

NEW TEACHER HANDBOOK

**VATAT
MENTOR
PROGRAM**



MENTOR/MENTEE TOPICS

While developing this program, a survey was sent to a group of stakeholders who rated a variety of topics a young teacher should be very aware of during their first years of teaching. The resulting list is not meant to be the only topics of conversation, but should form the basis of the mentoring effort.

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MANAGING TEACHER AND STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

One issue that many young teachers have is establishing boundaries between themselves and their students. In many cases, you might only be slightly older than some of your students. Every educator strives to have a positive or cordial relationship with their students. This helps to make for a productive classroom environment and an enjoyable experience for all.

Problems occur because students don't always see the lines they should not cross in dealing with young adult teachers. They may see their teacher as a peer, a buddy, or someone they might want to hang out with. It is up to the teacher to send a clear message that you are an adult and are not looking for teenage buddies.

This fact can be communicated in several ways. Always follow your district's social media policy which is probably going to include not friending any of your students on Facebook or similar social media sites. Be sure if your district permits limited text messaging, you only do this for professional purposes.

Students will often attempt to engage the teacher in inappropriate topics concerning personal relationships, drugs, alcohol, or even politics. It is important to shut these discussions off in your presence and make it clear these are topics that are not going to be discussed in your classroom.

Never discuss much of your personal life with students. If questioned about your relationship status, use of alcohol, or anything else of a personal nature, explain that those kinds of things will not be discussed. In return, you will not question them about their personal business, unless it happens on an FFA trip, and then it becomes your business!

The topic of physical contact comes up at times. When is a pat on the back, or a hug appropriate? A teacher has never gotten in trouble for not physically contacting a student. Some school districts have policies in place prohibiting physical contact other than handshakes. Always strive to follow the policy in effect. Assuming your district has no specific policy, what should you do?

Remember that students don't always understand boundaries. They may think because you patted them on the back today, they can pat you on the back tomorrow at their discretion. You see where this is going. Common sense should be the watchword and you must be the monitor.

Supervising students in the shop, greenhouse, or project facility is a little different than a classroom setting. Teenage boys like to horseplay which sometimes includes a few wrestling moves. Proper safety protocol prohibits this, but never let the boys engage you in playful horseplay. These things can turn serious quickly and assault is a term thrown about easily. A boy's parent may not see the humor in an accidental black eye on their son. Remember, you are the adult.

Be careful of the perception that you have favorite students. You will have those teacher-pleaser kids who always want to answer every question, go on every FFA trip, and make every team. It is hard not to appreciate those kids, but make sure they follow the classroom rules and procedures just like everyone else. Those kids sitting on the back row are watching, and they will be the first to know if they are treated as second class citizens. You may be able to influence those kids in a different, but very productive way.

You are a professional and the relationship you should have with students and adults should be professional. You have been hired to be the leader of your classroom or program. Be one.

DEVELOPING GOOD CLASSROOM BASICS

You were hired to be an agriculture teacher. While FFA activities are certainly important, you will be evaluated on your classroom duties. You probably worked on this a lot during your student teaching experience. Good teaching begins with clear expectations and good classroom behavior. You will not have a perfect classroom, but there should be order and no question who is in charge. Books have been written on this topic, so there is no need to put this under a microscope, but it is important.

Weekly lesson plans are often required by your district, but they also help you organize your classes for the upcoming week. Flying by the seat of your pants is not an option. Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills are found on the TEA website for each course you teach. These are not suggestions or hints. It is required by state law that they be covered if your district gives credit for the course. Some may be covered in a day and some might take much longer.

Another requirement is that you have grades and attendance recorded for each student. Most schools do this with some type of online system. Administrators must have six weeks, semester, and final grades recorded by certain dates. Never be the teacher that doesn't have grades in on time, even if you are at a show or contest. This is not negotiable.

You will be evaluated multiple times throughout the year during a full class period. In addition, there will be multiple walk-throughs that will be much shorter. It is important to continue to teach your lesson even if you are distracted. Most districts expect "bell to bell" instruction, and take a dim view of quitting early or starting late.

