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RESEARCH REPORT

Agriscience Education Leadership
Program

Survey and Focus Group Evaluation



Center for Public Issues Education
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Introduction

With the vast diversity of Florida agriculture, the need for high school agriculture students to experience an array of agricultural industries is crucial for their future employment as well as the future success of these industries. Florida's agriculture teachers can enhance their students' knowledge of agricultural diversity by understanding the vast array of commodities and job opportunities available across the state. The Agriscience Education Leadership Program was developed in an effort to provide teachers with diverse experiences in Florida's agricultural industries, as well as encourage them to take on more leadership roles through exposure to leadership venues and training. A recent study completed by the Center for Public Issues Education in Agriculture and Natural Resources (PIE Center) in partnership with the University of Florida and Florida Farm Bureau provides feedback valuable information that explores the impact of the Agriscience Education Leadership Program on participants, as well as potential areas for future improvement. This research was funded by a grant provided by the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS).

Participants were asked about their experiences with the Agriscience Education Leadership Program, benefits they gained through the program, and recommendations for program improvement. The information provided by the participants will aid in the program's improvement, thereby also enhancing Florida agriculture teachers' opportunities for diversified agricultural experiences and leadership development.

This report discusses the study's methodology, research findings, and strategic recommendations.

Methodology

This study was conducted through the use of an electronic questionnaire and two face-to-face focus groups. The survey questionnaire was sent to all Agriscience Education Leadership Program participants ($n = 100$). Seventy-seven participants responded, resulting in a response rate of 77%. Forty-seven percent of respondents were male while 53% were female. The vast majority of the questionnaire respondents were currently teaching, while 13% were employed but not teaching. A variety of Florida counties were represented by respondents. Slightly over half of the respondents reported teaching in a rural community (51%), while 31% reported teaching in a suburban community and 18% reported teaching in an urban community. A wide range of teaching experiences were also held by respondents, with years of experience ranging from less than five years to more than 20 years. Respondents were asked a series of closed-ended questions for which frequencies and standard deviations were calculated.

Participants in the focus groups were selected based on responses from the questionnaire. Two focus groups were held during the Florida State FFA Convention, the first containing nine participants and the second containing 11 participants. Each focus group contained participants from a variety of program classes, with participant years ranging from Class 1, which represented the first year of program participants in 2002, through Class 8, which represented the most recent year of program participants in 2010. Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions throughout the focus groups to guide discussion, which was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. Analysis through the constant comparative method led to the emergence of themes which can serve to enhance some of the data gathered through the questionnaire.

Results

Positive Overall Experiences

Questionnaire results indicate that respondents viewed their overall experience with the Agriscience Education Leadership Program as a positive one. Ninety-seven percent of respondents reported being very pleased or pleased with their experience, with 87% of these being very pleased. Further, 97% of respondents reported that they would recommend the program to other agriscience teachers, and 84% of respondents reported that they feel the program would be valuable to others outside of the agriscience education profession.

Focus group participants further detailed their overall positive experiences with the program, often discussing how the program has positively impacted them:

“I think it was the best, sorry, the best professional development that I’ve ever participated in. As a year long experience, and looking back, I don’t think as an educator I would ever have an opportunity to do such a wonderful all around addition for my profession.” (Group 1, Participant S, Lines 22-24)

Several participants noted how the program impacted their decision to remain in the profession:

“And in all seriousness, I probably wouldn’t be teaching ag. if it wasn’t for, I’d be out of it. Because I was, after 20 years, I was fed up.” (Group 2, Participant R, Lines 67-68)

“Participant R’ said that he wouldn’t be here without it and I have to say it’s possible I wouldn’t either. Not long term. It truly inspired me, not being from an agricultural background 100%...and I will be the biggest advocate for Florida agriculture the rest of my life that you can even imagine. I use it every week.” (Group 2, Participant K, Lines 651-658)

One participant mentioned that the group’s overall positive experiences have led to a need for the program’s continuation:

“I think one thing that we would all agree upon is that it definitely needs to continue. We have all benefited from it in some way and we would hate to see other people not have this opportunity.” (Group 1, Participant C, Lines 469-470)

Beneficial Program Elements

Improving Educator Effectiveness

Respondents indicated that farm and ranch tours, professional leadership training, team building elements and exercises, and Department of Education training and information sessions were each helpful to varying degrees in improving educator effectiveness. Farm and ranch tours were reported as the most helpful element in improving respondents’ effectiveness as educators ($\bar{x} = 4.73$; $s = .83$), Department of Education training and information sessions were reported as the second most-helpful element ($\bar{x} = 4.24$; $s = .98$), team building elements and exercises were reported as the third most-helpful element ($\bar{x} = 4.19$; $s = .98$), and professional leadership training was reported as the least helpful element ($\bar{x} = 4.17$; $s = 1.02$).

