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A Lesson in Farming, Classroom to Cafeteria

By STEVEN YACCINO MAY 11, 2014

HAGERSTOWN, Ind. — Beyond a stack of hay bales, past the site of Indiana’s first soil-judging contest, high school students in this tiny eastern town stroll down a grassy slope to reach their newest classroom: a fenced-in field of cud-chewing cattle.

Starting in the next academic year, the cattle, which arrived last month and have names like Ground Round and Honey Bear, will be fed by students enrolled in an agricultural science class. Then, when the animals are fat enough, they will be fed back to their caretakers — as beef patties on lunchroom trays.

Hagerstown, population 1,769, is like many rural communities confronting the cost of population decline and concerns that local agricultural ties are disappearing. Small-town schools across the country are turning to hands-on agricultural classes that also supply cheaper, healthier food for their cafeterias. A high school in Montague, Mich., has student-raised chicken on its menu. Another, in Willits, Calif., serves campus-bred pork. Pupils in other districts throughout the Midwest are growing crops or garden produce for a letter grade before eating the fruits of their labor when the lunch bell rings.

“As budgets keep getting cut, we keep looking to more creative ways,” said Stefonie Sebastian, education specialist at F.F.A., a national agriculture education group that was once known as Future Farmers of America and that has supported such projects. “Agriculture programs used to be on the chopping block. Now we’re seeing it as a way to get things

done at the school.”

The postrecession struggle of rural towns is as common around here as rows of corn. Farming and manufacturing jobs are disappearing. Residents move away in a steady, debilitating trickle. Few return.

Sixty miles east of Indianapolis, schools in Hagerstown have lost enough students since 2010 to cause a significant drop in per-pupil funding from the state. Teachers have been laid off, and a pre-engineering program was axed. The high school pool was drained in spring and summer to save on the cost of heating and chemicals, a compromise alternative to closing it permanently.

School officials say the Hagerstown cattle program — informally known as “Where’s the Beef?” — is expected to save at least \$2,000 in annual cafeteria costs and expand vocational training.

“We’ll have more meat than we’ll be able to consume,” said Mark Childs, the principal at Hagerstown Junior-Senior High School, which will sell its extra beef. “We supply our own.”

According to a United States Department of Agriculture report released this month, there was a slight uptick between 2007 and 2012 in the number of new farmers under the age of 35, but over all, the number of farmers shrank by nearly 20 percent. The total number of farms also fell, by more than 100,000, as large food producers expanded and land prices rose — putting more pressure on the small family farm.

Hagerstown has perhaps as good a chance as any place to buck the broader trend. Amish dairy farmers have arrived from Pennsylvania in recent years, with more on the way. Teachers at the high school, which has offered agricultural courses since 1934, tend crops and livestock on the side for extra income. Some students wear F.F.A. jackets as if they were sporting varsity letters; they speak with pride about the local chapter’s soil-judging team, which last year fell just shy of qualifying for nationals.

But even here, residents are losing touch with the land. According to federal data, Wayne County, which includes Hagerstown, lost 89 farms between 2007 and 2012, about a tenth of its operations.

“Most of our students come from in town,” said Macy Felton, a senior in high school. “They can point out that’s a cow, but they wouldn’t know what to do with them.”

In a district of roughly 1,000 students, the exodus of 66 students from Hagerstown since 2010 was a blow to the district’s budget. William Doering, the superintendent, set out to close a spending gap a couple of years ago, calling for \$350,000 in cuts — five educators lost their jobs — and asking staff to come up with ideas to save more money.

It was Nathan Williamson, an agricultural mechanics teacher, who presented the idea of a cattle class to the school board last year. While instructing students on things like farming techniques and veterinary science, the course would supply enough meat to pay for itself and then some, Mr. Williamson told the board, replacing 5,000 pounds of hamburger patties that the district was purchasing at \$3.30 per pound.

“Right now, beef prices are going through the roof,” he said in an interview recently. “We’re saving money each day those cows are out there.”

In lieu of a classroom, students built a fence around 10 acres of school land. The district is still looking to hire a new teacher to run the cattle course, which will be open to sophomores, juniors and seniors. If all goes as planned, the first herd of six Angus cross and one Hereford — bought with donations from local banks and members of the community — will be slaughtered this fall with the help of a butcher who volunteered to stock school freezers. Extra meat will be sold, and the money will go toward buying more livestock.

Garrett Blevins, a junior who is eager to take the class, said he was proof that students with close ties to their food supply were more likely to consider careers in agriculture. The son of a nurse and a carpenter, he had no farming background when he joined the local F.F.A. chapter last school year. “Now it’s my life,” said Garrett, who hopes to study animal science at Purdue University.

“There are kids out there who would never experience agriculture

until they join these programs,” he added. “Once they do, it will open up a whole new world.”

But even supporters admit the plan could backfire. What if the cows get loose or die? What if the price of beef plummets? What if pupils grow attached to their assignment and cannot stomach the sight of Honey Bear between two hamburger buns?

Students in Hagerstown shrug when asked if the class might produce more vegetarians than potential ranchers. Mr. Williamson, who works 400 acres of crops at home when he is not teaching, said no lesson plan about farming would be complete without a little risk.

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