught baseline information about agriculture throughout their formative years. This in turn will help them to embrace some historical perspective about our ever-changing agricultural system, allowing them to understand and communicate the source and value of agriculture as it affects quality of life, not only in American but across the globe.



How can agriculture be integrated into K-12 curricula?

The content centered on agriculture, food and natural resources has no boundaries in the K-12 classroom! Maybe I am too close to the work at hand, but it has always boggled my mind when a teacher says he/she doesn’t teach agriculture at their grade level yet then tell me they are a social studies or science teacher. It’s the context we are aiming to embed within every classroom and school setting. We aren’t asking you to just stop everything and teach agriculture; rather we are encouraging you to integrate agriculture/food into the very core curriculum you are teaching. Use agriculture as a real-life learning opportunity for your students.

What have been the biggest challenges and biggest successes in your 31 years with Minnesota Agriculture in the Classroom?

Biggest Successes:

- Not many education programs have had the “staying power” that MAITC has had over the past 31 years. That is in large part due to our unique public/private partnership, drawing on financial and human resources from Minnesota’s great agriculture community and the long-term commitment of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture.
- The stability of our core educational resources. We have successfully offered the student Minnesota AgMag Series for 30 years, going on 31 years. That stability has brought us great credibility. Knowing that I was going to retire, I have had several teachers contact me recently to tell me they used every AgMag since inception in 1986. Now that is cool. Also, our working relationship with the Minnesota Alliance for Geographic Education and the development of our Food for Thought geography resource has been going strong since 1997.
- The ability for MAITC to stay true to its educational vision and mission through a great transformation in agriculture ... everyone seems to want to get to students and teachers with their particular message and social media and immediate gratification have sometimes made it hard to ensure learners are getting their information from the most trusted and accurate primary sources. By mission we are not a promotional program.
- Without a doubt the hiring of Sue Knott as our first MAITC Education Specialist in 2011.

Biggest Challenges:

- Technology. When I was first hired the only way to reach a teacher was to write a letter or leave a message with the school secretary. You then had to hope you were at your desk when that teacher called you back. Now everything is instant communication. What’s next??
- The every-widening gap between agriculture and the consuming public. How can you expect a teacher to embrace agriculture in the classroom when they have no past experience with it or frame of reference of how we got to where we are today? So, teacher professional development will be a key piece for MAITC for many years to come.
- The growing pressure to reach students with messaging will continue. We must continue to embrace education about agriculture, teaching them to discover and ask questions about agriculture, rather than telling them what to learn based on special interests, advocacy or product promotion.



What advice do you offer to teachers and educators?

- Broaden your perspective about agriculture. Yes, it all starts with the farmer and the land, but agriculture is evident in every subject while you follow its path from the farm to table and beyond.
- Choose your primary sources for information about agriculture and current day issues in agriculture wisely.
- Agriculture means something different to just about everyone. It's okay that we all don't think and act alike. Agriculture is very complex and as a subject can be quite polarizing at times.
- Don't hesitate to reach out to MN Agriculture in the Classroom staff for great educational materials and teacher training opportunities. We offer valuable, free help!!

Thanks for the opportunity to provide you with a great public service since 1985!!