The real key to teaching is to engage the students; all of them, not just the ones on the first row that always want to be a part of everything. Those back row kids need your help and guidance even more.

MANAGING FINANCES AND BUDGETS

There is a clause in every educator's contract that talks about the reasons a teacher may be dismissed. Misuse of public funds is prominently listed. Misuse doesn't just refer to theft, but to any handling of funds not in accordance with state and local school policy. That leads to the words "public funds." All money you handle or spend as part of your responsibilities are considered public funds. That includes FFA fundraiser money, budget expenditures, as well as anything connected with animal projects or entries.

In talking about your departmental budget, it is imperative you read and understand your district's policy on spending money allocated to run your program. In most districts, the days of going to the hardware store, charging materials, and giving the receipt to the school for payment are over. You may be required to fill out a pre-acquisition form and a purchase order before ordering any materials. School districts have been known to refuse to pay for items ordered without authorization and the teacher was forced to pay.

Never include any personal items in any bill purchased by the school district. Even if you reimburse the district for the items before they submit a check, it is still against Texas Administrative Code. This includes feed, medicines and supplies used by your own child, even if he or she is one of your students. Many ag mechanics teachers have students construct things for them. While not illegal, it is important to make sure that those expenses are kept separate from other projects. It is always better to prove that you are innocent, rather than try to defend yourself without proof.

This brings us to the area where many agriculture teachers run into issues: activity and/or FFA accounts. It is not uncommon for a program to handle tens of thousands of dollars, much of it in cash. Please read your district policy and understand how this money should be handled.

The way any cash should be handled is very critical. Some districts require a receipt be given anytime money changes hands, no matter how small the amount. Some receipts must be done in triplicate, with one going to the payer of the money, one to the receiver, and one turned in when the deposit is made. Most schools require cash to be turned in the day of receipt, with no money left overnight in your department.

It is suggested to count the money and keep a journal in your department. Never assume that everyone is honest. Insist the money be counted in your presence and get a receipt. Never just hand it to the person that handles the money and tell them to send you the receipt when they get it counted. In some cases, a trusted school employee is found to be dishonest and you need to be able to prove your innocence.

Another area of concern is purchasing student projects. In many cases, this allows students to access better animals than they would be able to find on their own. Be sure that if you handle project money that you get and receive receipts for any such funds. Never charge more than the cost of the animal. You should never have to defend yourself against allegations you are profiting from your students. At times, teachers raise show animals as a sideline. You should be very careful about selling to your students. This practice can go south very quickly. Allegations of profiting from your students are difficult to defend.

Ag teachers are busy, overworked, and distracted by the day-to-day activities they must contend with. If money is somehow mishandled, telling some investigator you “didn’t have time” to follow the school policy is not a very good excuse. There have been good teachers fired and some have lost their teaching certificates, not because they were guilty of taking money, but they simply couldn’t prove their innocence. This is the third time that phrase has been used in this section and if taken to heart, you won’t have any problems.

DEVELOPING HEALTHY AND PRODUCTIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH ADMINISTRATORS

In today's educational climate, there are several reasons to have a good relationship with your administrators. Good relations will lead to more opportunities for your students, less stress on the teacher, and can foster a collaborative attitude by all. In truth, a teacher can please everyone in his educational world, except the administrator, and wind up losing his job. How can this important task be accomplished?

Realize that first and foremost, you have a boss. It may be the CTE Director, Principal, or even the Superintendent that you must answer to. They are the leaders of their campus or district and their jobs are dependent on the success of their staff. Even highly effective and experienced teachers forget this at times.

They probably had a hand in selecting you to be hired. Therefore, they want you to succeed so they can feel like they made the right choice. If you approach them with the attitude that you want to learn and improve as an educator, they are more likely to support you.

Your mentor will ask you to set up a time to allow both of you to sit down with your administrator to discuss your program. The mentor will open a discussion about realistic expectations for new teachers. A new teacher shouldn't be expected to win state championships in their first year, or be an expert livestock show advisor. No teacher should be expected to turn around a weak program at once, but progress can be made.