1. Farm Tours

While all questionnaire respondents reported utilizing information learned on farm tours in their classroom curriculum, the frequency with which information was incorporated varied among respondents (see Figure 1).

Frequency of Farm Tour Information Utilization in Classroom Curriculum

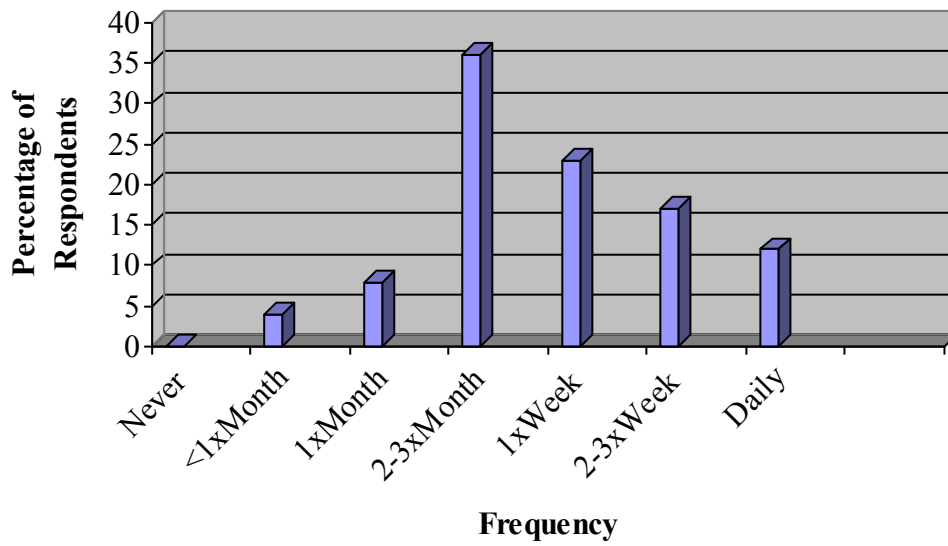


Figure 1. Frequency of Farm Tour Information Utilization in Classroom Curriculum

Focus group participants explained how they utilized information from tours to enhance their own knowledge to share with students:

“I use the example of a cotton gin. I teach Eli Whitney, I teach cotton gin, I’d never seen a cotton gin in my life, never seen cotton ginned in my life. But I got the opportunity to see it, really understand the process now from the field to the finished product and was better able to teach that to my students because of understanding the experience.” (Group 1, Participant J, Lines 27-29)

Participants also noted that the tours enhanced their effectiveness through the diversity in agricultural commodities they experienced:

“I was able to do a comparison of agriculture in the deep south versus far north. At the same time, with the peanut harvesting and the cotton baling, that was amazing. Some of the things I brought back to my students to show them this is diversity in florid agriculture.” (Group 1, Participant E, Lines 111-113)

“The most beneficial thing for me was seeing the diversity of agriculture in Florida, which I didn’t know existed, and I have used it almost every week in my classroom in one way or another ever since then. I just had no idea.” (Group 2, Participant K, Lines 36-48)

“I agree, the opportunity to see different areas of the state, the diversity of agriculture that exists in different areas of the state, and being able to integrate that into my daily lessons and instructions and just simple discussions with students about agriculture.” (Group 2, Participant N, Lines 40-48)

The tours also enabled teachers to enhance the relevance of content through the sharing of their firsthand experiences:

“But when I went back to the classroom, I spent like half a class period just talking about the tour, and I vividly remember the birds when they started burning the field, all the birds swooping down because all the snakes and the rabbits and everything would go out and all the birds were like, you know, if they see the smoke they know it’s dinner time. So you just see snakes and everything pulled away. It’s just so...you are able to explain, even if you haven’t done that as a profession, you are able to explain to the students so vividly it’s like they were there.” (Group 1, Participant B, Lines 317-325)

