

## Teacher Feature

**Ms. McKenzie Gregory**

**5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Grade Writing Teacher**

**Rockford Middle School, Center for Environmental Studies**



### **Where and what level do you currently teach and why did you choose to become an educator?**

I am a fifth and sixth grade writing teacher at Rockford Middle School, Center for Environmental Studies, a STEM Magnet school, in Rockford, MN. I do not come from a long line of educators; in fact I was the first in my family. Rather I come from a long line of farmers. Like many other farm kids, I fell in love with the farm life at an early age and planned on agriculture becoming my field of study once college rolled



around. As college approached I started to question whether agriculture was the path for me because I'd realized that my experiences of helping my dad on the farm were not only a part of my upbringing, but actually something that I really enjoyed doing. I continued on to a university that had a college for both of my interests, undecided on whether to follow my love of farming with the intention of an agriculture degree or to pursue my passion of helping others with a teaching degree. It didn't take me longer than a semester to realize that farming would always be a love of mine, but helping others is where I could most make a difference. There began my path to becoming a teacher.

### **How has agriculture and the Minnesota Agriculture in the Classroom Program and resources impacted your students and instruction?**

This past summer I attended the MAITC Summer Teacher Tour for multiple reasons. One reason being that it involved two of my passions, farming and teaching, all wrapped into one outstanding field trip for teachers. Another reason I attended the teacher tour was to find ideas that I could use for a new class, called "Exploratory", that I would be teaching in the upcoming school year. Attending the tour allowed me to glean countless ideas from different tour stops, other teachers on the tour, and MAITC education specialists. A "big idea" that I took away from the tour and am now exploring with fifth graders is the various steps involved in the world agriculture including production, processing, distribution and consumption of dairy products.

### **Describe any agriculture based projects you have been involved in lately.**

Although I didn't pursue a degree or career in agriculture, my passion for farming has not faded. I am fortunate to be teaching in a middle school that encourages teachers to take their own passions and interests and integrate them into what we do with students. One class offered to all middle school students at Rockford Middle School is called "Exploratory." Students meet for this class once each week and explore different areas related to science, technology, engineering, and math. Exploratory classes are designed to integrate project-based learning focused around a driving question while addressing grade level standards. This year I've chose to integrate my past of growing up on a dairy farm into my exploratory class. The driving question I asked students is "How does milk get from grass to glass?"

Rather than explicitly teaching the steps milk takes to get from grass to glass, I have guided students to figure out the process on their own. MAITC education specialist, Sue Knott, suggested having themes or “smaller” questions as a basis for helping students to find the answers to our driving question. I have been pleasantly surprised at how my fifth graders have really taken an interest to figuring out the steps that milk takes to get from grass to their glass at home or milk carton in school. Some of our smaller themes based on the driving question include a cow digestive system, a visit from a local farmer, byproducts of milk, and waste compared to consumption.

**What advice do you have for other teachers on implementing agriculture into their classroom/program?**

First, start small; even simply asking your students questions to find out what they already know about the world of agriculture or determining what they believe about agriculture can be the key to deciding the next avenue to take with them. Second, do your research! You’d be surprised what materials and community resources your school already has that can be used to aid in making agriculture come alive for students. In addition, many agriculture based programs within the state strongly support educators who want to teach their students about agriculture. Midwest Dairy Association and MAITC have proved to be strong supporters throughout my planning process of this exploratory class.

**Ms. Gregory’s Exploratory class displays the parts and dairy products that will be used to create their model of the cow’s digestive system.**