Communication is key. A young teacher should visit with their administrator often and make sure the lines of communication are open. They hate surprises, so communicate the bad and the good. If something happens in your department or on a trip, he shouldn't hear it from a parent or student, but from you.

MANAGING LIVESTOCK SHOW VALIDATIONS AND ENTRIES

Deadlines. Deadlines. Deadlines. Today's livestock show programs have grown from a supplementary activity to the "driver of the bus" in many programs. To this generation of students, showing animals has become a family industry of sorts. Just this past year, there was a family in Texas that validated 38 pigs for one child. This is just one example of how important the activity is to some.

In some cases, the teacher may feel like they are just a middleman, whose only purpose is to sign the validation and entry forms. In some cases, local politics determines what kind of stock show program exists in each school. These discussions are best discussed with your local administration.

A new teacher must familiarize themselves with the various deadlines associated with county and state shows. Validations come first. In fact, major show steer validation occurs in June. All of the rest of the major show validations occur in the fall. There is a local committee that carries out validation in each county. The species chairman will publicize when orders for validation tags occur. This is usually more than a month before the actual validation. Some teachers order a few extra tags to account for animals purchased late; unused tags can be transferred between counties. Your county show may have a separate validation or may use the state validation in their show. Read all the respective show rules to understand what you are dealing with.

EFFECTIVELY PROMOTING AGRICULTURE PROGRAMS

When promoting your program, it is important to identify your target audience. Are you looking to promote your program to current members, prospective students, parents, school board members, or the community? You must recognize your audience and modify the message.

The best spokesmen for your program are always your current students. If they are engaged and happy to be a part of your program, they will tell their friends and younger siblings.

Most schools offer some time to recruit middle school students and it is important to use the successful students to help in this. The band usually puts on some type concert for the younger students and the athletic department usually invites elementary students to pep rallies. Ag programs could take a lesson from this.

When you talk about promoting your department to the rest of the school community, you are really talking about the other teachers, your administrators and school board. Too many times agriculture teachers think of themselves as a separate entity unrelated to the rest of the school. It is always good to have allies in your district rather than enemies. Support the other teachers in their activities and events. Make it a point to express that you want the agriculture program to be a part of the larger whole in education. It is impossible to have an outstanding agriculture program in a failing campus.

Your administrators have a different job than you. You are most concerned with your program and they must be concerned with all programs under their control. Understand that they may have to make decisions not altogether with your approval. There may have to be times of compromise. They are charged with supervising you and have

a large role in your success or failure. Strive to never be part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Make it a point to have open communication with these folks, including sharing with them your calendar of events, summer plans, and anything else they might need to know.

It is common for school board meetings to have student recognition time. It is important for you to have your students represented, hopefully two or three times per year. You might highlight FFA events such as LDEs or CDEs, stock shows, or you could recognize those students who have earned a certificate in class, or participated in an essay or speech contest. They don't have to be winners at the area or state level, just kids who have exceeded expectations. Most of those board members are not aware of the difference in level of competition, just that the kids recognized have done well.

Promoting your program to the community is going to be different in different places. Some small towns may have a local radio station or newspaper that is hungry for content from you. Texas FFA provides press release templates for various events. They are easily customizable and can be submitted your local media outlet. Social media may also provide a forum.

You are looking to be positive, as it relates to the program and your job. No one ever gets anywhere by bad-mouthing their job or their employer. There are no perfect jobs out there, and realize that you may never be appreciated in the way you deserve. There are teachers who criticize the teaching profession in front of their students. If you don't value your profession, no one else will ever take it seriously.

BALANCING PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

Many successful professional people struggle in this area. Agriculture teachers are no different. There is a great difference in the investment of time, emotions, and effort between an average teacher and a great one.

Quality teachers willingly put in extra time and effort, but family life must be considered. At times, family life ranks second when it is crunch time on school business, but there should be time when work should come in second. The key is in determining priorities.

Ag education is filled with deadlines and crunch time. Successful teachers know this and prioritizes events. Obviously, if you have an entry deadline looming, that must be priority number one. Key job responsibilities like this are critical to keeping your job and being successful.

