

# SCHOOLING BY RURAL DELIVERY

## TE KOWHAI SCHOOL AT THE HEART OF WAIKATO'S DAIRY DISTRICT

EDITOR

The playground is full of challenges for building confidence

*This account investigates rural schooling and highlights issues which are specific to students and to the teachers and principals working in country areas. Editor, Liz Hawes heads to the Waikato journeying through the dairy intensive landscape. First stopover is the Agricultural Fielddays at Mystery Creek on the outskirts of Hamilton city. Trolling the Fielddays provides a curious entrée to the 'rural personality'. Next is a visit to Te Kowhai School set in the heart of Waikato's dairy district, just 7 kilometres north-west of Hamilton city. In contrast to the soft green pastures of Te Kowhai the trip to Te Kura A Rohe O Whaingaroa, Raglan Area School, steers us through a spine of rugged ranges protecting the western coastline and Raglan's world famous Manu Bay surfing beach. The school occupies a cul-de-sac at the top of the hill, above the quaintly appealing little township of Raglan. Its playing fields form a peninsular extending into the estuary, whilst the school itself commands stunning views of both the estuary and the bay.*

**THE LUSH WAIKATO** is the country's richest dairy region with 12,000 dairy farms making up 40 per cent of the province's farming activities. The region claims one of the largest dairy product factories in the world. Located at Te Rapa, the factory pumps through 10 million litres of milk a day. Supporting the success of Waikato's dairy industry is the work of the Ruakura Research Centre, an international leader in both soil and animal science research. Once a year, the Waikato region gets to boast its rural roots. It plays host to the Fielddays where inventors of farming equipment are given an open stage and ample audience to promote their agricultural innovations. The Fielddays are a key event for showcasing the latest in agricultural research and, most important, demonstrating how new thinking applies on the farm. That is what the 100,000+ visitors come to learn about each year at Mystery Creek.

Those in charge of the exhibit stands and many more amongst



The junior classroom block and attractive outdoor area



Entrance to Te Kowhai School

the spectators have devoted their lives to farming and farm improvements. They represent the backbone of New Zealand's export trade and thus our economy.

Rural folk are different. They are an understated bunch, strong, tough and resilient. They know how to work together and they know how to be creative with what they've got. Rural folk have a close affinity with the 'national' game of rugby and many of the exhibit stands exploit the connection in the language and imagery they use for their promotions. There was a time when most All Black teams boasted at least a handful of farmers. Their hard physical work meant they were likely to be the fittest and toughest on the field. Farmers' isolation from mainstream means they are also a self-reliant breed. They have learned how to make decisions and do things for themselves.

'At present we have over 300 children here,' says principal Tony Grey, 'and the roll is growing.'

The reason for the roll growth is largely because a sizable stretch of farmland within the school's zone has recently been subdivided into 10-acre lifestyle blocks and there are more to come.

'Ten years ago the school's roll was under 200, because there were of course far fewer families here then,' said Tony.

There are still intergenerational farmers in the district but not as many as there used to be. With the growth in the lifestyle blocks has come growth for the village and greater wealth for the district. It has pushed the decile rating of the school up to 10.

The school itself has a long history. Only photos remain of the rather grim-looking original school and school house dating back to 1890. It was demolished in 1966 to make way for the



Machines to excite the Mystery Creek crowds include effluent disposal devices, fertiliser applicators, and animal feed dispensers. Today, inventions are much about automating farming functions through advanced technology rather than creating labour-intensive devices. These days successful farming is based on business models, so it is just as important to have financial and IT skills to facilitate the planning of farm maintenance, production cycles, growth and improvement as it is to have the practical skills of herding the cows to the milking shed.

Heading from Mystery Creek to Te Kowhai takes you through the distressingly non-pastoral light industrial region of Hamilton, yet with a single left-hand turn you are back in a picturesque rural paradise within minutes. The dazzling sun lights the undulating countryside a glowing shade of emerald and a glittering waterway curls lazily through the lowlands. A scattering of trees in assorted autumnal shades completes the rustic tableau whilst in the distance one can just make out the rooftops of a farm cottage and its implement sheds. Big sleepy eyed lactating cows dot the landscape. It is impossible not to be affected by the tranquillity of the scene, yet driving into the Te Kowhai School you are startled by its size.

new school, which boasts a selection of spacious bright and airy classrooms and a well-appointed library. A legacy of the olden days remains, however, in the form of the strong rural traditions and values that were established back then and are still fundamental to the school.

