

Kids Need Experience With Animals

Teachers who use animals in their classrooms are strong advocates of their educational value. They can attest that nothing teaches responsibility better than to have a child assume care of a critter.

According to research cited in this week's *Education Week*, "...pets in the classroom can increase enthusiasm for school and learning, decrease disruptive behavior, teach management of stress and anxiety, and help children learn to value nature."

Many Kansas teachers work animals into lessons in science, math, and of course, reproduction. One Wichita middle school teacher is the "frog lady" because she works everything into that theme; her classroom is a jungle of art and writing about frogs.

However, there are ominous forces assembling to rid classrooms of animals. Because some students have allergies, *Education Week* reports "the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recommends barring pets from classrooms as a precaution" despite the fact that students with allergies easily can be routed to the many classrooms without pets.

Kansas elementary schools have dropped using baby chicks for lessons in hatching, reproduction and development because of non-binding guidelines from the Kansas Department of Health and Environment. The reason given—salmonella—is the same basis for suggesting eliminating reptiles and amphibians from the classroom, though none of those animals have been implicated in such transmission in the classroom setting.

Terrorism and state economics haven't helped. Many Kansas school administrators have halted field trips, thereby cutting costs, liability, parent concern and, sadly, educational experiences for students at zoos and nature trails.

Students from farm families still have opportunity to care for horses and chickens and naturally learn the lessons of responsibility and reproduction. But in an age when "one Kansas farmer feeds 128 people and you," that leaves few of our students on the farm.

As our classrooms drift toward padded white cells, abstract media, and lessons with no genuine consequences, parents will have to assume more responsibility. There are several actions parents can take:

- Support the teacher who does provide classroom animals, labwork and field trips to zoos.
- Use the summer vacation to take your children to the Great Plains Nature Center and the Sedgwick County Zoo (or other similar facilities across the state).
- Consider Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and 4-H which provide children with both outdoor experiences and work with animals.
- And go to the rodeo—such as the one this weekend at Strong City—and focus on the horse-and-rider who work so seamlessly to pick up the competitors or head off the runaways.

Animals are a part of Kansas history.
Let's keep it that way.