At times, there will be opportunity for flexibility in setting times and dates for local activities. One day, your child's recital date may drive some of the decision-making process when scheduling school events. In multi-teacher departments, some sharing of the load of responsibilities can be worked out. Just make sure that this process is fair, and the workload is balanced.

In many cases, teachers become frustrated with parents contacting them after normal work hours. It is important to be responsive to parent contacts during the normal workday. Encourage email correspondence so you have an easily retrievable record of the contact. The office telephone is the next best option. If the parent wants to have a conference, that is within their rights. If you think that the conversation might be contentious, it would be good to have a teaching partner or even an administrator present. It is a good policy to answer

all correspondence with parents within 24 hours or less. Some parents become frustrated and demanding when they do not receive a response in a timely manner.

In some cases, teachers are contacted via cell phone after hours. We live in a society where everyone wants instant gratification, and if you don't answer a text or phone message as quickly as someone thinks you should, they become angry. Sharing your cell number with everyone invites this perception of instant access. It is your phone and unless the district expects you to share your number with everyone, and pays for your phone plan, you should control who has access to it.

It may be possible to share your number and impress upon the parents that it is only for emergency contact that can't wait until the next business day. Many people have problems with boundaries and some don't seem to understand what that means. If you start the year immediately answering these type communications, the expectation is that you will continue to do so. Considering you might have more than 100 students in class each day, it is simply unrealistic to be able to answer every call or text as quickly as some would like.

Be very careful communicating with students through your cell phone. Many districts have policies restricting communication with students this way. Some districts that pay for a teacher's phone allow group text alerts to students concerning meetings or deadlines. Most of these allow the parents to also get the message. Any type of personal or non-business communication with students can put you at risk.

It is important to make time for yourself. Family time, hobbies, and just time to decompress from the rigors of your job are important for your long-term mental wellbeing. No matter how well you do your job, don't let yourself get burned out after only a few years. A worthwhile career is a marathon that is likely to last up to forty years.

Almost every successful long-time educator has a spouse that is on board with a career of service. If a spouse complains about the hours it takes to do the job, either the spouse or the job will probably suffer. At times, adjustments are made in schedules to alleviate the pressure and allow family time to be scheduled.

There are many 8 to 5 jobs out there that allow a person to make a satisfying living. Some are filled by former agriculture teachers who had problems balancing their personal and professional life.

DEVELOPING GOOD TIME AND TASK MANAGEMENT SKILLS

At times, we all struggle to “manage the whirlwind.” Dealing with day-to-day tasks and deadlines can consume our time and talent. It is easy to get caught up in the details of our jobs and forget the 20,000-foot view of what we all need to remember.

A valuable tool might be to develop a strategic plan for your program. This is covered in another section of this manual. It may be that some duties or tasks can be minimized or eliminated because of a collaborative strategic plan.

Everyone needs to develop a good calendar of events, and maybe take it a step further. If a deadline for an entry is December 1st, you obviously need to begin the process much earlier. A calendar listing these kinds of preliminary dates could be very valuable.

Develop a system of dealing with issues one time and moving on. This could involve mail, email, or any other task you must deal with. If you can request all your travel needs for the year at one time, do so, and you won't have to continuously work on the task. Just remember, if changes occur you must update your requests. It may even be practical with some purchase orders and acquisition forms.

Don't be afraid to ask for help. At times, booster club members or other parents can help with some tasks at school or at stock shows. Just remember that you are the responsible party and you can't turn everything over to them.

Set aside some time each summer to plan for the year. A weekly planning session involving teaching partners is a recipe for success and collaboration. A small amount of planning time, either at the beginning or end of the work day, can help clear the head for the work at hand.

Books and articles have been written about time management. It wouldn't hurt to do some reading. The big thing to do is not let the "whirlwind" overwhelm you. It may take a little getting used to, but take each task as it comes and at the end of the year, you will have survived with ideas on how to improve next year.

DEVELOPING AN EFFECTIVE SUMMER PLAN

Summer activities help set agricultural education apart from many other programs in the school. Imagine our profession without the ability to supervise students at FFA Convention, Degree Check, FFA leadership development opportunities, or to miss the chance to attend workshops at the VATAT Professional Development Conference. Ultimately, the summer activities provide more and improved opportunities for ourselves and our students.

