

# Snakes in class? Just one way for students to learn agriscience

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Colonial High School junior Sara Humphrey, 17, chases sheep around the agriculture area at the school in Orlando, Florida, Dec. 9, 2015. Photo: Jacob Langston/Orlando Sentinel/TNS

ORLANDO, Fla. — As Valerie Lantigua quietly worked on her laptop, a snake rested on the back of her neck. She hardly paid attention to it, except to occasionally guide its wandering head.

It's a typical day in Timothy App's class. Students are taking the class as part of the Veterinary Animal Science and Services program at Colonial High School. The four-year program covers critters from the zoo to the wild.

Agriscience programs like Colonial's don't just teach about "cows, sows and plows," said Danny Garner. He is the Orange County district coordinator of agriscience and natural resources education. The classes teach about the science of agriculture. Students learn skills that can be used anywhere such as public speaking, debating and critical thinking.

"To me, it's a program that can benefit any and every student at a school, regardless of career choice," he said.

## **Animals, Plants And Biotechnology**

About 4,500 Orange County students take part in agriscience programs like the one at Colonial, Garner said. That's up from 2,500 during the 2012-13 school year.

Colonial's program is about animals, but Garner said different schools focus in different areas. Wekiva High offers an agriscience academy. It has classes in vegetable garden growing and aquaponics, the science of using waste from fish tanks to grow plants. It even teaches biotechnology, the science of changing living things to grow livestock or plants better.

Orange County isn't the only place where students are showing a growing interest in agriscience. The National FFA Organization, which used to be called Future Farmers of America, is growing. They counted 629,000 young members this year, up from 495,000 a decade ago.

Yet today's students are less likely to become farmers than in previous generations. The share of Americans who work in agriculture has shrunk from 41 percent in 1900 to less than 2 percent today, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

## **Many Career Choices Available**

The Bureau of Labor Statistics is a government agency that studies the U.S. job market. It released information stating that employment in fields such as agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting is expected to decline by 6 percent over the next decade.

Educators in the Orange County district stand behind their program. They say that studying agriscience can help students prepare for a wide range of careers. A background in agriscience can prepare students to become veterinarians, scientists or nutritionists. App values giving students a chance to explore their choices, including avoiding bad ones.

"I want them to find out what they want to do before they go to college," he said.

At the Colonial High program, about a quarter of the 74 students don't live in Colonial's zone. Many students who enter the program are eager to become veterinarians, and a few do just that. App said he tries to educate them about other animal-related careers, too.

App said he covers all types of animals because that's what his students want to learn. Snakes are clearly popular. The reptiles lurk in the glass tanks that border the room. Students roam freely with the animals wrapped around their necks.

App said he used to have chinchillas in his room, but the noise stressed the rodents. Snakes are a better fit for a busy school.

## **Students Keep Farm Animals At School**

Behind the school, a couple of large tortoises sat lazily in a pen. Dozens of chickens clucked noisily in a coop. Three sheep waited to be fed in a covered area.

At Colonial, most students live in homes with small yards or apartments. They don't have room at home for farm animals. App allows his most serious students to keep farm animals in a grassy area next to a parking lot. Families must purchase the animals with their own money. Students arrive at school before the first class starts at 7:27 a.m. to feed the goats and come in on weekends and over school breaks.

One of the sheep that lives at Colonial belongs to Valerie. She's raising the animal for a school project, and she'll eventually sell it for its meat.

A junior at Colonial, Valerie travels 45 minutes each way to Colonial from her home. The extra time in the car is worth it, she said, because it's good preparation for veterinary school.

"There would be no means for me to raise these animals if it weren't for this program," she said.

## Quiz

- 1 Select the paragraph from the introduction [paragraphs 1-4] that BEST summarizes the article.
  
- 2 Which detail BEST supports the article's central idea that agriculture programs can help students gain life skills?
  - (A) Colonial's program is about animals, but Garner said different schools focus in different areas.
  - (B) App values giving students a chance to explore their choices, including avoiding bad ones.
  - (C) Many students who enter the program are eager to become veterinarians, and a few do just that.
  - (D) App allows his most serious students to keep farm animals in a grassy area next to a parking lot.
  
- 3 Read the section "Animals, Plants And Biotechnology." What is MOST likely the reason the author included the fact that Future Farmers of America has 629,000 young members?
  - (A) to show that interest in agriculture is increasing among youth
  - (B) to show that only a small number of youth are interested in agriculture nationwide
  - (C) to show that youths' interest in agriculture has declined since the 1900s
  - (D) to show why some schools decided to start agriculture programs
  
- 4 Which answer choice accurately describes the reasons educators in Orange County support an agriculture program?
  - (A) They believe that jobs in agriculture will increase in the future.
  - (B) Most of the careers in their area involve the field of agriculture.
  - (C) Many students have farm experience, so they will do well in this program.
  - (D) They think the program will help students in a variety of professions.