the LEADER

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CELEBRATING 40 YEARS

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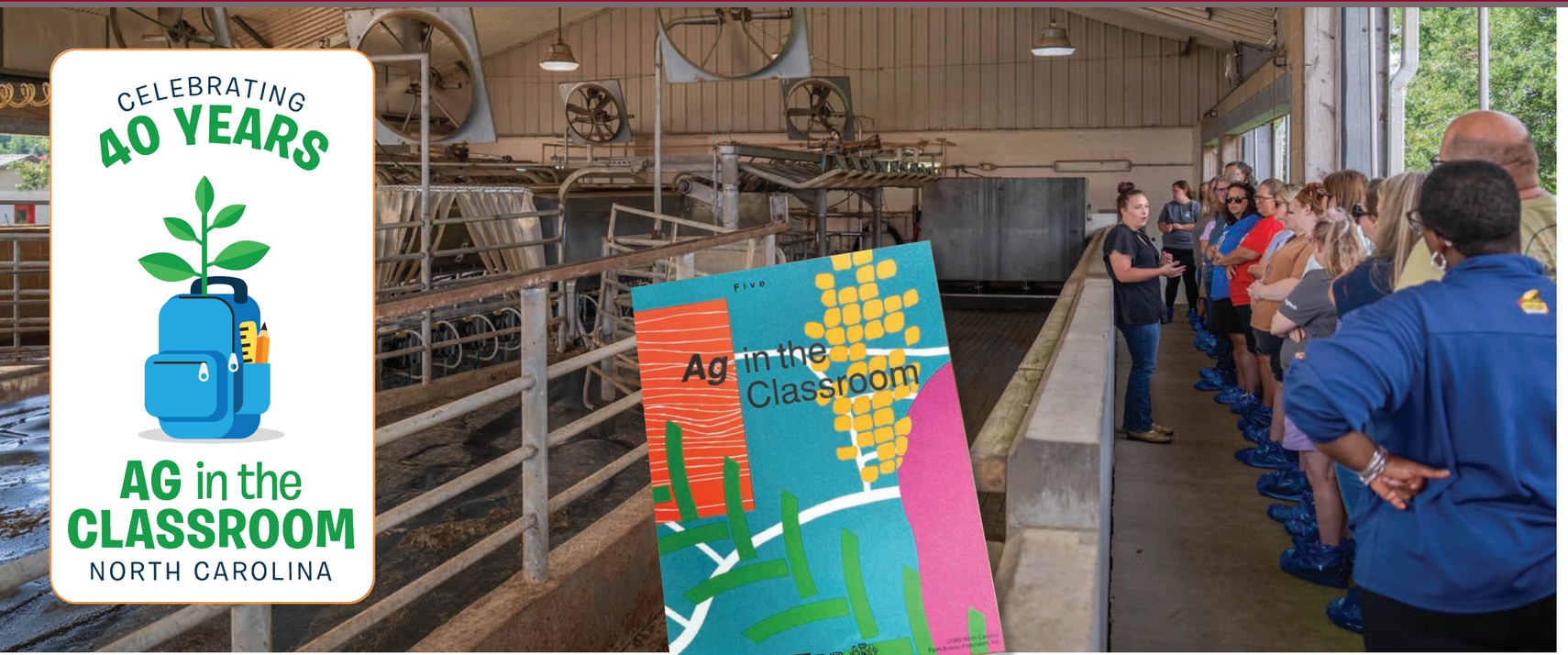

