



Why Aren't More Missouri Students Earning IRCs in Agriculture-Related Industries?

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By: Emily Stahly

In many of Missouri's school districts, career and technical education classes are available either through the local high school or area career centers. But why are only a fraction of our state's high school students receiving industry-recognized credentials (IRC), especially in Missouri's major industries like agriculture? Even where classes are available, it seems that getting some kind of certification is more of an afterthought.

When a student is looking to go to work right out of high school, an IRC shows the potential employer that the student has skills needed for that job. If a student is planning on going to college, an IRC can help them gain valuable experience, make some money, and potentially earn college credit. Particularly in industries like agriculture and animal science where there is a lot of student interest, Missouri should look for ways to create clearer pathways for high schools to earn IRCs.

In a [recent article](#) from the St. Joseph area, a local teacher discusses how he is observing more students interested in jobs related to agribusiness such as food safety, veterinary science, and conservation. But according to data from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), only three students from the St. Joseph school district passed the MO Agriculture Skill & Knowledge Assessment, an IRC that shows that students have mastered one of 15 areas including farm management and livestock evaluation. Despite interest in veterinary

science, no students in the district received the Veterinary Assistant Animal Care Technologies IRC.

It is worth noting that some districts do very well in getting their students credentialed. For instance, even though Jefferson School District had fewer than 50 high schoolers enrolled in 2018, students in the district earned 23 MO Agriculture Skill & Knowledge Assessment certifications.

Nevertheless, Missouri as a whole could do a better job of helping students get a jump start on a career or college. And not just in agriculture-related fields—there are opportunities, albeit limited, for students to specialize in areas like welding, web programming and development, health care, and automotive repair. In 2018, only 7,084 IRCs were earned by Missouri high schoolers and about 2,800 of those were ag-related (for perspective, there are over a quarter-million high schoolers and over 64,000 12th graders in Missouri).

How can we expand these opportunities and make earning an IRC for career-minded students more of the norm in Missouri? Creating an incentive for teachers and districts through [bonus pay](#) is one option. In Florida, teachers are awarded a bonus of \$25 to \$50 for each student that obtains an IRC. After adopting this policy, IRC obtainment increased from 803 in 2007 to over 86,000 in 2017. North Carolina also has bonus pay for high-performing instructors and over 160,000 IRCs were obtained in 2017.

Missouri has over 500 school districts, all with different strengths and challenges. Establishing a bonus pay program would give districts an incentive to find the best way for them to give more of their students a head start on a career or college.

About the Author



*Emily Stahly
Analyst*

Emily Stahly is an analyst at the Show-Me Institute. She earned her B.A. in politics from Hillsdale College in Michigan and is researching education with the Show-Me Institute.

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Show-Me Institute

5297 Washington Place	3645 Troost Avenue
Saint Louis, MO 63108	Kansas City, MO 64109
Phone: (314) 454-0647	Phone: (816) 287-0370
Fax: (314) 454-0667	

Email: info@showmeinstitute.org

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