According to a recent survey, 90% of teachers who responded reported having contracts longer than what is normally considered a ten-month contract. The ability of a school district to offer these “extended” contracts is a local decision arrived at by your school administration and board. There is no requirement to keep these contract lengths the same from one year to the next.

Agriculture teachers are overworked and underpaid. Never in our history has more been expected of teachers in general, and specifically agriculture teachers. If most ag teachers counted their weekends, nights, holidays, and school days, they would far exceed the number of days listed on their contract. It would not be a bad idea to keep some type written record of this. In most school districts, even with this written record, don’t expect to take off most of the summer. Many districts look at those extra days during the school year in the context of the “other duties as assigned” clause in your contract. You are expected to account for the days you are on contract during the summer.

One of the best ways to keep these extra days in your contract is to create, and file with the proper people, a copy of your summer plan. There is a sample on the VATAT website. It is simply a week by week plan for the time between the last and first day of in-service. You may

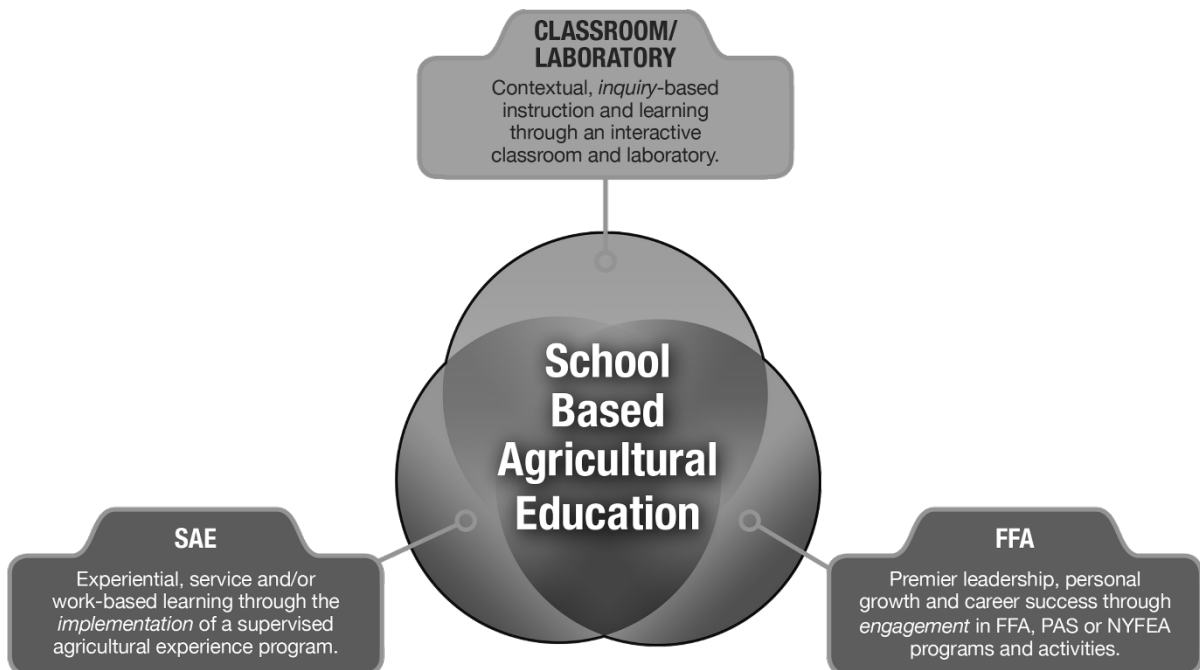
list a wide variety of activities designed to improve your program. Depending on your situation, many of these activities will be away from school. The least effective use of your summer days is if your school requires you to be in your department from 8 am to 4 pm. File a copy with your Principal, school secretary, or maybe even your Superintendent. They may need to know where you are on any given day, so provide them with your cell number.

