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California

Advocates tout importance of FFA, other career-technical programs

By **TIM HEARDEN**
Capital Press

Advocates for agricultural and other career-technical training in California high schools should make their voices heard during upcoming budget negotiations, state lawmakers told them this week.

Ag teachers, FFA students and other enthusiasts for career-oriented instruction packed a high school performing arts center in Buena Park, Calif., on Oct. 2 as state leaders discussed how to stabilize funding for the programs.

Assemblyman Patrick O'Donnell, D-Long Beach, encouraged school board members, administrators and others to educate their elected officials about the importance of including money for the programs in next year's budget.

"The commitment from the governor is gone, so we need to make it happen next year," said O'Donnell, who chairs the lower chamber's Education Committee. "Every time you're at a function, you need to say to your state senator or Assembly member, 'Hey, we need to continue (career-technical education) funding.'"

The sense of urgency comes after Gov. Jerry Brown sent shock waves through many high schools when he proposed deleting \$15.4 million for FFA and high school career-technical programs from the 2017-18 state budget.

Brown reinserted the funding in his May budget revision after parents, students and other FFA advocates took to social media to rally support for the programs. The outcry prompted 65 legislators to send a letter to the governor and to budget committee leaders asking that the funding be restored.

Of the 114,000 students that would have been affected by the cut, 86,000 are in FFA, which has a foundation to help raise money but relies on the \$250,000 state allocation as "base funding," California



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

California lawmakers are considering ways to boost funding for career-technical education.

Agricultural Teachers Association executive director Jim Aschwanden has said.

But Brown found one-time funding for the programs for this academic year, meaning they can be on the chopping block again next year.

"What you need to do is take this to your school boards and administrators and make sure they're advocating and reaching out to elected members," O'Donnell said during the Buena Park informational meeting, which was streamed online.

O'Donnell was joined by his committee's vice chairman, Assemblyman Rocky Chavez, R-Oceanside; Assemblywoman Sharon Quirk-Silva, D-Fullerton, who chairs the chamber's Committee on Jobs, Economic Development and the Economy; and other lawmakers.

The legislators heard from panels of students, teachers, superintendents and other school officials and took about an hour of comments from the audience.

Edwin Madrid, an FFA member at Buena Park High School, told the lawmakers he manages a 4-acre farm that grows avocados and other commodities and plans to study agriculture at California State University-Chico.

"I've developed skills that

are practical and real world," Madrid said. "I go to competitions and compete in them. I compete in job interview."

Aaron Gonzalez said his auto shop class motivated him to continue his education. He was 30 credits behind, but made them up and graduated from Redlands High School in June.

He now he has a job with California Steel Industries.


"It was the only reason I wanted to go to school," Gonzalez said. "Auto shop was my getaway. When I would have problems in a regular class, I would go there and work it out." He said career-technical programs help high school graduates get a start in life.

"Regular high school ... is preparing you just for more school," he said.

While lawmakers rescued the career programs last spring, convincing them of their long-term value could still be a challenge, committee members said.

"When I got to the Legislature, people fought with me about career-technical education as if it were a dead end," said Assemblywoman Autumn Burke, D-Inglewood.

"You have achieved soft skills," she told the students. "Every one of you speaks so well."



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Courtesy of UCANR

Agricultural start-up Blue River tests its technology by flying a drone over sorghum crops to collect data at the University of California's Kearney Agricultural Research and Extension Center in Parlier. The UC has received a \$500,000 federal grant to develop a network for entrepreneurs.

UC, nonprofit receive \$500,000 grant to start entrepreneurs' network

PARLIER, Calif. — The University of California and a nonprofit organization will share a \$500,000 grant to develop a network for agricultural entrepreneurs.

The UC's Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources and AgStart, which seeks to connect start-up businesses with researchers and investors, were awarded the grant from the U.S. Economic Development Administration.

The money will go toward cultivating the Verde Innovation Network for Entrepreneurship (VINE), which will link businesses with mentors, advisers, collaborators, events, competitions and other services, according to the UCANR's website.

"We want to make sure every Californian has the support system to take a novel idea and commercialize a new product or start a new business," Glenda Humiston, the UC's vice president for ag and natural resources, said in a statement. "They don't have to be a university inventor. They could be a farmer or a young person."

AgStart itself was es-

tablished with federal grant funds and has supported more than 50 entrepreneurs and their companies since 2012. Last year the group helped 16 companies, including eight from outside the Central Valley region, explained John Selep, president of AgTech Innovation Alliance, AgStart's sponsor.

Among the VINE's contributors will be the UC's nine research and extension centers, which can provide places to field-test products, university officials said. For instance, the Sunnyvale, Calif.-based Blue River Technology is testing its data-collecting ability by flying a drone over sorghum crops at the UC's Kearney Agricultural Research and Extension Center in Parlier.

The VINE will complement other innovation resource "clusters" around the state, including the Fresno-based BlueTechValley Regional Innovation Cluster, Western Growers' Innovation and Technology Lab in Salinas and UC-Merced's VentureLab, officials said.





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