

Sowing Wellness, Reaping Balance

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As an expat child living all over the globe, I call the world my home. Although my parents are both Missouri natives, I spent my childhood living abroad. This brought me to the sand dunes of Dubai and to the flatlands of the Netherlands, where I found my passion in agriculture. Growing up, I always had an appreciation for the industry, but it wasn't until a 4th-grade field trip to a small Dutch farm that my perspective truly shifted. It was something about the feeling of hard work and being a part of an industry that feeds the world that truly gave me that passion, and ultimately brought me here today.

Because the outlet for agricultural education is limited overseas, halfway through my freshman year, my parents moved us to Weston, Missouri, to give me the opportunity to start my education in agriculture. Behind every one of these agricultural experiences is a hard-working Ag teacher. Yet as important as they are in the future of our industry, supporting and promoting balance in these teachers' lives is often overlooked. There are over 11,000 of these hard-working middle school and high school agricultural educators here in the United States (*Overview*, 2024). Agricultural educators wear many hats and take on workloads that often go beyond a typical school day and even a typical school year. From classroom instruction, after-school FFA activities, traveling, CDEs, LDEs, conventions, the list goes on. Not to mention that oftentimes our FFA advisors are not just our Ag teachers, but they are also our personal therapists, mentors, role models, and so much more. So the real question is: how do agricultural educators balance it all?

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines balance as “mental and emotional steadiness”. Having a balanced lifestyle means dedicating equal time and energy towards each aspect of your life, including social, emotional, and physical. Mrs. Kelsey, an ag teacher in Gower, Missouri, told me that, “Finding time for yourself and family, as well as setting boundaries for work and

personal life, is the key to balance”. Mrs. Kelsey is not my Ag teacher; however, watching her interact with her students and others during our chapter’s Farm Safety Day showed me how she has genuine passion for people, as well as what she teaches. With three of her own children in her classes, she has the opportunity to connect with them in and out of school, and her work has inspired her daughter to pursue a career in agricultural education. Her willingness to help me with my Teach Ag Fall Speech shows a servant-hearted and helpful spirit, and that is truly what makes a good agricultural educator. Although Mrs. Kelsey dedicates a lot of her time and energy towards her students and her own children in her class, she shows steadiness and balance in how she lives.

One thing about Mrs. Kelsey that stood out to me is her ability to set boundaries and say “no” when work starts interfering with her personal time. Mrs. Kelsey’s story is a perfect representation of what so many agricultural educators experience. The workload of these teachers is heavy. Although their passion is strong, passion alone cannot sustain them. We need to make it a priority to promote systems that support teacher wellness through professional development that incorporates balance, mental health resources, and protection for personal time.

With 537 agricultural educators, overseeing 365 ag programs here in Missouri, (*Preparing for Success, 2025*), we need to especially focus on supporting the health and well-being of these teachers here in our home state. Programs such as TeachWell, Mental Health America, and AgriStress provide resources for agriculturalists and educators alike. TeachWell and Mental Health America focus specifically on mental health, resilience, and burnout prevention for all educators. The Agristress Helpline is specifically catered to help agriculturalists in mental crisis and serves as an outlet for mental health and agriculture-related resources. Missouri is proudly one of the 11 states that provides this service to individuals in the

agricultural industry; however, a system that specifically caters to agricultural educators is yet to be created. Launching such a project would greatly benefit ag teachers all across the country.

One of the most stressful and time-consuming times of the year for Ag teachers is prepping for contest season, and sometimes that preparation time bleeds into out-of-school instruction time. Although Mrs. Kelsey is excellent at maintaining her boundaries, sometimes dedication requires sacrifice. Mrs. Kelsey, along with many other Ag teachers, can be found working with kids during contest season, even staying late at night after students' sports practices, and making sure that they are prepared for their contests.

Sacrifice is defined as “destruction or surrender of something for the sake of something else”. (Merriam-Webster, 2019) For many Ag teachers, it is the sacrifice and surrender of time. As stated before, Ag teachers often work outside of instructional class time and beyond typical school years. Generally, vocational agriculture teachers are contracted for 12 months a year compared to the typical nine-month contract of most educators. Ag teachers all across the country can be found spending their summers doing SAE visits for their students, attending livestock shows, state fairs, and so much more. As a result of this, most ag teachers do not get a typical summer vacation, this especially can lead to burnout and the need for a break.

The million-dollar question is, how do you find the balance? Mrs. Kelsey has made it a point to say “No” and set boundaries when it comes to overcommitting and letting work interfere with personal time. But what are some other ways that Ag teachers can avoid burnout throughout the year? A strong support system is vital. Having fellow teachers that understand the workload, and having an understanding and flexible school administration is key for any teacher’s success, but especially for agricultural educators. For example, Ag teachers need substitutes more often than the average teacher because of events and conventions where they cannot be present in the

classroom. Understanding and accommodating administrators can help reduce that stress.

Another way to avoid burnout is exercise, which not only is good for physical health, but adequate exercise also releases endorphins that help boost mood and reduce stress and anxiety.

Mrs. Kelsey takes time for herself to go to the track near her house, and she has noticed that this is a good personal ritual that benefits her overall mind and body.

Finally, one of the largest parts of teaching is planning. By creating clear lesson plans, dates on the calendars, and to-do lists, Ag teachers can more effectively handle the workload. Although the agricultural education profession is very overwhelming and stressful at times, the reward of watching your students succeed is what makes it worth the while. If we truly want to sow seeds of success in agricultural education, we need to start by sowing wellness within our teachers, our classrooms, and our communities. By reaping balance, we ensure the sustainability of this profession for generations to come. Because when our teachers thrive, so does the future of agriculture.

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