

# Sharing Common Ground

## Science is Big Part of Ag in the Classroom Message



*By Alex Binkley*

Johanne Ross comes to her job as executive director of the Agriculture in the Classroom program in Manitoba (AITC-M) with good credentials. Her P.Ag. shows she knows the subject, and as the mother of three boys, she understands youngsters. She has always felt it was important to introduce kids “to where their food comes from and why they should really care about that.” She got involved with the program eight years ago. The Nutrients for Life Foundation is working with Agriculture in the Classroom on its educational initiatives.

**Q: Is Agriculture in the Classroom a national program?**

**A:** There are Agriculture in the Classroom organizations right across the country. We don't have a national umbrella organization because each province runs their programs differently. But we do work together a lot. We hold a conference call with each other once a month and we get together face to face once a year. We share lots of resources and work together across the country.

**Q: Who supports Ag in the Classroom?**

**A:** In Manitoba, we have unbelievable support from across the agriculture industry. The membership listing on our website ([www.aitc.mb.ca](http://www.aitc.mb.ca)) shows who AITC-M's financial supporters are but they also help us run our programs. We supply teaching tools to schools for all grade levels for teachers to use in the classroom. But we also have a whole outreach component, kind of what I like to call “experiential” learning, where we put students and teachers right up close and personal with agriculture. To do that, we need support from our membership in terms of volunteers and speakers.

**Q: So your program is very dependent on the participation of volunteers?**

**A:** Frankly, we just couldn't run our organization without them. The industry as a whole is realizing that we have to look after agriculture education and awareness if we want to see a strong

future for the industry. They've really bought into supporting us. We are one of the only organizations in the industry that's telling the good news story about agriculture. It's our responsibility to be talking about the industry's exciting and dynamic opportunities.

### **Q: How widespread is the program in Manitoba?**

**A:** There are about 1,000 schools in Manitoba and during the last 10 years, about 70 per cent of them have used one of our resources or attended one of our programs. Most of our current material is aimed at kindergarten to Grade 8 because it's easy to work with the curriculum. During the next three years, we plan to focus on our high schools. For example, a lot of high schools offer career placement programs but the guidance counselors may not understand the opportunities in our sector because of a lack of information. We want to provide them with contacts to help place students. Students who have had a weeklong placement in an agriculturally based job are blown away with the opportunities that are available within the industry.

### **A: What about public awareness about agriculture?**

**A:** Young people have lost their connection with agriculture. They understand farmers produce food but they don't really think about what happens after the farm gate. There's a big black hole between there and the grocery store. They don't think about all the steps in between, how lucky we are to have such abundant, affordable food and why they should care where it comes from, or why they should support local and Canadian products. We want to inspire young people to think of agriculture as a career but also to know where their food comes

from, to read labels and to think more about the industry as a whole so we'll have informed consumers in the future who will support agriculture. We have to look at ways we can connect with young people and what they're enjoying. Right now it's all about technology. We have to be on YouTube and Facebook; we have to be really savvy.

One of the most rewarding aspects of my job is seeing the dawning on kids' faces when they realize how cool, amazing or scientific something is and how it affects them as a person. They're also thankful when they see what farmers have to do to produce food as well as non-food products.

### **Q: How does the Nutrients for Life Foundation fit in with your program?**

**A:** I'm really excited that Nutrients for Life has started here in Canada because I've used the U.S. website and it has a tremendous amount of excellent science-based resources. I'm especially pleased they are trying to adapt some of the U.S. materials to each of the provinces. It's a huge task but once it's adapted to the Manitoba curriculum, we will make very good use of it. We've always said to our supporters and members that AITC-M is a vehicle into the schools. The Nutrients for Life resources are dead-on in terms of the content and we need more resource material on the nutrient side of things in growing crops to reply to some of the negative reports about nutrients. It's important to growing food and it will only become more important as our population grows. I'm excited about the materials that Nutrients for Life is putting together and I know we'll be able to work closely with them. ♦

