

Revitalizing Ag Ed

Wisconsin Teacher of the Year emphasizes importance of community partnerships and relevant learning

For high school agriculture teacher Brad Markhardt, the best classroom lessons start with ‘why.’

“I really like to focus on why,” Markhardt told an attentive audience. “I love that question. If I don’t get it, I sometimes ask it.”

Markhardt, a 20-year veteran at Black River Falls High School who was named Wisconsin’s Teacher of the Year for 2011-12, gave a master class in how to teach, complete with audience participation, hands-on experiments and simple demonstrations of complex concepts.

Agriculture is about much more than just farming, he said. There are hundreds of possible careers for students in a vast industry that supports communities across the state. And he believes teaching agriculture and career and technical education in general is still important in an educational age that emphasizes raising test scores in basic subjects like math and science.

For instance, a simple exercise in pruning branches can lead to a variety of lessons in biology, ecology and botany.

“It’s a chance to apply those things with relevancy,” Markhardt explained. “We can answer the why. We can provide the context.”

In his classes, Markhardt emphasizes rigor, relevance and relationships



2011-12 Wisconsin Teacher of the Year, Brad Markhardt, shared his teaching philosophy, which centers on making learning relevant.

to give students a holistic immersion in agriculture education. He illustrates the model as three overlapping circles. The rigor comes in the classroom where he holds students to a high standard and uses field trips and guest speakers to do as much “hands-on” instruction as possible. But the more complete education comes outside the school doors.

Students are given independent projects that they use to explore specific interests with an emphasis on giving relevance to concepts learned in the classroom. Some students extend their knowledge even further by joining FFA, formerly known as Future Farmers of America. Now known simply as FFA, the group gives students the

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opportunity to develop leadership skills and pursue independent projects for competition at regional and national levels.

Community Partnerships

Markhardt makes a point of seeking out local experts and bringing them into his classrooms. This builds stronger connections between the community and the school and adds relevance to his lessons.

An exceptional example of community-school partnership is the development of an agricultural test plot on eight acres of land donated by a local electrical cooperative. Markhardt's students work with representatives of other local co-ops to grow test crops and have even formed their own co-op to manage the plot.

"The more people I can bring in from the community, the more they will feel connected to the students and the school and the more they



Markhardt gave attendees a hands-on look inside his classroom activities.

Session Details

TITLE *Teacher of the Year*

PRESENTER **Brad Markhardt**,
teacher, Black River Falls School District

will want students to succeed," Markhardt said.

He ended his presentation with a series of recommendations for school board members and administrators to help teachers succeed. They ranged from finding common ground to recognizing the importance of leisure time, recognizing teacher impact and offering ways to individualize professional development.

"It takes time. It takes time to develop teachers," Markhardt said. "It's a constant development." ■

ACHIEVE

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