You will find that as the trust factor develops with your administration, they will be less likely to question you on your whereabouts or the necessity for the extra days on contract. Check in with your administrators during the summer just to let them know you are on the job and keep them updated on your activities. Even with our many summer activities, it is still a good time to relax, catch your breath, and do some strategic thinking about your program. Having a good summer plan on file will pay dividends that will make your program better.

DEVELOPING A GOOD BALANCE BETWEEN THE CLASSROOM AND THE FFA

Agricultural education prepares students for successful careers and a lifetime of informed choices in global agriculture, food and natural resources systems. Through agricultural education, students are provided opportunities for leadership development, personal growth and career success. Agricultural education instruction is delivered through three major components:

- Inquiry based classroom/laboratory instruction (contextual learning)
- Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) programs (work-based learning)
- Student leadership organizations (National FFA Organization)



The three component model for agricultural education (shown above) highlights the integral nature of each component. These components are of equal size and overlap significantly, demonstrating that quality agricultural education programs can find balance between each component. No one component carries more weight or importance, and each operate in tandem with the others.

Often as new AFNR teachers, there will be pressure to maintain the traditions of success your program/FFA chapter has experienced in the past. You might find yourself in a position where your success as an Ag teacher is being measured by the number of buckles your students bring home from the livestock show or the banners and plaques won during a leadership, speaking or career development event. When the above scenarios become the focus of our programs, more than anything, many of our students lose out.

Below are a few tips to remember as you work to establish yourself early in your career. When you can find balance in your program, you will be able to provide the truest agricultural education experience for your students.

Tips for balance

- Teach Agriculture. Time in your class should expose students to the knowledge and skills required to identify and find success in agricultural careers. Time in class should not be spent working in packets while you and your judging teams are practicing.
- Facilitate FFA. FFA is a *student-led* organization. Your chapter should have an elected group of student leaders

who should be leading the chapter. Help to empower them to take the reins so you don't spend all your time planning/executing events. Establish that "being older than the rest of them, you're there to advise them as the need arises." Our youth are incredible, we just need to get out of their way and let them have ownership in their positions.

- Advise SAE. Based on the TEKS, EVERY student enrolled in an AFNR course should have in operation an approved SAE. Spend time early in the year working to pair students with SAEs. They should be student driven and have records to track financial and skill attainment. If there are students who have great projects that can earn them FFA awards and degrees, excellent. If not, don't force it. FFA DEGREES AND AWARDS SHOULD NOT DRIVE SAE AT THE LOCAL LEVEL. Not every student will get a Lone Star FFA Degree...and that's ok.
- Reflect, often. It's good to step back every so often to reflect on our performance. How are we doing? Are we delivering quality content in the classroom? Are we facilitating a hands-on leadership development experience for our students through our FFA chapter? Do our students have in operation SAE projects and are they keeping records? When we evaluate our progress often, we can make minor course corrections that are needed. Try drawing out the three component model for your agricultural education program. Are the circles balanced? Do they overlap significantly? If not, then what do we need to do to rebalance?

The pressures placed on a new agricultural science teacher cannot be overstated. When we remember our purpose as

educators and the purpose of agricultural education programs; our students win. They receive the knowledge and skills, leadership development experience and work based training to be productive members in our communities. All we have to do is find balance in those three components, know our limits and manage the expectations of our administration and community. When we make our way to the middle, that's where the "magic" of agricultural education happens.

DEVELOPING A CALENDAR AND DEADLINES FOR THE PROGRAM

Developing your school calendar is an important task to tackle. The tentative schedule included will help you establish a solid understanding of the major events related to Texas Team Ag Ed this year.

The official Texas Ag Ed Calendar is continuously updated and can be found at TexasFFA.org under Participate > Events. It is also a good practice to check JudgingCard.com for additional event information.

STUDENT RECORD BOOKS FOR ALL AND NOT JUST FOR AWARDS

As a new AFNR teacher, you may or may not know that some form of a record keeping system is required for every student enrolled in an Agriculture, Food and Natural Resource (AFNR) Course as notated in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). The TEKS also state that each student must develop a supervised agriculture experience program, otherwise known as an SAE. In Texas, SAEs will primarily fall in the category of Entrepreneurship, Placement, Research/Experimentation, or Exploratory.

