Hershey Montessori Farm School: The Adolescent Community

By Heide Aungst and David Kahn

Heide Aungst is a freelance writer and a frequent contributor to Cleveland Magazine.

David Kahn is a Montessori leader in the field of adolescent design, and is currently implementing Project 2012, with a million dollar grant from the Dekko Foundation, the Hershey Foundation and the Oppenheimer family. Executive Director of the North American Montessori Teachers’ Association and the founding director (1998-2003) of the Hershey Montessori Farm School, Mr. Kahn seeks to establish a definitive model for Montessori Adolescent education from ages 12-18.

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Brianna Sennott and James Hecker get a hearty welcome when they walk through the doors to start their school day at 7:15 a.m. Rather than sleepy hellos from fellow students in a classroom, they’re greeted by the loud baas of hungry sheep and peppy braying of baby goats in the barn on their school’s campus.

Soon, their biology and geometry teacher, Rachel McKinney, and two more students join them in the barn. McKinney sweeps the dusty floor, while James scoops feed from a bin, pouring it into the troughs in the animal pens.

This is McKinney’s first stop of the day. Later in the morning, she’ll accompany a group of students in hipwaders, watching from the edge as they take a deep, slushy stroll through a swamp, scooping up snails in nets while bullfrogs bellow in surround-sound.

Here in the barn, birds flutter among the wooden rafters, the resonance of their flapping wings drowned out by the sheep. As the morning sunlight streams through a crack in the door, Brianna takes a moment to sit among the fuzzy baby goats, letting them jump on her and affectionately nuzzle her face.

“They’re more fun than puppies,” James says of the kids born a few weeks before this spring morning.

Brianna, 14, of Chicago, and James, 15, of Chagrin Falls, Ohio, were ninth grade students at the Hershey Montessori Farm School in Huntsburg Township. (They have since graduated.) While other adolescents are sowing their wild oats, the kids here are actually sowing corn, beans, and tomatoes. You might ask how is farming an aid to education?

Opened in 2000, Hershey Montessori is one of a handful of farm schools in the United States, and the only boarding school in the world based on the Montessori philosophy. A model for adolescent learning formulated in 1926 by Maria Montessori, an Italian physician and educator, it calls for “first the education of the senses, then the education of the intellect.” She called it “Erdkinder,” which literally translates to “Children of The Earth.”

Here, the kids are as likely to have dirt under their fingernails as geometry problems in their heads. “Work makes study better,” says Montessori. Adolescents are recognized for their “noble work and noble characteristics.” In Montessori’s terms, the farm community is all about responsibility, an implicit sense of justice, spirituality, empathy, solidarity, collaboration, physical work, creative self-expression, and social learning. In keeping with the words of Maria
Montessori, the lessons to be learned are life lessons: “Social integration has occurred when the individual identifies himself with the group to which he belongs. When this has happened, the individual thinks more about the success of the group than of his personal success.”

The Hershey Montessori Farm School program was started by a handful of experienced Montessori professionals dedicated single-mindedly to the cause. David Kahn was the founding project director. Laurie Ewert-Krocker and her husband Jim were also founders and now direct the program. Debra Hershey Guren was the President of the Hershey Montessori School Board and hands-on team player. Deborah Bricker was Head of School.

About half of the 50 seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-graders at the Farm School are boarders drawn from as far away as Sweden, Australia, New Zealand, and Mexico—and states from California to Connecticut. The rest come from surrounding communities in Ohio.

Despite its growing popularity, the school remains a well-kept secret, nestled on 97 acres off Route 528 in Geauga County’s scenic Amish country. Just a small sign announces that it’s there behind the dense trees.

A driveway winds through the woods to a red barn and a pony grazing in a lush green pasture with a split wood fence curling around the property. On this warm May day, the scene looks as if an artist has painted it against a background of azure sky and fluffy cotton clouds.

But don’t get the wrong idea, this isn’t a school that trains kids to be farmers. And it’s not a school for the gifted or disabled though it accepts both. This program also has clear academic benchmarks in the humanities, science, mathematics, language arts, foreign language, vocational arts, the visual arts, theater, and music. But academics at the farm school are intensified by community activity and conscious social relations. The Farm School’s academic head start presupposes Montessori education from early childhood through the elementary years as its prerequisites. The learning culture is very self-motivated with the highest academic expectations.

Also Montessori Erdkinder’s real intention is to set up the framework of an adolescent community where the students help maintain an operating business, which incorporates every part of the farm. The main goal of the micro-economy is to impart a sense of independence through economic self-help.

“We’re living in this small community that works just as a big community would work,” says student Ximena Camarena-Lopez, 14, of Mexico City. “It’s preparing us to go out to the world and be good people and be helpful to the rest of the world as much as we can.”

