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RURAL FFA PROGRAM MAKES A DIFFERENCE TO KIDS AND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

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(BOISE) – Rural schools often face challenges to make their students not only college ready, but also career ready in order to meet the needs of local businesses and industry, thus giving those graduates an opportunity to continue living in the community and culture in which they grew up.

At Malad High School the FFA program is meeting both of those goals.

Principal Rob O’Neal is enormously proud of what his students and their advisor, Stephanie Whipple, have accomplished. Although he’s been a principal for seven years, this is his first year in Malad, “and when I got here and saw what those (FFA) kids were doing, I was just blown away,” he said.

The intracurricular program, which combines club activities with ag-oriented regular high school classes, is designed to grow agricultural and leadership skills among its participants. Members of the Malad FFA have served as state officers and regularly compete at the state -- and national – level. They recently returned from Indianapolis, Ind., where they earned bronze in the national Poultry Evaluation competition. They also recently swept an ag-oriented essay contest, and one of 2015’s graduates earned the rare American FFA degree, “the highest award you can get in the program,” O’Neal explained.

“They’re the ones that volunteer to do concessions at games, they do volunteer work around the community, they’re one of the most active organizations we’ve got,” O’Neal said. And he admits to “using them shamelessly” to make presentations at regional educators’ conferences.

“They make an impact on our community,” he said with pride.

One of the keys to the program is the leadership skills they are taught. They learn, for example, the ability to present themselves to potential employers. “Five or six of the kids I had couldn’t talk in front of a class, they never volunteered,” Whipple said. “Now, they’re stepping out, getting involved, leading others.”

“I’m only their advisor,” she stressed. “They do all the work. They organize and put on our banquet, put together our events,” and are working to organize some state-level events as well.

The program’s internship and project components also give the students real-world and job-ready skills.

“This is more than just a ‘look at a cow’ program,” O’Neal said. “This is what these kids live and breathe. It’s what they do when they go home,” he noted, describing the rural farming and ranching community Malad High School serves.

It’s all part of an integrated program supported by a school infrastructure that offers courses ranging from Introduction to Agriculture to Animal Science, Equine Science, Veterinary Science, Introduction to Livestock, Introduction to Ag mechanics, intro and advanced ag welding and ag fabrication. In addition, the school has an automotive program that O’Neal said



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he'd stack up against ones in the biggest districts in the state, and they're one of three districts that participate in the Southeastern Idaho Technical Center programs.

That coordinated educational effort helps students be job-ready for local farming, ranching and ag-related business needs, as well as setting students up for college and other post-secondary education.

"I don't think I'd have gone to college if it hadn't been for my ag classes" in a nearby school district when she was growing up, said Whipple, who teaches the bulk of the various agriculture classes on Malad's four-day school week block schedule. As the program advisor, she also mentors the roughly 50 FFA students she has in their projects and internships, which directly supplements their coursework.

"I give them a window into what it would be like (to work in a given field), and then they go with their own interests " often through an FFA Career Development Event competition, "all designed to give the kids a chance to see what those careers are like," she said.

For example, there may be projects on farm business management, job interviews, prepared and extemporaneous speaking, livestock judging and food science. "They own the process," she said. "Maybe one will raise 10 cattle of his own, another will train police dogs."

But not everyone, she knows, will inherit the family farm. "One of my students, she's raising sheep so she can pay for college and become an extension agent. Then she'll come back and work in a community like this," Whipple said. "She's going to make an impact on some small community."

"I want them to go out and do something they love. Hopefully, they'll get a job in ag, or if not, a career in something they want."

But if they want to stay in the community where they grow up, Malad High School and its FFA program are giving students the chance to fill the job needs unique to rural communities.

In her fourth year leading the program in Malad, Whipple is now seeing the fruits of her efforts come to bloom as students she first met as freshmen prepare to graduate this year. "I have one senior who learned how to artificially inseminate cattle. She wants to own her own ranch.

"It's exciting to see these kids working to achieve big dreams," she said.

The FFA program, she noted, is good for the community and good for the students. "It makes a difference."

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