

Note: This essay was originally published as Smagorinsky, P. (2012, October 25). Another great Georgia teacher: Justin Sealy of Pelham City Schools. *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Available at http://blogs.ajc.com/get-schooled-blog/2012/10/25/another-great-georgia-teacher-justin-sealy-of-pelham-city-schools/?cxntfid=blogs_get_schooled_blog

Since then, the AJC has cleared out its archives, so it is now only available in the form in which I originally submitted it to Maureen Downey's Get Schooled education blog.

Great Georgia Teachers: Justin Sealy, Agriculture Teacher, Pelham City Middle School

By Peter Smagorinsky



Georgia, like many states, has a large rural population where farming remains a central part of community life. The family farm has lost a lot of ground to Mega-Ag, Inc. over the years, but providing a sound and fundamental hands-on experience with the earth and the food that people produce from its soil is a noble and important contribution to the quality of life in areas far removed metropolitan congestion. High School Agricultural Courses are subject to End of Pathway Testing and some are available for 4th-year science credit, which will surely make the edupreneurs. In places like Mitchell County, Georgia, the Ag curriculum may well be the most important part of a good many students' academic experience and professional futures.

Justin Sealy is an Agriculture teacher and Sponsor of the [Future Farmers of America program at Pelham City Middle School](#), and one great Georgia teacher. Justin states that his instructional mission is "to provide career preparation for secondary agricultural education students and teachers that is exemplary, including courses and curricula, supervised agricultural experiences, and learning opportunities through the FFA." That sort of hands-on, practical, and purposeful learning is the sort of experience that might just keep a kid in school if he or she finds the abstract learning of "core" classes to be of questionable value and the incessant bubble filling of standardized tests to be a ridiculous waste of valuable time.

Agricultural Education prepares students for careers and informed choices in the global agriculture, food, fiber, and natural resources systems, as the FFA puts it. As someone who feels a strong connection to the earth and how we live in balance with it, I have a great admiration to those educators who help young people understand what it means to work with nature to improve the quality of human life.

The FFA “envisions a future in which all agricultural education students will discover their passion in life and build on that insight to chart the course for their educations, career and personal future.” Passion and education seem to be headed in different directions with the new corporate values governing public education. Just as Mega-Ag, Inc., has no soul because it is driven by profit at the expense of people, public education is headed toward an era where the whole purpose of learning—to make life a richer and more fulfilling experience—has been sacrificed to provide a veneer of accountability that places students on a par with the tasteless tomatoes produced at the highest volume and lowest investment by the machinery of Big Ag: assembly-line, uniform products whose individuality and spirit get standardized out of them so that they appear to have no unique character or flavor of their own.

Justin’s teaching is designed to foster the relationship between students and their environments so that they can develop the knowledge to make both their lives and the earth more rich and productive. Justin is a graduate of the Pelham City School system (class of ’98). He knew he wanted to be an Agricultural Education instructor since his high school days. He understood that his career as a teacher could help students find opportunities similar to what was available to him as a student, when he was an active FFA member in a chapter for which he served a term as president, was involved in forestry career development activities, and exhibited livestock.

Justin then headed off for college. Like many people who aspire to be teachers, he was a highly respected and accomplished student all along the way, as his role as FFA chapter president should indicate. He was awarded a C.M. Stripling Forestry Scholarship and a Georgia Feed and Grain Scholarship to support his studies, which he began with his post-secondary education at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College in Tifton, where he earned his Associate’s degree. He then transferred to UGA for his B.S., which included certification to teach Agricultural Education. At both Abraham Baldwin and UGA, he was awarded Presidential Scholarships.

He has since completed his master of arts in leadership with a focus on Agricultural Leadership (UGA) and an Ed. S. in Agriscience Education from Auburn, and is scheduled to complete his Ph.D. in Career and Technical Education from Auburn next year. His average GPA across this impressive range of studies is 3.8 out of 4.0, and his graduate research has focused on studying ways of attracting and retaining young people into agricultural professions.

Justin’s teaching career has not followed the linear school-to-college-to-classroom sequence that traditionally has provided the pathway for young teachers. Justin taught at Screven County High School from 2002-2005, then worked in Georgia Agricultural Education as an Area Forestry Teacher for seven years, providing classroom resources, facilitating FFA career development events, developing statewide curriculum, and evaluating performance evaluations for agricultural instructors in South Georgia, working closely with 130 agricultural teachers.

