

## History of AITC

Throughout much of the history of the United States, agriculture and education have been closely related. During the decades when most Americans lived on farms or in small towns, students often did farm chores before and after school. Indeed, the school year was determined by planting, cultivating, and harvesting schedules. Old school books are full of agricultural references and examples because farming and farm animals were a familiar part of nearly every child's life.

In the 1920's, 30's and 40's, as the farm population shrank and agricultural emphasis decreased in school books and educational materials, educators focused on agriculture as an occupational specialty, rather than an integral part of every student's life. Agriculture education was mainly offered to those few students wanting to make a career of agriculture.

During this period, a small nucleus of educators and others persistently pushed for more agriculture in education. They recognized the interlocking role of farming and food and fiber production with environmental quality, including wildlife habitat, clean water, and the preservation and improvement of forests. They kept interest in agriculture and the environment alive during a period when interest by the public as a whole was decreasing.

During the 1960's and 70's, as experienced agriculture, conservation, and forestry organizations realized the need for quality material, many excellent films, literature, and classroom aids were financed and produced by businesses, foundations, nonprofit groups and associations, as well as state and federal agencies. There was, however, little coordination of effort or exchange of ideas among the groups and no central point for national coordination.

In 1981, at the invitation of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, representatives of agricultural groups and educators came to a meeting in Washington, D.C., to discuss agricultural literacy. A national task force was selected from this group. Representation came from agriculture, business, education, and governmental agencies, some of whom were already conducting educational programs in agriculture.

This new task force recommended that the U.S. Department of Agriculture be the coordinator and that it sponsor regional meetings to help states organize their own programs. They also urged the Department to encourage the support of other national groups.

As a result, in 1981 the USDA established Ag in the Classroom, which has the endorsement of all living former Secretaries of Agriculture, the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture, the National Conference of States Legislatures, most of the Governors of the States, and the major agricultural organizations and commodity groups. Significant progress has been

made through these partnerships of agriculture, business, education, government and dedicated volunteers.

Each state organization addresses agriculture education in a way best suited to its own needs. For many years in Illinois, the Illinois Farm Bureau® was the state contact for Ag in the Classroom. In the Fall of 2005 the Illinois Farm Bureau Agriculture in the Classroom program merged with Partners for Agricultural Literacy to form Illinois Agriculture in the Classroom. This merge combined the efforts of the Illinois Farm Bureau, Facilitating the Coordination of Agricultural Education (FCAE), University of Illinois Extension, Association of Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Districts, various Illinois Commodity organizations and others. Regardless of the structure, Ag in the Classroom has advanced because of a cooperative spirit among the participants. There is an AITC presence in every state and territory. Representatives from Canada have attended many USDA sponsored AITC national conferences and have now hosted two national conferences in Canada. Requests for information about Ag in the Classroom come from many countries around the world and from other organizations wanting to learn how to deliver their programs with equal success.

The strength of Ag in the Classroom comes from its grassroots organization and the fact that educators are very much a part of the movement. Giant strides have been made since 1981. Ag in the Classroom is regarded as a refreshing and flexible educational program designed to supplement and enhance the teacher's existing curriculum.