2. Team Building

Participants in Focus Group 2 noted that team building activities assisted them in creating a group dynamic among their team, although not every team member immediately appreciated the activities until the purpose was seen:

Participant A – *“I think our group was pretty diverse, and we did something I don’t think any other group had done. We played a lot of board games back at night, and Miss B went and got all these games and brought them back. And they were some of those weird games, where you have to like expose stuff about yourself and that really helped to open our group up because we learned things about each other that we didn’t know.”*

Participant K – *“And I have to say, we were threatened with that, I had heard that going into it and I was dreading it because I hate group games. But now in reflection, that could have been one of the best things that we did at least for the first two group meetings.”* (Group 2, Lines 236-243)

4. Department of Education Aspects

Focus group participants expressed that Department of Education involvement was a beneficial element when it was included as a component of the class. One participant expounded on the positive experience had by her group during a year that a bill pertaining to agricultural education was being presented:

“...that’s not an experience that maybe every group had, but I mean our group, it’s an experience none of us will ever forget because the outcome was more favorable for what we wanted and we saw how we were a part of that and now I’m much more involved politically that I ever had been in the past and I have a better idea if something’s happening that we don’t like, here’s the way to go about it and here’s what tends to work, here’s what doesn’t tend to work.” (Group 1, Participant B, Lines 64-69)

Other participants also noted the sense of ownership they gained through exposure to the Department of Education:

“I think it empowered us to do that. We got our tag. Our license tag because we understood the process because we were part of the class that helped us to understand the political process and how things get done. And I think that it empowered us to be a little bit less victims in what happens in Tallahassee.” (Group 1, Participant J, Lines 70-75)

Other participants did not report any benefits associated with their involvement with the Department of Education; however, this lack of benefit was only reported when the participants did not feel they experienced any aspects of Department of Education involvement:

“The only time we talked about DOE was when you did the little presentation. I mean, that was all our team did about that.” (Group 1, Participant D, Line 389)

“My team, the education piece, because I think that’s the way you had phrased the question, um, the education piece was very small, I can barely remember it...” (Group 1, Participant B, Line 398)

One participant justified her lack of experience and lack of felt benefit with her visions of the governmental processes that might dictate group experiences:

“The legislative piece was a little bit difficult, simply because when you think about the legislative year, and so when we came together those first times after we met in the summer, and I’ll get my months wrong, but I want to say it was like, September, November, January? Well you know, the legislative session, there’s not a whole lot going on yet so we were having to do some real serious research, which is a good thing. But by the time we got to March, you know, they’re just now really getting heated into the session.” (Group 2, Participant C, Lines 333-338)

Networking

Questionnaire respondents also indicated that farm and ranch tours, professional leadership training, team building elements and exercises, and Department of Education training and information sessions were helpful to varying degrees in encouraging networking and collaboration with other educators. Again, farm and ranch tours were reported to be most helpful ($\bar{x} = 4.56$; $s = .83$). Team building elements and exercises were reported to be second most-helpful ($\bar{x} = 4.49$; $s = 1.00$), professional leadership training was reported to be third most-helpful ($\bar{x} = 4.42$; $s = .96$), and Department of Education training and information sessions were reported to be the least helpful element ($\bar{x} = 4.18$; $s = 1.03$).

Many focus group participants felt that the networking benefits of the program were the most beneficial program outcomes. They explained that the networking provided through the program assisted them in overcoming several barriers to networking experienced in their profession:

“The number 1 thing you got out of it was a sense of a group of ag. teachers that by the end of the thing, by the end of the year you felt, they may have been 30 year veterans, they may have been on year 5 and still considered themselves a new teacher, it may have been someone who came in as a career and technical education professional, and it gave them a sense of who they could talk to or turn to within our profession that may not be in your county, may not be in your area, but you could call them and say, ‘I don’t know what I need to do about this’ or ‘I need help with this’ or ‘how do you do this’ and that sense of camaraderie and the friendship that came out of it was probably the most important thing that I got out of it.” (Group 2, Participant H, Lines 25-35)

Participant A – *“And we get together a lot, like at state convention, but we always have kids. And we have other responsibilities and it’s a time that we can get away and make those connections that you may not make, even though you see people, because you’re going in different directions.”*

