

Growing the Future

St Andrew's College has a strong farming tradition that new Science and Agriculture teacher Robyn Cox intends to strengthen. "Agriculture is the backbone of the New Zealand economy and it's the one industry with the potential for significant growth," she says.



EMILY HARRISON (YEAR 10) FEEDS A COW DURING A TRIP TO THE SCHOOL FARM AT CAVE.

"This is our opportunity to create pathways for our students to tap into that market." Robyn was behind the development of an agricultural programme that moved agriculture from focusing on industry training (ITO) unit standards to a university approved achievement standard programme that offered some ITO papers in the holiday breaks, and also included a Scholarship strand. "ITO based standards work well in a rural setting where the students can practise their skills," she says. "But in a city school there aren't enough opportunities for students to do as much hands-on learning." Robyn says she'll be looking to help students develop their skill sets.

"Farms are complex multi-million dollar businesses," she says. "While most students, unless they have a family farm, won't own one, they still have wonderful opportunities in the industries surrounding farming. The sector needs good people right throughout the supply chain, including research, economics, logistics, marketing, and personnel management. The advantage of studying agriculture at school is that, even if you don't intend to go farming, you will have a good understanding of the processes and terminology of the sector."



CALEB RYDER (YEAR 12) AT LAKE STATION AT LAKE TAYLOR.

At St Andrew's the Year 11 Agriculture programme is a general course that covers pasture, soils, plant and animal production. Year 12 builds on this foundation with a more scientific approach, with the detail similar to a first year diploma in Agriculture, and in Year 13, students have a wider commercial approach where they need to justify on-farm decision making based on market requirements. "It's about understanding how the farmer manipulates their farming practices to meet these requirements," says Robyn. "On-farm is only one element of the learning. Others include research, politics, business, environmental sustainability including community engagement and attitudes towards farming."

Robyn has eight students working towards Scholarship exams and, having taught New Zealand's Top Agriculture Scholar once before, hopes she will continue this success at St Andrew's. The scholarship group meets weekly and often hosts industry experts such as Nick Aubrey from New Zealand Merino and Sir Graeme Harrison CEO of ANZCO Foods. Since the Young Farmer's Club was re-established this year, the students have already made an impression.

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Robyn Cox

St Andrew's teams came first and third in the regional finals of the ANZ Young Farmer Contest and finished in the top seven at the national finals in Auckland. The highlight of the competition however was the strong showing by the College stock judges who won all of their events. Luke Gilbert (Year 11) was named overall stock judge winner in the dairy goat and dairy cow section and Ben Sutherland (Year 12) won the sheep, and came second in the beef, judging.

An advantage of the College's strong farming traditions is the number of Old Collegians and parents who open their doors to host student trips. "Among others, we've visited Robin Oakley who has a large market garden operation in Southbridge; David Burnett who farms chickens on a large scale and is a company owner; Ross Ivey's Glentanner that involved discussions on high country merino farming and a visit to Duncan and Nicky Anderson in Rotherham, who showed students the dynamics of a large scale dairy conversion," says Robyn. "Some of the students here are from second and third generation farming families so there is a real connectedness."

One of Robyn's goals over the next few years is to get more girls to see agriculture as a viable career path. "The dairy industry is arguably one of the most gender equal industries in New Zealand. It is less about physical strength but more about dedication, hard work and good people, animal and pasture management." She would also like students to see the subject as an academic pathway for the industries that support agriculture. "Agriculture is probably the one sector where graduates are paid more than any other, and there are more opportunities because of the shortage of skilled workers," she says.



YEARS 12 AND 13 STUDENTS WATCH A SHEEP SHEARING DEMONSTRATION AT THE MCLEAN'S FARM IN OMAHI.



SAMUEL HUGHES (YEAR 10) DURING A TRIP TO THE SCHOOL FARM AT CAVE.

A Love of the Land

Twenty years spent living and working on large scale hill and high country farms has given Science and Agriculture teacher Robyn Cox a good insight into the farming sector, although a career in agriculture was never her first choice. She initially enrolled at Massey to study as a vet, but decided to do first year Agricultural Science at Lincoln instead. "I loved Lincoln University, and never left. I then married my old flat mate who was a high country musterer, and the rest, as they say, is history." Two decades later, Robyn and her husband, Anthony, now live on a lifestyle block at Swanannoa and are still passionate about agriculture.

"I like the fact that agriculture is real contextual learning. Students can see that it's useful and that it generates billions of dollars a year for the New Zealand economy," says Robyn. "We only have a first world economy in New Zealand because of agriculture and we should be encouraging our brightest and best students to recognise agriculture for what it is – New Zealand's most productive, innovative sector that offers a wide variety of career opportunities." Robyn is also President of the Agricultural Teachers Association, (HATA) and is working towards her Masters in Applied Science on the stakeholder perceptions surrounding milk quality.



ROBYN COX