Brianna and James lead to the 2,000-square-foot Bioshelter, which looks like an oddly futuristic house of glass behind the classic red barn. And it is. Hundreds of plants, a sea of green with some flowers bursting forth in vibrant pinks and yellows, line the steamy interior. But this is more than a simple gardener’s greenhouse, with solar panels and a composting area among its features. The Bioshelter is a complete indoor ecosystem.
James waters plants, while Brianna nips the tops off dozens of basil plants to get them ready for the weekend plant sale.

The students grow hundreds of starter garden vegetables and flowers from seed to sell at area farmer’s markets and at the school’s weekend plant sales each spring. They also use these plants in their own 18,000-square-foot garden, generating plenty of food to harvest and sell at fall markets and to can for themselves to eat throughout the winter.

By spring, the shelves in the commercial, 15-by-9 foot pantry in the basement of the main building are nearly depleted. Only some pickles and a few jars of honey and jams remain.

Raising and selling plants and produce is part of the Farm School’s micro-economy. The students also make and sell their own maple syrup and honey from bees that they raise. They’ve even hand-built the hives in their large woodworking shop, located behind the barn.

Just before the holidays, the shop turns into a crafts workroom to make wooden stools and Christmas wreaths, while the canning kitchen in the main building is transformed into a candle-making studio. Last year, the students also began selling Christmas trees that they harvested from a neighbor who agreed to share the crop.

The money raised from these entrepreneurial endeavors doesn’t pay for pizza parties or field trips like a fundraiser at a typical school might. Instead, profits are poured back into other projects. So, for example, tree sale profits purchase gasoline for the tractor that is used to grow the plants that the students will then sell. The money is kept separate from the school budget and is handled by a student manager who balances the account and writes the checks.

In this micro-economy, students learn not only about biology through growing plants, or the skills needed to run a bed-and-breakfast, they also learn business management, math, finance, and communication skills. But their social life is now intensified by purpose and the real challenges of productivity and exchange. Furthermore, the history of humanity, which finds its

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**MONTESSORI STUDENTS DEMONSTRATE MORE MOTIVATION THAN TRADITIONALLY EDUCATED COUNTERPARTS**

The Hershey Montessori Farm School was one of five Montessori middle schools which participated in a study under the direction of Kevin Rathunde and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. The articles were published in 2005 and appeared in highly regarded scientific journals: the *American Journal of Education* and the *Elementary School Journal*. Both journals have been published by the University of Chicago Press for over one hundred years and are among the oldest in the field of education. The results in the *American Journal of Education* suggested that Montessori middle school students, when compared to demographically matched students from more traditional school environments, have a higher quality of experience while doing academic activities. For example, the Montessori students reported better moods, energy, motivation and more frequent states of deep engagement referred to as “flow experiences.”

The findings reported in the *Elementary School Journal* focused on the social context of the Montessori and traditional schools. These results suggested that the Montessori students had more positive perceptions of their school environments and teachers, more often perceived their classmates as friends, and were spending more time actively engaged (e.g., doing collaborative or individual projects) than passively listening to a teacher's lecture.
origins in agriculture and trade, is the point of departure for the study of civilization and its unfinished business.

Most of the kids here come from Montessori backgrounds and fit into the flow of finding projects, setting goals, and working independently to achieve them—the essence of Montessori. For those from a traditional classroom setting, the adjustment is greater.

Bryan Jones, 14, a ninth-grader, was conditioned by the structure of his public school education in Mentor, Ohio, from kindergarten through sixth grade and struggled with his new freedoms. “For the first couple of months, I was late on a lot of my assignments,” he says. “I learned if I’m going to be in an environment that’s open, I have to structure my time more.”

Former student Kaitlin Guest—now a graduate of one of Cleveland’s finest preparatory schools—attended Hershey Montessori School from the time she was two years old. As an eighth grader, she was among the inaugural group of students when the Farm School opened. By the time she was in ninth grade, Kaitlin was the first manager of the Farm School’s sugarbush, where the students tap maple trees each spring and make their own maple syrup.

“If there was one aspect of the farm that you really loved, you could totally immerse yourself in it and become the leader of it,” Kaitlin says. “I thought that was so cool that at that age you could take over something that you love.”

The fact that Montessori children love what they do in a community setting has a long term impact. Their future dreams are shaped by happy memories experienced within the adolescent community.

People talk to you a great deal about your education, but some good sacred memory preserved from childhood [or adolescence] is perhaps the best education. If one carries many such memories into life, one is safe to the end of one’s days, and if one has only one good memory left in one’s heart, even that may be the means of saving us.

(Dostoyevsky)