

# The Ag Class Hypocrisy

By Mark Hawthorne



*Piglet running in meadow Image: © Herbert Spichtinger/zefa*

It was supposed to be a routine lesson. But when a teacher recently castrated a live pig without anesthesia in a California high school agriculture class, it sparked an impassioned debate carried out in news stories, op-ed columns, letters and blogs across the U.S. Animal protectionists, who have long held that such cruelty has no place in public schools, made the story a national issue when it came to light in February and rallied activists to voice their opposition. The agriculture industry quickly fired back, saying that castrating a pig without using any pain relief is merely standard practice. Charles Parker, assistant state Future Farmers of America (FFA) adviser at the California Department of Education, said anesthesia is not normally used during pig castrations, which are done to calm male animals, prevent them from breeding, and improve meat quality. After all, most may argue, isn't castration also performed on dogs and cats?

Indeed it is, but that's where we encounter a troubling double standard. When such a procedure is performed on animals we consider companions, a doctor of veterinary medicine first administers anesthesia so the dog or cat is rendered unconscious and feels no

pain or anxiety during the operation. The veterinarian also provides the guardian with pain medicine to give to the animal, with instructions for post-surgical care. Castration is handled much differently when the animal is destined for the dinner table, and the California ag teacher gave a casebook demonstration, holding the screaming piglet by his legs while slicing open his scrotum. Ag students thus learn that abusing animals is acceptable, even encouraged, if there is money to be made. If someone were to treat a companion animal this way, he or she would surely be charged with animal cruelty.

The castration incident is just the latest example of why FFA, 4-H, and other animal agricultural programs—which sponsor the raising of animals for slaughter on public school grounds—have no place in our school system. In these programs, young people across the country care for pigs, sheep, goats, cows, rabbits, turkeys and other farmed animals who will eventually be shown at their local country fair—and slaughtered. Thus, the earlier lessons the students learned about empathy and compassion for animals are completely negated. Instead, students learn what their beloved animals are worth per pound or how to profit by selling rabbits for meat.

## Violence in Schools

Ag programs are of special concern today, when educators and school administrators cite campus violence as a paramount concern. Readers may recall a deplorable incident in 2004 when 35 pigs sponsored by FFA were viciously stabbed and beaten by five junior high school students in Washington State. Another case that same year involving two young men who broke into a school in California and used a hacksaw and chisel to brutally kill two FFA lambs was particularly disturbing. And this past January, two young men broke into an FFA barn at a Texas high school and beat several pigs with a shovel and then ran over them with a truck. Three pigs died and six more were injured. These are but a few of the appalling incidents in recent years demonstrating that animals cannot be protected from abuse while they are on school grounds.

Moreover, children and teens who engage in such cruelty have a greater potential to harm humans. As a fact sheet from the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) states, "Many studies in psychology, sociology, and criminology during the last 25 years have demonstrated that violent offenders frequently have childhood and adolescent histories of serious and repeated animal cruelty."

What message are we giving kids when we encourage them to care for a helpless being and then slaughter the animal on school grounds? How can we possibly teach these same children that violence is wrong? With their policy of hypocrisy—nurturing the student's natural love of animals and then sending these critters off to the auction block—ag programs cause much confusion for young people. Each year, Animal Place, a sanctuary for farmed animals in California, receives phone calls from children desperately trying to find a haven for their animal. After living with and caring for a pig for four months, for example, these students appreciate the animal not as a source of revenue, but as an intelligent, social being with as much desire and right to live as humans.

As a former 4-H student, Erin Williams knows firsthand how devastating school-based ag programs can be. "Rabbits, chickens, ducks, sheep and dairy cows were my 'projects' in elementary school and

junior high," she says. "We had all manner of animals on my family's dairy farm in northern Illinois. I refused to sell them at the end of the season, so they stayed on the farm or we found homes for them with people we knew. However, my cow Zelda, who was a beautiful, affectionate and rambunctious Brown Swiss, was killed because she couldn't conceive and therefore was unable to lactate. I didn't know that she had been slaughtered until about a week later, and I remember going to a fast food restaurant soon after. I sat down to eat my hamburger and couldn't take a bite of it, thinking about her and all the other animals just like her who were ground up in those burgers." Erin has since devoted her life to animal advocacy and is now an outreach coordinator at HSUS.

**Helping Students Help Animals**

As an alternative to programs like those sponsored by FFA and 4-H, Animal Place has introduced its About Building Compassion (ABC) campaign, which promotes kindness and compassion in our schools. ABC is in response to what many animal protectionists see as a need for teachers

and administrators to allow compassion to be part of the farming industry. This campaign is designed to sensitize children to the beauty and individuality of farmed animals; to counter agribusiness' relentless conditioning of young children, which serves to dull their natural feelings of empathy and curiosity about farmed animals; and to offer compassionate alternatives to the traditional FFA and 4-H projects.

PETA, meanwhile, has developed its TeachKind program to provide educators with free lesson plans and materials that nurture the students' empathy while empowering them to take compassionate action for animals. The program has been a lifeline for ag students wanting to save their beloved animals from slaughter. Among its many other efforts, PETA helped identify two teens who had attacked a pig from an FFA program. The teens were charged with felony animal abuse for hitting the pig, Phil, in the head with a concrete block, and the high school agreed to let Phil be adopted. He is now recovered and living the good life with guardians who love him.

"FFA misleads students about the reality of animal agriculture," says Sangeeta Kumar, a humane educator for PETA. "If they really wanted to show students how animals are raised for food, they'd take them on a trip to a factory farm or slaughterhouse, where animals have practically no federal laws protecting them, and where they are subjected to unimaginable cruelty."

In their present form, FFA and programs like them encourage the ultimate betrayal of trust: The animal develops a strong, loving bond with the student, who then sells the animal for slaughter. We do our children and the animals a profound disservice when we allow such hypocrisy to occur, especially under the authority of our public school system and funded by taxpayer dollars. ■

*Mark Hawthorne is a contributing writer for Satya. For more information on Animal Place's About Building Compassion campaign visit [www.animalplace.org](http://www.animalplace.org) and for TeachKind see [www.teachkind.org](http://www.teachkind.org).*

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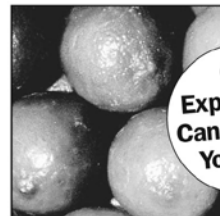
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