At times, we tend to focus on record keeping only with those students who have traditional entrepreneurial projects like show animals. This can lead not only to students who don't have animal projects feeling left out, but to a forgetfulness on the advisor's part that every student must have a record book. It is important to engage every student, so when it is data entry time, every student has something to enter. It sounds pretty simple, but it is the key to the process.

So how does a first-year instructor implement the use of record books? It begins with a solid foundation of teaching a quality, engaging unit on SAEs and the importance of record keeping. Students don't come into your classroom with an understanding of these concepts, so it's up to you to cover these subjects in detail. You may find that upperclassmen students that have traditional animal projects often don't keep accurate, up to date records until they are interested in applying for an award or degree. Again, it is

vital that you teach the importance of keeping accurate records, even for students who may be familiar with record books.

The Agricultural Experience Tracker (The AET) system of record keeping is the widely used record keeping system used in Texas and is what the Texas FFA Association recommends our members use. This online system links up with most of the National FFA and Texas FFA applications and has many advantages for students. TEA and Texas FFA does not require the specific use of The AET system to satisfy the requirement of a record book. This being said, using alternative record keeping systems might not provide the ease of use or proper documentation when applying for FFA awards.

It might be advantageous to set aside regular class time each week or every two weeks to allow students to get caught up on the record books. If you are using The AET and your students have smartphones, they can use their phone to enter data. At any rate, a regular grade each grading period devoted to record books raises the interest in keeping up with relevant entries.

The importance of SAE programs extends far beyond the agricultural education classroom. An SAE is a catalyst for person growth, career development and responsible citizenship that leads to individual, group and societal benefits not possible through formal education alone. Skills, knowledge, experiences and connections gained through SAEs remain with students for a lifetime and positively influence others along the way. An SAE is more than an integral part of agricultural education; it is tangible learning with applied purpose and measurable results.

CONTACT LIST

MENTORS

Kenn Carr.....	806.786.6256.....	kenncarr48@gmail.com
Joe Dickson.....	713.409.7622.....	joe.dickson@yahoo.com
Glen Dossett.....	903.850.4462.....	gdossett@suddenlink.net
Tony Dunkerley.....	940.704.2418.....	twdunkerley@gmail.com
Rick Fleming.....	254.718.3969.....	rick.fleming@cevmultimedia.com
Steve Forsythe.....	512.734.0914.....	stevewf@sbcglobal.net
Lacho Garza.....	956.312.8001.....	lacho.garza@yahoo.com
Mike Jackson.....	940.531.2531.....	mikejackson62@aol.com
Randy Looper.....	817.360.1734.....	rlooper@rocketmail.com
Pam Lynch.....	832.493.1661.....	plynchpigs@gmail.com
Don McGuffin.....	903.754.2732.....	fifteenacres@yahoo.com
Jim Missildine.....	210.862.3672.....	jim_missildine@hushmail.com
Loyd Nations.....	903.312.8001.....	loydleenations@gmail.com
David Reiley.....	210.771.5755.....	dwreiley@yahoo.com
Kay Richards.....	325.829.5638.....	krichards1@ymail.com
Bobby Rosenbusch.....	254.681.7800.....	rosenbuschrea@gmail.com
Liz Treptow.....	361.772.4006.....	lizt@weimarisd.org
Jimmy Vaculin.....	713.320.0036.....	javaculin1955@gmail.com
Ron Whitson.....	512.858.9785.....	ronwhitson@ymail.com
Mary Wilson.....	936.391.5128.....	marywilson0785@gmail.com
Jack Winterrowd.....	512.203.3694.....	jack.winterrowd@gmail.com
Gerald Young.....	281.797.6090.....	younggerald@live.com

VATAT STAFF

Ray Pieniazek.....	512.472.3128.....	ray@vatat.org
Tori Rosser.....	512.472.3128.....	tori@vatat.org
Ashley Dunkerley.....	512.472.3128.....	ashley@vatat.org
Karen Jones.....	512.472.3128.....	karen@vatat.org