'It's not too difficult for families coming into our school community to quickly settle in because we foster a strong culture of belonging which the children and their families enjoy,' says Tony.

One success of Te Kowhai School which bucks the national trends relates to its Maori student cohort. Whilst many Maori children in mainstream schools struggle with their learning, at Te Kowhai School Maori students lead the way.

'Almost all of our Maori students are at or above national expectations and sometimes better than their non-Maori peers,' says Tony.

One can't help but reflect on the emphasis the school places on relationships and encouraging that sense of belonging for the whole family and just what impact those attitudes may be having on the achievement not just of Maori children, but on all of the children.



Principal Tony Grey visits the classroom

The relationships between the staff and children are also warm and friendly. They reflect the schools values of partnership, respect, integrity, drive and excellence or TK PRIDE as the locals say.

‘It’s a very family oriented school with a strong culture of collaboration not just between the teachers and support staff but between the parents, children, teachers and staff,’ he said. ‘It is this culture which makes the school an attractive option for parents and every year we are turning families away from out of our zone because we just don’t have the capacity to take them all in.’



Mr Grey helps a new entrant with her school bag

The new lifestylers are not just immersed in the country school’s culture, they have adopted the country way of doing things.

‘We have no problem getting support from our parents to help out in the classroom, to help with the fundraising which is led by our PTA, to come with us on school trips or accompany our sports teams on trips or to help coach and manage our sports teams,’ says Tony. ‘We are incredibly fortunate to have such an actively involved parent community which means we can offer the children so many more learning experiences.’

Sport is enthusiastically encouraged and due to the vastness of the school playing fields, Te Kowhai School is also the Te Kowhai Rugby Club. The school has five rugby teams and they are driven and motivated by the parents.

The netballers on the other hand have their competition in the city. Kids can also play hockey, football and a host of other sports for which there are many trophies to aspire to. As Tony puts it, ‘The history of our whole school is in our sports cups and in our trophies and that’s been the case since 1890.’

Yes, at Te Kowhai School, those country values of all pitching in together, sharing and caring are alive and well. The voluntary hours given by parents amount to 10,000 hours a year.

There are certain practices that identify Te Kowhai as a country school. These are things like ‘Ag Day’ that you wouldn’t find in city schools. All children are encouraged to rear a calf a lamb or a kid goat and bring them along on ‘Ag Day’. Farming families often help out kids from the lifestyle blocks by lending them an animal to rear, such is the interconnectedness of the area.

A second annual event which is most popular and typically country is the ‘Harvest Festival’. This is a day of competition where pumpkins, grown at home are brought along to be judged for colour, shape and unattractiveness.



An abundance of sports and an abundance of sporting trophies



Mural depicting school's history

'Our pumpkin competition is probably one of the few occasions on which we actually celebrate ugliness,' laughed Tony. 'For pumpkins, ugly is good!' he said. The day also includes competitions for soup, baking and preserves. Pumpkins and scarecrows are on show and there is a prize for the heaviest pumpkin. The day of celebration also extends to face-painting, origami, 'soak the teacher', pony rides and even pumpkin racing. It's a fun day and a great fundraiser, but nothing like the scale of the school's major fundraiser, the 'Top School Games'.

Te Kowhai School hosts the 'Top School Games' every year and some 20 schools all compete in a range of sporting activities. The games require a huge amount of parental support but here in the country, they turn out to help in droves. It is by far the biggest annual fundraising effort for the school and draws as many as 1500 people.

'It is through hosting the "Top School Games" that there are iPads in the junior rooms and laptops for the middle and senior students, all this outdoor playing equipment and well-maintained playing fields,' says Tony.

'What counts as success for us,' says Tony, 'is giving every child a variety of learning experiences that are consistent with the values of the school and of the community. We are a country school with a very close community and we have fantastic relationships with our parents. That means everyone feels they have a place here and everyone is welcome at our school.'

It's a recipe that according to the ERO report also yields exceptional learning results. If we can learn anything from the Te Kowhai experience, it is to get the relationships with the kids and their families sorted and the rest will follow.



A group of year 2 children use interactive technology to learn along with their teacher