Participant A1 – *“And teachers are always competing against each other for things and there, they’re not competing. They’re together.”*

Participant H – *“It’s a collaborative effort at that point instead of a competitive effort.”* (Group 2, Lines 72-77)

“And ag. teachers are tight anyhow, but it’s usually, you compete. It’s always a competition. And this was a situation where you actually got to sit down with your peers and there’s no competition at all. And so it was purely the ability to build strong bonds and friendships and academic partners, and I think that no other program offers that for you either.” (Group 1, Participant J, Lines 42-48)

“You know, there were people that have been doing it way longer that you could talk to about something so some were, you know, we have a high burnout rate. We have a lot that leave in the first five years, they don’t get to the point where they get to participate. Where as if they had those relationships, you know, part of the reason, people who make it long term make it,

is because they built relationships with other people and that helps to remind them of the things that they love about this profession and you know, that they're not the only one experiencing these things and that they're not...you know, everybody has a parent from the bad place and everybody has a rough year and then it gets better.” (Group 2, Participant H, Lines 601-613)

Farm tours were the primary method of improving networking connections expressed by the focus group participants. Networking included both collaboration between agriculture teachers in and outside of the group during the tours, as well as between group members and industry leaders hosting tours:

“On the networking side, not just your team, but on our group, we always wound up at a different ag. teachers’ facilities somewhere or another throughout the state, someone close to the...that was pretty cool.” (Group 1, Participant B1, Lines 37-38)

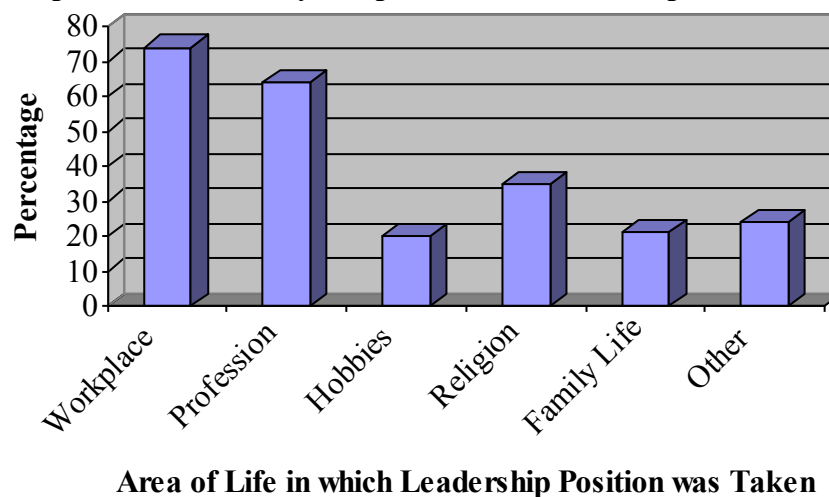
“And it was knowledge about the program and knowledge about each other’s programs. There was a lot of conversation about how different teams operated or how you train things or where you went to practice, or how you got your officers to participate, and that comes out of noncompetitive conversations that we don’t necessarily get to have. So, again, the knowledge, but not just of the agriculture industry. Of each other’s programs as well.” (Group 1, Participant J, Lines 105-109)

“And I did the same thing with AgriStarts. I called and I brought my class, and he even made arrangements with four other nurseries in the area, set up the tour, and provided lunch for the kids that came. I’ve taken them for 4 years.” (Group 2, Participant H, Lines 670-672)

Leadership Positions

Eighty-five percent of the questionnaire respondents reported accepting at least one leadership position since participating in the program. Leadership roles were reported to be taken on in a variety of life areas, as indicated by Figure 2.

