



Conversation with Traci Curry

April 23, 2020

Traci Curry is the Director of the Southern Region of New Mexico for [New Mexico Agriculture in the Classroom](#). NMAIT's purpose is to educate the general public, with an emphasis on K-12 students and educators, about the importance of agriculture.

NM First (NMF): How is education being affected in these times?

Traci Curry (TC): The pandemic really brings to light that children's first teachers are their family. It takes a village - we're all educators. Family members should recognize their power and responsibility to continue this journey. I think we put a little too much responsibility on classroom teachers. Families need to read, explore and discuss ideas together at home, all year round.

During the pandemic, we are all looking for ways to adapt and thrive as fast as we can. Teachers are always in that position - they're forever having to adapt, change and figure new things out. They are well suited and well trained to meet the challenges of the time. If it's for their kids, teachers will do whatever they need to do. A lot of teachers worked through their spring break in anticipation of e-learning. Many of them also have their own children to get schooled and have had to navigate everything under immense stress. They're real troopers.

Each school district is different. Every district is doing something. It depends on their means. In Alamogordo, the homeroom teachers called each of their student's parents to find out what was available at home so they could get the right resources to the kids who needed them. Some schools organized a drive-through system for parents to pick up supplies. Others tapped into their busing system to deliver food and educational packets via school bus. Some school districts made wifi available by installing it on a school bus and parking it in an accessible location. Some were able to make Chrome books available to kids. And others didn't have enough resources.

NMF: Why agriculture education?

TC: During the pandemic, we talk about what is essential. Our food system is essential. We really need to understand our food system. There's power in being able to get kids excited about growing our food. Less than 2% of the US population is composed of farmers or ranchers. Getting students interested, looking at careers and possibilities of being world problem solvers is more important now than ever before. Agriculture education has the capability to address all that. To know agriculture is to understand what our root systems are. What are our essentials and where do they come from? In [our blog](#), we will provide all learners to value them and know our essentials. We're working with experts in the field to share their knowledge. Our biggest goal is to get kids interested in agriculture. Soil scientists share how we can grow better, be sustainable in our practices, eat healthy and be healthier.

NMF: Are you doing anything differently, and if so, in what way(s)?

TC: At New Mexico Agriculture in the Classroom, we're helping teachers work with families to take stock of what materials students might have at home. We don't want to ask families to leave the house to pick up supplies, so we're working to adapt lessons to something they have in their house. One teacher had planned for her students to grow something from seed. She was worried about her kids not having seeds. We worked with her to make that part of the lesson. Teachers and families could organize a seed hunt to find seeds already in the house, such as beans or seeds from apples. Or they could go outside with the kids and ask, "Where do we find seeds? Where do seeds come from?" We're trying to be the helpmates to these teachers.

Now that teachers are established and comfortable with their technology, we're connecting with them and can conduct virtual classroom visits. We use Google Meet Classroom (similar to Zoom) to work with classes. For instance, this week my colleague will be reading a book with different pre-K, first and second grade classrooms. The teachers have already prepared ahead of time with the parents.

We're also developing an e-learning section on our website called [Know Ag](#). We're connected to the national Agriculture in the Classroom, and our New Mexico blog will offer local resources and activities for informal teachers. We're also brainstorming how to adapt the free lessons on our website for babysitters, parents and grandparents working with their kids who are not formally trained teachers.

NMF: What are assets and needs you see as immediate and long-term concerns? Anything positive you see coming out of this?

TC: The pandemic has really brought to light the disparities in this state. We've needed to address them for a very long time. In this state we've had such great disparities between those with access and those without. School districts are now in tune more than ever before. They understand how many students have resources, how many do not and are helping parents get these resources. We are gaining an understanding about how many kids have access to internet service, computers, tablets or phones so that they can use them to extend their education opportunities. Also, people don't realize how much school takes care of key issues until something like this happens. School is important for feeding kids. It's important for medical.

We've heard the pandemic could come around again hard in the fall or winter. Now with e-learning and resources available that teachers know how to use, it's going to prepare us for such issues in the future. It's an exciting time when teachers have more resources at their fingertips. They had the technology but until now, didn't have the resources to learn them effectively. Also, in response to the pandemic, amazing resources are available now – publishing companies and museums have begun sharing their resources for free. There are some great opportunities out there when it comes to learning.

NMF: Is there anything you'd like to share with the rest of the state?

TC: A child's first teacher is the family.

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