Nebraska News Service

LINCOLN--If the aging workers of Nebraska's approximately 60,000 farms are going to be replaced, the schools are the best place to start.

Sen. Kate Sullivan of Cedar Rapids said that's why she sponsored an interim study to examine Nebraska's K-12 education standards and curricula to determine whether agriculture is incorporated as an essential component.

"These programs focus on assisting educators to effectively incorporate information about agriculture into subjects already being taught in K-12 schools so students have a better understanding of the impact of agriculture on society," Sullivan said at a legislative hearing Friday. "Agriculture is much too important to only be taught to a small percentage of students considering careers in agriculture and pursuing vocational agricultural studies."

Sen. Tom Carlson of Holdredge agreed, and said in an agriculturally abundant state like Nebraska, farmers have an objective to provide for many.

"We take for granted that we have the safest, most plentiful food supply in the world," Carlson said. "Our students take that for granted. It's so important to remind ourselves that agriculture has a noble mission, and that's to feed the world."

Deanna Karmazin with the Agriculture in the Classroom program testified that many younger students were confused about the role of farm products in everyday consumption. Karmazin said some students she talked to classified eggs as a dairy product and believed most food was created at a store or factory.

Farming is the No. 1 industry in Nebraska producing $547 billion in food products, and with Nebraska assuming so much responsibility for the world's food supply, Karmazin said she was worried that the leaders of tomorrow have no agricultural literacy.

Cory Epler, who represented the Nebraska Department of Education, offered an explanation of the regulations surrounding school curriculum and statistics into efficacy of current programs.

Epler said currently, no statewide mandate exists because curricula are developed at the local level for each district. Half of the state's social studies standards match agricultural knowledge and skills. Currently, 148 Nebraska schools offer career-based instruction based around agriculture, natural resources and food. Fourteen percent of students were enrolled in an agricultural class in 2009-10 and opportunities to do so exist in 55% of schools, most in rural communities.

"Our staff has been in communication with administrators to continue to seek ways to fund agricultural programming at the local level," Epler said.

Kerry Hoffschneider, the communications manager at DuPont Pioneer, and Robert Aranda, principal of Bryan High School in Omaha, said bountiful opportunities exist for the future of farming.

"Because of the Urban Agriculture class, the kids are becoming more open-minded," Aranda said of a popular class offered at his school wherein students integrate agriculture with other topics like English and geography. "The leadership aspect is…just outstanding."

Hoffschneider said incorporating a curriculum that teaches younger generations of farmers new technology will help agriculture reach its potential.

"Young people are mobile," she said. "The dream is everywhere."

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