Leadership Positions Held By Respondents After Participation in Program



Focus group discourse did not lead to a discussion of current leadership positions held, but rather focused on participants’ reactions to their experiences with the program’s leadership components. Participants reported varying degrees of depth

in their leadership experiences, with some classes engaging in very specified, structured projects, others engaging in loosely-structured projects, and still others engaging in vague projects that were later dropped from their agenda:

“We had very specific, very specific, it angered me what we had to do. We had a project that we had to produce.” (Group 1, Participant J, Line 175)

“...we had to work on that each time and go back and pull that out and evaluate, you know, now what did you do? To go back and exemplify leadership in these scenarios and we would process that.” (Group 2, Participant C, Lines 121-123)

“We had the meetings, but I don’t, we were trying to put together, it just didn’t seem as organized as far as that.” (Group 1, Participant K, Lines 166-167)

“It started out with them telling us, you’ll have to do this, you’ll have to do that, and then by the end there was nothing. Them not telling us anything they had originally told us that we needed to find a bill and follow it, and then they gave us no direction.” (Group 1, Participant C, Lines 220-224)

“...we were kind of charged to come up with something, but what are you gonna do at that point? And I don’t think we ever ended up with a complete project. I don’t think we ever finished what we started...It was almost like busy work.” (Group 1, Participant D, Lines 232-238)

“The only thing, they did a survey with us at the beginning on leadership qualities, and we got the results, but other than that, we really didn’t get any leadership training I felt.” (Group 2, Participant A, Lines 102-104)

Regardless of the types of experiences had, experiences that led participants to believe the program’s intentions were not realized or were less developed than other aspects of the program caused frustration in participants:

“...it was difficult to get everybody on the same page. And that was a problem. Finally, we came up with something, but that was months after we left the program. So, you know, I’m not sure if it was facilitate or leadership, or what, but that was a problem.” (Group 1, Participant E, Lines 215-219)

“And if there’s something that you need to do, let’s do it, but if not, let’s find something else to do. In other words, not waste our time, because we’re busy people and we’re giving up time already, especially if you have to take something away from there to work on it. And another point, this should be supplemental to what it is that we’re already doing, not add to what we already have to do.” (Group 1, Participant D, Lines 239-242)

“I understand from our class when we did it, that they intended to further our leadership training but that money for the grant ran out so I guess that’s a year by year case scenario and unfortunately mine came in a year that they did the survey, gave us results, and that was the end of it. So that was definitely one negative.” (Group 2, Participant K, Lines 191-195)

One participant summarized the feelings of her group, leading to a question of potential changes that could be implemented to improve benefits experienced through leadership aspects:

“...from the sounds of it, none of actually had the same leadership development experience and if that’s the truth...you know, if that’s the case, than that’s something that actually needs to be addressed. Are we consistently giving them leadership development?” (Group 2, Participant H, Lines 271-274)

Recommendations

Both open responses on the questionnaire and focus group responses offered similar recommendations for improvement to the program. Themes found included those related to increasing the impact of the program on previous participants through program reenrollment and the hosting of an annual reunion, and increasing the connection between teachers' classroom responsibilities and the program's activities through participant input in tour planning, incorporation of agricultural education programs and teachers into the tours, building tours around classroom content, and the building of a take home project to be used in classrooms.

Program Repeaters

Eleven of the questionnaire respondents recommended methods to increase the impact of the program on previous participants, including offering an advanced program, offering additional training, or allowing previous participants to re-enroll in the program.

Focus group participants explained potential benefits they saw relating to follow-up participation:

“And what I was thinking like maybe if people want to participate again so it doesn't just open up for everybody, but if there's something different on that tour that someone didn't get to experience, then open it back up and you can go for that aspect of it.” (Group 2, Participant A, Lines 598-600)

Reunion

Five questionnaire respondents recommended a reunion for previous participants be held. One participant indicated that the reunion could be beneficial because “some of us old timers need the program to get ideas from the younger teachers and some of the younger teachers could gain some insight and help from the older teachers in the group”.

Focus group participants indicated that the reunion held potential for furthering networking connections between teachers, which was already seen as major benefit of the program:

“I remember with the reunion, you met everybody from the previous classes. And that was just fun because you talked about every, every time it's different every year a little bit.” Group 1, Participant K, Lines 57-59)

Participant Input in Tour Planning

Three questionnaire respondents indicated that more input in the types of visits or tours would improve the program's effectiveness.

Although focus group participants did not recommend that teachers be included in planning tours, many participants expressed a lack of satisfaction with the repetition in commodities they experienced on their tours:

“I would not be doing my class justice if I did not say too many greenhouses” (Group 1, Participant D, Lines 35-36)

Participant L – *“They could have spread some of the time out a little bit better. Like, I never want to see another peanut plant again, we spent so much time out looking at peanuts...”*

Participant H – *“I’m thinking about nurseries that way. That was the one that it was like, really? Another nursery?”* (Group 2, Lines 386-388)

“So, I mean, that would be one thing. To make sure your tours are...diverse.” (Group 2, Participant H, Line 414)

Incorporation of Agricultural Education Programs/Teachers

Three questionnaire respondents recommended utilizing local agricultural education programs and teachers to find interesting and relevant industry tours in the area, as well as host a tour to expose participants to a variety of agricultural education programs and facilities.

