

## A Common Core *Dilemma* for NY Agriculture

*"The whole farm was managed from a bank of computer monitors in a control room. Sitting in that room, the farmer could, at the flick of a switch, douse his crops with water or whatever chemical he thought they needed. That's where my potatoes come from? I never knew."*

*"---And then, very suddenly, the golden hills turned jet-black on both sides of the highway: black with tens of thousands of cattle crowded onto a carpet of manure that stretched as far as the eye could see. That's where my meat comes from? I never knew."*

*"The picture in my head, of small family farms with white picket fences and red barns and happy animals on green pastures, was seriously out of date."*

*-Excerpts from the introduction to **The Omnivore's Dilemma - Young Reader's Edition***

"You better take a look at what we are reading in school, Dad," 8th grader Josie Swyers told her father, Joe Swyers last Spring, handing him her copy of **The Omnivore's Dilemma -- Young Readers Edition**.

Joe Swyers and his wife, June operate an 1,100-cow dairy in Dansville, NY, and the more he read, the more shocked he became. How could a public school include such a slanted view of the US food system as required reading?

He soon found out why. The book is part of New York State's Common Core English Language Arts Curriculum (Grade 8: Module 4: Sustainability of the US Food Supply Chain). The objective of this module is for students to analyze persuasive writing. Students are asked to consider which of author Michael Pollan's food supply chains they would choose: Industrial, Industrial Organic, Local Sustainable, or Hunt and Gather. They are not asked to analyze whether Pollan's portrayal of these food systems is correct. Notes that accompany the module encourage teachers to remind students that this is just one point of view and that they are not to read this book and believe that everything Michael Pollan says is true, however, there are no suggestions of resources that offer another point of view.

It soon became apparent that any efforts to remove the book from his school's curriculum was blocked by the fact that the book was part of the NYS Common Core. After getting nowhere with teachers or the principal, Swyers finally convinced the school superintendent to give him a chance to offer the

kids another perspective of the food system. And as a dairy farmer in the community, he felt qualified and compelled to tell it. Swyers was given the opportunity to spend one class period with each of the 8th grade ELA classes and host a field trip at his farm.

Swyers enlisted the help of Livingston County Cooperative Extension Ag in the Classroom educator Bernadette Harwood. (Harwood's position is partially funded through a grant secured by Senator Gallivan) Harwood collaborated with NYAAC Director Jessica Ziehm, who suggested a survey to identify the key issues students had after reading the book. Harwood developed a survey with the following three questions:

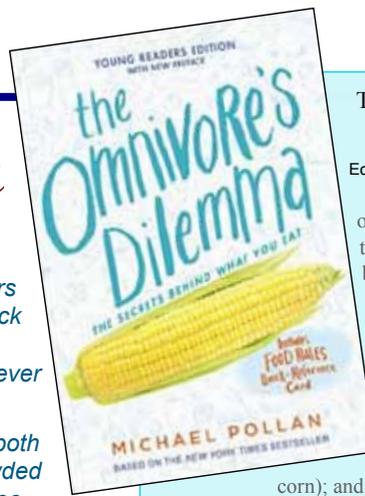
1. What are three take-away points from Omnivore's Dilemma?
2. What concerns do you have about food?
3. What questions would you ask a farmer or agricultural professional about our food supply or their practices?

Dansville uses Google Apps for Education to provide electronic communication with students so that was used to administer the survey.

The responses were shocking. After reading the misconceptions these kids had of modern agriculture after reading this book, Swyers was more convinced than ever that he needed to present a different perspective.

Here are just a few examples:

*-Do you ever stop and think, 'I kill animals for a living?'*



### The Omnivore's Dilemma: Young Readers Edition

Editorial review from School Library Journal:

"Based on Pollan's best-selling adult book of the same title, this version will appeal to thoughtful, socially responsible teens. The book is divided into four sections: "The Industrial Meal" (exemplified by the fact that only two companies, Cargill and ADM, buy nearly a third of all the corn grown in the U.S.); "The Industrial Organic Meal" (covering most of what's found in stores like Whole Foods); "Local Sustainable" (small farms typically based on grass, not

corn); and what he calls the "Do-It-Yourself Meal" (where he hunts a wild pig and gathers wild mushrooms). Pollan has done an amazing amount of research, both of the typical kind (there are 16 pages of footnotes) and the more personal kind. His own research includes slaughtering a chicken himself and eating a fast-food meal in a moving car with his family. He explains complicated issues clearly, offers compelling evidence of the environmental damage done by what he calls the industrial meal, and urges readers not to look away from animal-welfare issues: "We can only decide if we know the truth." An afterword, "Vote with Your Fork," recommends simple actions that will improve the health of our bodies, our society, and our planet."—Lauralyn Persson, Wilmette Public Library, IL END

*-The way the majority of farms grow their food is damaging the earth.*

*-The way we treat the animals on farms is often inhumane and should be regulated.*

*-CAFOs have been proven to create toxic pollutants, allow bacteria to make it's way into our food, and force animals to eat food that isn't meant for their bodies*

*-Do you farmers ever feel bad about your job?*

*-Do you ever wish you had chosen a different job than farming?*

Overall, survey results showed students were concerned about chemicals and pesticides in their food, treatment of animals on farms and agriculture's impact on the environment.

### In The Classroom

Swyers and Harwood developed a classroom presentation to address these concerns. They included:

- A short video entitled "A World Without Farmers," produced by BASF and available on YouTube
- A Power Point presentation addressing sustainability and modern farm practices to address it.
- An exercise using monopoly money showing how much of Americans' income is spent on food versus other countries
- A handout and demonstration showing production gains in agriculture over the past 50 years - using

- fewer natural resources and less land
- Swyers' description of how cows are treated on his farm, where he strives to provide a stress-free, comfortable environment.
- Examples of how and why herbicides and pesticides are used on crops, and medications and vaccinations are used on animals.
- An exercise to help students quantify the size of an acre and the small amount of pesticide or herbicide that would actually be applied to that acre.
- Evidence that both conventionally-produced food and organically-produced food are safe to eat
- A handout of agriculturalists to follow on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram.

#### At the Farm

The 8th grade field trip to Swyers' farm happened June 10 and comprised of 8 stations:

- Dairy Nutritionist - what cows eat, providing a balanced diet
- Crop Consultant - flagged an acre in a field and discussed soil testing, nutrient management and chemical application
- Equipment dealer - GPS and precision planting technology
- AI Company Rep - genetics and reproduction
- Seed Company Rep - GMOs and their place in the food system
- Milk inspector - milk quality, safety regulations and animal well-being
- BOCES/Ag Academy/FFA- career opportunities in agriculture
- Veterinarian - animal health and well-being

Swyers believes his efforts made a difference, not only with the kids, but also with the teachers and administrators that attended the presentations and farm tours. He plans to continue the program at Dansville Central School and offer the field trip to any school who wants to come.

Harwood hopes to replicate the program in other schools that are including **The Omnivore's Dilemma** in their curriculum.

"This module does scare me because in 8th grade kids are so emotionally driven and this book is emotionally charged. Very little of this module is based on science or research from our nation's land grant universities," says Harwood, concerned that this book has

the potential to have a lifetime impact on these students as consumers.

"We need to introduce these kids to their farmer neighbors and show them that we care about our cows and our land and our communities," Harwood insists.

#### Spreading the Word

Swyers and Harwood encourage farmers to contact their local schools to see if this module is being included in their 8th grade ELA curriculum -- there's a good chance it is. If so, insist on the opportunity to present another perspective to students with a classroom visit or farm tour.

Harwood invites farmers to contact her for help in coordinating a program. Her email address is beh53@cornell.edu and she can be reached by phone at 585-991-5420 or 585-755-2703. NEDPA will share reference material used at Dansville Central School on their website at [www.nedpa.org](http://www.nedpa.org).

NYFB and NEDPA have expressed their concern to the Commissioner Ball and the Governor about **Omnivore's Dilemma in NYS Common Core** and asked that the module be removed. Farmers should also express their concern to their legislators.



This article appeared in the December 2015 issue of *One Step Ahead*, the quarterly member newsletter of the Northeast Dairy Producers Association (NEDPA) and is being shared with permission.

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