

# Not Just "Sows & Plows!" Interest In Agriculture Ed On The Rise

By [ROBIN SUSSINGHAM](#) · JUN 14, 2016 | Source: <http://wustnews.wustl.edu/post/not-just-sows-plows-interest-agriculture-ed-is-on-the-rise>

You hear a lot of bad news about Florida's agriculture industry. Competition from foreign markets, labor shortages, insects, the loss of farmland to development. And most seriously, the disease of citrus greening, which has devastated Florida's signature crop.

But surprisingly, young people aren't shying away from agriculture education in their schools. In fact, participation is at record highs.

David Byrd has been involved in agriculture education for nearly four decades, retiring from the Polk County School District as agriculture program supervisor in 2013, and is now at Warner University in Lake Wales. He's seen a lot of changes.

"When I first started teaching, we taught specific courses," Byrd says. "We taught nursery operation, citrus production, livestock production, and what has happened over the last few years is we've gone from specific courses to four-year programs."

The agriculture education programs are much more specialized than they used to be. In many cases, students can finish one of these programs - in veterinary assisting, say, or food science - with a certification, and it helps them land a job.

Other changes have been to Florida agriculture itself. Production of the state's iconic crop, citrus, is down 70 percent from a decade ago.

But student participation is not declining. In fact, it's the opposite. More and more students are turning up in ag classes - and joining the FFA, the national student organization dedicated to agriculture.

"Student participation in the FFA is probably at an all time high," Byrd says. "There's a lot of interest!"

State agriculture education officials say the diversity of programs is bringing in more students who live in cities. Urban schools can support ag courses like veterinary assisting or biotechnology, because they don't require a lot of land.

Of course, many students still want more of that traditional farm experience, like Byrd's grandson, 12-year-old Timothy Vester. Timothy's mother (who is Byrd's daughter) is also an ag teacher in Clewiston.

Timothy, nicknamed "BuddyRo," plans to join FFA next year.

"I'm a country boy kind of person," says Timothy, who says he'll participate in the FFA's citrus and livestock programs.

Byrd says agriculture education offers a path for students who learn differently, who want to do things with their hands. Also, it's a break from the anxiety that often swirls around schools, in part because of burdensome testing requirements.

"They like the less stressful environment," Byrd says. "I tried to make my class about 50 percent in the classroom, and about 50 percent in the greenhouse, the garden, the pasture, the hog pens, the steer pens, with hands-on learning."

Byrd says students have said to him that they would have quit school if not for the agriculture program. He says one big difference from traditional academics are the relationships that grow between students and agriculture instructors. They might spend four years with the same students, visiting their homes, getting to know their parents and grandparents, or even spending two weeks together at the state fair.

"I had a student one time," Byrd recounts, "that had been in my class for four years, and he was a senior, and we use this term "senioritis." They get kind of lazy, and ready to get out, and he said something one day that upset me, and I said, 'you're really getting on my nerves,' an 18 year old male student." Byrd's voice starts to break. "He started crying, and said, 'I'm sorry Mr. Byrd. So you build up a relationship with people."

There were 69,000 students in Florida enrolled in agriculture education this year, and that number has been climbing steadily in recent years. The problem now, officials say, is finding enough ag teachers to meet demand.