Focus group participants expressed desire to incorporate agricultural education programs and teachers to enhance networking opportunities and tour diversity:

“I really like the chapter program component of it because when we’re in our chapter teaching, we don’t know what’s going on outside. We hear people come across the stage, but you don’t really understand what’s going on. And I really liked to visit other programs. You don’t get that chance during your year.” (Group 1, Participant B1, Lines 310-313)

“But you know, I would, we have cedar key right there beside us. I’ve never been asked, hey, do you think you could come up with some aquaculture that’s different from...that’s the clam capital of Florida, that’s just totally different.” (Group 2, Participant M, Lines 451-453)

Classroom Connections

Three questionnaire respondents recommended linking the program’s activities to classroom focuses and responsibilities. One respondent stated that, “all of the tours or visits [should] be correlated to curriculum in some way. How can we utilize the information we gain in our classroom?”.

Several focus group participants also indicated that the program benefits experienced in the classroom could be enhanced through greater connection between the two:

“I think maybe being able to have something that not only helps us as a team, you know for the leadership component and teaches us about ourselves but that we can take back to our kids and our leadership teams. And there was never that connection when it came to the leadership component of it.” (Group 1, Participant C, Lines 273-276)

Take Home Product

Three questionnaire respondents recommended that the program include a project that allows teachers to take a usable teaching tool back to their classrooms. While many participants collected information and materials throughout the tours, “it is difficult to follow-up after everyone goes home and goes back into the classroom. If each team was to bring in their notes, contact list with addresses, or best resources collected with enough copies to share with the group then each team member could put a notebook together the last day and have everything in hand in one location to take back and use in the classroom”.

Participants in both focus groups also recommended adding a take home product to be used in classrooms, stating that this was often done by participants anyway, but was less organized than they would have liked:

“And some of the classes shared their CDs, some did not, so we’re able to use those in the classroom as well. And I think in the future if we could get every class to share their CD with all of the previous classes, because we don’t all go to the same things.” (Group 2, Participant H, Lines 493-495)

Participant H- *“We shared our pictures and stuff like that, but there was no guidelines as far as exactly what was expected. And granted that’s the teacher wanting the guidelines again, but they don’t have to be very stringent guidelines, just-“*
Participant S – *“Yeah.”*

Participant H – *“A general, this is the bare minimum of what we expect and you take it from there with your group. That kind of project is something that is not just beneficial to that team, but it can be shared and it does make a lot of sense.”*
(Group 2, Lines 516-522)

Recommendations

Based on the results from this study, the PIE Center recommends the following:

- The Agriscience Education Leadership Program be continued, but that a reevaluation of eligibility requirements be conducted in order to ensure that a) eligibility requirements do not keep those from participating that would benefit from the program; and b) those that have already participated in the program have the opportunity to experience further benefits if potential exists for further benefits to be had.
- Components of the program be evaluated and revised to ensure that all are beneficial to the participants, relevant to their professions, and well structured and developed so that potential benefits are realized. This revision should include a restructuring of the leadership components of the project, as respondents reported a wide range of experiences had by classes, as well as a level of frustration associated with leadership components that appeared to be less developed.
- Agricultural Education programs and teachers from around the state should be included in the development of the program components each year. By gathering input from these teachers, industry diversity can be established and increased networking can occur between agriculture teachers.
- A reunion should be hosted each year, allowing participants from different classes to collaborate.
- Department of Education program components should be further developed to ensure that each class experiences benefits found by those classes engaging in more in-depth activities. Activities found to increase the benefit of this program component include those that have relevance to the teacher’s profession and create a sense of responsibility and ownership in the practices of the Department of Education.
- The project component of the program should be structured to guide participants in the creation of a take home product that enhances teacher use of program components in their classrooms. Aspects of the take home product can include components from each aspect of the program, including industry information and experiences, leadership activities and theories, and experiences from the Department of Education.