

OPINION

Agriculture crops up in education

ED
GANNON



HOW much do your kids know about where their food comes from? Not as much as the kids of yesteryear, I bet.

With the growing urbanisation of our population, the gulf between farm and town has never been wider.

Once upon a time most city children had a grandparent or aunt or uncle on a farm that they would visit to milk the cows, feed the lambs or ride around on the back of the tractor.

Many of these farms were a short skip away, on prime farming land at exotic places such as Lilydale, Cranbourne and Werribee.

But with the concreters and tilers having commandeered great chunks of that land, the farm connection has been lost for many.

We're even at the stage where farm visiting programs such as Farm Day are needed in an attempt to re-establish the bond between farm and city.

But, thankfully, a significant decision this week has seen the wheel turn back in agriculture's favour.

On Monday the body that governs Australia's national school curriculum agreed to put agriculture back into the classroom.

In future, all students from kindergarten to year 8 will learn about agriculture and other primary industries.

And primary industries will be offered as an optional stand-alone subject in years 7-10.

The change has come after years of pressure from groups such as the National Farmers Federation and the Primary Industries Education Foundation.

These groups were increasingly concerned that in the current school curriculum, students heard of farming only when discussion turned to environmental damage caused since white settlement, or of nasty, wasteful farmers pinching water from dying rivers.

Little focus has ever been placed on food production, the value of agriculture to Australia, or the environmental benefits of farming through practices such as no-till cropping, tree planting and bio-fuel production.

In fact, a draft history curriculum seen by *The Weekly Times* in July showed that students were to look at farming in medieval Europe and Asia, but not locally.

The move this week is a significant win for Australian agriculture.

For years tertiary enrolments for agriculture courses have dwindled as they lost students to more "groovy" careers such as environmental science.

As a result, agriculture struggles to fill well-paid professional roles not just in the paddock, but in agribusiness, finance and agriscience.

But there is a bigger factor at play, as food security becomes a greater concern across the globe.

A Food Security Risk Index last week showed Afghanistan, Congo, Burundi, Eritrea, Sudan, Ethiopia, Angola, Liberia, Chad and Zimbabwe are all at "extreme risk" of food shortage.

As a major food producer, Australia stands at the precipice of a revolution that could see us become an even bigger supplier to the world.

But we need people to research, produce, market and trade that food. And to do that you need to know where food comes from.

Of course, the irony is that at the very moment agriculture wins a place in the national curriculum, rural Australia is the central player in the argy-bargy over who forms the next Federal Government.

After years of being made to stand in the corner, agriculture now looks like the teacher's pet.

Ed Gannon is editor of *The Weekly Times*



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