Why extended contracts for agricultural educators?

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I was on a 12 month teaching contract my entire teaching career. During that time, other teachers who were maybe a little envious, and administrators who were looking at their budget, would sometimes ask why I was on a 12 month contract. I usually replied, only half joking, that it was because they didn’t have 13 month contracts.

If you are an agriculture teacher in Louisiana, it is a state law that you are on a 12 month contract. It was similar in Texas 40 years ago. Beginning in the mid 1980s, local schools were given more control to adjust contracts. We began to see more contracts for seemingly random number of days. A traditional 10 month contract for all teachers could be extended for any number of days, usually up to 226 days. The 226 day contract usually had approximately 40 days included between the last day of in-service and the first day of the next school year’s in-service.

Let me tell what those days are not, and then I will tell you what they are. They are NOT included in your contract to compensate for the holidays, weekends and late nights that we invest in our students during the regular school year. I have had teachers tell me they had spent 226 days working by mid-May. That is pretty typical in our profession for good teachers. These extra days ARE for the time spent during the summer months to put on a high quality program. I can’t imagine any great agriculture science program without the teachers on the job during the summer.

According to our fall 2011 survey available on our website, 90% of agriculture teachers are on some type of extended contract. The majority of that 90% are on 12 month contracts. So what are activities that should be accomplished during the summer?

Attending the State FFA Convention in mid-July is a key element in any local program. The opportunity to participate in this process is very valuable, although the teachers are on duty 24 hours per day during this five day event. Participating in the VATAT Professional Development Conference can, in my mind, make the difference between an average program and a great program. The opportunity to get the latest updates in our profession, attend workshops to hone your skills and meet with other teachers and leaders who have the same goals, can be invaluable. This conference takes another five days.

Being a part of a the State FFA Degree and Award Check committee can bring about an improved understanding of our program, which can lead to enhanced student performance. This event usually takes three days in mid-June.

Another worthy undertaking involves participating in workshops and skills development programs, many times offered by our university partners. These can range from agriculture mechanics to training LDE and CDE teams more effectively. Typically these trainings are three to five days in length.

Many activities during the summer will take place in your own community. Time should be set aside to develop a long range plan for your program. Having meetings with your Advisory Committee and school administrators to develop this plan is essential. Often during the school year, we are just too busy to get this done. I always tried to make time to meet with the other agricultural groups in the summer. These include the Extension Agents, Farm Service Director and NRCS Director. It is also a good time to sit down with representatives of agricultural industries in the community.

There are a variety of FFA camps for students during the summer. Some require you to be an elected officer, while others are interest specific, like range camp or livestock show camps. Most of these require a teacher supervisor.

That brings us to the supervised agricultural experience programs. All active FFA members are required to have a SAE. While there are different types, animal projects are the most popular. Animal projects carry over to the summer in most cases. Oftentimes animal projects are procured during the summer, feeding programs are developed and some communities have a summer livestock show. A teacher’s presence is a requirement.

An agricultural teacher is responsible for more than their classroom. There is almost always an agricultural mechanics shop to maintain, equipment to have repaired and a safe learning environment to provide for students. In many cases, there is a school project facility to manage. From personal experience, I can tell you that can be a demanding job. This is also a good time to reorganize and make the facilities neater and pleasing to the eye of any visitor.

Summer is always a good time to reflect on your classroom teaching. Improving your yearly teaching plan and individual lesson plans should be an important part of any summer plan. You will be evaluated on your PDAS by how well you teach your classes. Don’t let this be an afterthought.

I could talk about many other worthy activities for the summer, but every community is different. The summer is when you set the stage for the year and prepare for enhanced student achievement. Schools that have limited summer programs put their students at a competitive disadvantage for scholarships and other honors compared to schools that have 12 month programs. When schools look to hire a teacher, high quality candidates will look for those places that offer extended contracts. I spoke with a superintendent recently who told me he didn’t know if he could afford a 12 month teacher. I simply told him he couldn’t afford NOT to hire such a teacher if he wanted a quality program, and that’s the truth.