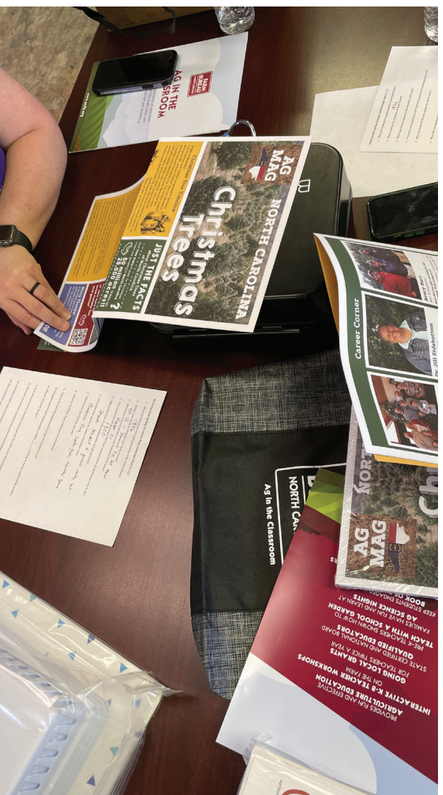

In the early 1980s, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) recognized that schoolchildren were losing agricultural literacy. By definition, agricultural literacy means understanding the food and fiber system, including its history and its current economic, social and environmental significance to all Americans. But in basic terms, it means understanding the importance of agriculture to your life and our society. To combat the loss of agricultural literacy in young students, the USDA created the Agriculture in the Classroom program. Each state was responsible for funding their own program. Luckily, Ag in the Classroom was a great fit for North Carolina Farm Bureau, and in 1985 the state Board of Directors adopted the program. That Board had incredible foresight and wisdom, and many of those folks are still active Farm Bureau leaders today.

From 1985 to 1988, all 100 county Farm Bureau boards were visited and told about the Ag in the Classroom program. Every school system in the state also received presentations about the program. The first program materials, including lesson plans and curricula, were created and distributed to every K-8 classroom in North Carolina. In 1990, Ag in the Classroom hosted its first teacher workshop. North Carolina Ag in the Classroom was up and running!

Today, many students ride the school bus past fields of corn, soybeans and wheat, yet do not understand what they are seeing. They see cows grazing; they see silos and barns; but they do not know the greater meaning. They cannot name the plants; they do not understand what these fields, structures and animals provide for them. The misconception is that only students in urban cities lack agricultural literacy, but that is not true. What's worse is hearing about surveys where adults believe chocolate milk comes from brown cows, or hamburgers magically appear in restaurants. It's clear there is still work to be done.

Despite the efforts of Ag in the Classroom and other initiatives, **the challenge of improving ag literacy is greater than ever: the world holds over eight billion people, and the gross majority have little to no agricultural literacy.** That's why Ag in the Classroom is such a valuable tool in teaching the next generation (and sometimes the current generation) of Americans about agriculture and combating our ag literacy problem.

Through the Ag in the Classroom program, we are starting conversations about agriculture with young people and not waiting until they are adults. Addressing misconceptions about agriculture early on provides a support system for farmers in communities across our state. **Agriculturally literate children grow up to be agriculturally literate adults, and children with an understanding of the importance of agriculture become informed members of their communities as adults.**

We are blessed to be an agriculturally diverse state, but we need our children to know what this means for them. Agricultural literacy can start with questions as simple as, "Why is food important to you?" We are helping youth discover the importance of agriculture to their lives, but also all of the careers accessible to them in agriculture. Starting these conversations early and often helps the agriculture career pipeline while also increasing agricultural literacy.

Connecting with and supporting teachers is a key strategy. Teachers are some of the most important "ag-vocates" we have because they see our children every day and are responsible for educating them. Ag in the Classroom helps teachers integrate agriculture into curriculum they are already teaching by providing ready-to-use materials and resources – not just in science, but in math, social studies, healthful living and English language arts as well. Plus, Ag in the Classroom's resources align with the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, making it easy for teachers to incorporate agricultural concepts.

In addition to our workshops (for educators and county volunteers) and library of lesson plans, we have new resources like Ag Mags, Going Local Grants, and The Book Planter program. We have digital resources and wonderful partnerships with other educational organizations and agriculture commodity groups. It is incredible how much the program has grown in the last 40 years!

Of course, county Farm Bureaus also have an important role in Ag in the Classroom. We provides resources to county Farm Bureaus to aid in educational outreach, whether it be for school visits and activities or community events. Many county Farm Bureaus buy and/or deliver our Book Planter books each month and support our in-person events. There are many ways to get involved with Ag in the Classroom!

Ag in the Classroom is truly beloved by many, and for good reason. After all, agriculture is the original STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math)! As agriculture changes, so will Ag in the Classroom. We will continue to work to increase agricultural literacy in North Carolina. So, happy birthday to Ag in the Classroom! Here's to 40 more years and beyond!