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### **WVDA URGES STATE TO EMBRACE STEAM**

Recently, a West Virginia Department of Agriculture (WVDA) employee participated in Career Day at Leading Creek Elementary in Lewis County. Kudos to these teachers for setting forth the importance of introducing their students, at such a young age, to careers that fall under the science, technology, engineering and math initiative called STEM. Now, more than ever, West Virginia needs jobs that will bring innovation and attract the best and brightest to our state. As we consistently rank last for percentage of the population that holds a college degree, schools like Leading Creek Elementary are needed to stir the creative bubbles in our young people. As policy makers, we cannot turn a blind eye to investing in our students. Without an investment in STEM, West Virginia may never turn the course of the last 60 years.

STEM is a great program that West Virginia needs to embrace it fully, but we need to add an "A" to STEM for agriculture. STEAM usually incorporates an "A" for art, but agriculture is a science and an art form. What we tend to forget is all the scientific knowhow that goes behind developing a safe, reliable food system. With the technology we have today, science is changing the very nature of how we grow our food. At the department, we have chemists, veterinarians, apiarists and even a taxonomic entomologist. All these experts of the scientific community come together to make sure we yield the highest number of crops per acre, combat diseases that affects our food and find new ways to grow what we eat. From high tunnels and hydroponic systems to the traditional farm, agriculture is an industry that relies heavily on science.

Although, that doesn't mean every scientist is a good farmer. Becoming a successful agribusinessman or woman takes years of trial and error. Tricks of the trade are hard lessons learned and only learned one way, in the field. How to manage and care for crops and livestock is more than what you can take away from a textbook. Agriculture is a hands-on industry that takes in the field experience to master. This is where the art portion of agriculture comes into play. Just like a great sculptor, it can take years of practice for a farmer to master their craft.

Embracing what we call STEAM will not only inspire the next generation of scientist and engineers, but also find and teach the future farmers of America. Why is this important? Every day, the age gap in the agriculture labor force grows. We, as a country, are not replacing the farmers that retire every year with a fresh batch of young people passionate about the industry. This is troubling if you enjoy the food system we eat from today. Who will grow our food if we do not reverse this trend? The farther we have to ship food in from other parts of the country or the world, the higher the chance for disease and contamination to occur. It is imperative that we reverse the age gap trend as soon as possible.

The WVDA and myself will continue to inspire our young people and promote STEAM. We cannot do this alone. We need our Department of Education and schools to follow the example set by Leading Creek Elementary. Start early, start often and always strive to teach the best in our children. West Virginia has brighter days ahead and it starts with our young people. Let's start investing in their future.

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