But he felt a void from not directly affecting students in the classroom on a daily basis. “I firmly believe that teaching is like preaching. It’s a calling,” he says, a sense of mission that I often find in people aspiring to teach. If you accept the media-promoted stereotype of the public school teacher as a lazy, selfish underachiever, then you’re not looking to teachers like Justin for your examples. In fact, you’re probably not basing your opinion on actual teachers, who tend to share his passion for cultivating the growth of young people and intelligence for making it happen.

Justin’s return to the classroom became available when the Pelham City Schools established a new middle school agricultural program, which he saw as a way to serve his community and

build a legacy. That legacy is well under way. I've studied high school agriculture classes, and have been impressed to see how they synthesize a variety of disciplines, including math, literacy, history, nutrition, and a host of scientific sub-disciplines, from materials science to meteorology to horticulture to chemistry to just about anything else involving natural phenomena in conjunction with human commerce. This synthesis comes in the course of immensely practical activity that is explicitly related to the lives that the students hope to live. The activities are also amenable to a range of literacy practices, not only the design of agricultural spaces and report of scientific studies but, in Justin's case, an exploration of plant poetry.

In other words, even though Agriculture courses tend to be lower in status than "core" academic courses, they often provide greater intellectual stimulation, because all work is fundamentally interdisciplinary and has real implications. Students who calculate a feed mix need to understand nutrition, health, chemistry, mathematics, and other disciplines in order to keep a farm animal healthy and productive. If a student misses a math problem in a math class, he or she gets a red mark on the paper. If the same student miscalculates a feed mix, a horse might become weak and infirm. Now that's accountability I can stand behind.

Like many great teachers, Justin's day does not end at the ringing of the closing bell. He has worked with his students to help the city's local electrical co-op re-landscape a city park, planned a fishing rodeo for a local church organization that provides youth camps, encouraged his program to volunteer to help with the Pelham Wildlife Festival, partnered with the chamber of commerce on several activities, and planned several adult classes that promote local businesses and environmental stewardship. To assist with these diverse activities, he has helped to secure a \$10,000 grant from Mitchell EMC to develop a community garden at his school, one that is equipped with composters and rain barrels to promote awareness of conservation.

As FFA faculty advisor, Justin oversees a large program of over 300 students that includes every student at Pelham City Middle School, using fund raisers to cover the students' dues and putting on events and activities from meats evaluation to floral design. Each student that he teaches is responsible for either a placement, research, exploratory, or entrepreneurship project, and from these activities several students have become young entrepreneurs through such endeavors as developing fashionable ear-rings from fishing lures, becoming poultry producers, serving as landscapers, and otherwise putting their knowledge to practical use. Justin has found a range of community businesses with which his FFA chapter partners, including the Pelham Flower & Gift Shop, the Do It Best Home Service Center, and the Pelham Banking Company, each with a clear relationship to the sorts of teaching that Justin provides.

As Justin's high educational levels and organizational skills might suggest, he is a leader at the state and national levels in a variety of agriculture-oriented associations, having served as president of the UGA Agriculture Leadership, Communication and Leadership Advisory Committee; as a member of the National FFA Forestry CDE Committee; and as Executive Secretary of the Georgia Vocational Agricultural Teachers' Association. He has also been instrumental in developing a better sense of continuity in his local FFA chapter by reactivating their Alumni group for mentoring, networking, and other developmental opportunities.

One theme to which I continue to return in writing about Great Georgia Teachers is that great teachers are the heart and soul of every school. Justin Sealy meets that description perfectly. In a county where agriculture both historically and currently has been a way of life, Justin makes sure that every student in his school is versed in a wide range of farming activities. Every student

won't become a farmer, although many will. Even those who don't will have an appreciation for the work that has sustained their families and neighbors for many generations. They will learn how to live in relation to their environments in ways both scientific and spiritual, and will see school as a place where their beliefs, values, interests, and needs are met and brought into harmony through the agricultural curriculum.

That curriculum was not created by an outsider with a curriculum and assessment product to sell, but by a dedicated teacher whose altruistic commitment of time and energy to his community and school has produced instruction and assessment sensitive to the needs of the local people. To me, that's what school is all about, and great teachers like Justin Sealy are the ones who make it happen.