

The Owlet



A Kickapoo Valley Forest School Publication
Autumn 2025

ISSUE.7



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**LA FARGE SCHOOL
1901-1902**

Dear KVFS Community,

As we begin another year of forest schooling, we find ourselves reflecting on the natural cycles that guide our day to day operations and the growth we've experienced together. It is an apt time for celebration! The forests are aflame with color, the school garden bursts with bounty, and the children are full of the fresh excitement of a new year.

This school year finds us recognizing that sustainable growth requires both careful planning and bold decisions. Over the past several years we have taken the time to thoughtfully research and consider the best ways to ensure a strong foundation for the future of our school. Part of this process involves moving beyond familiar boundaries and seeking environments that will support our long-term goals. This is why we are excited to announce that KVFS has relocated to the 1901 Building and the La Farge School District. You can read all about this move and historic spaces in this edition of the Owlet. You can also read about the unique landowner relationships we have fostered and what makes KVFS a distinctive charter school.

As we continue to evolve and grow, we are deeply grateful for the support of our families, friends, and community members, whose belief in our work makes these opportunities possible. It is this collective effort that sustains us, allowing us to move forward with confidence and purpose into the next chapter of our journey. Thank you for being a part of this vibrant and thriving community at Kickapoo Valley Forest School.



Bringing New Life to a Historic Building

Emily Schendel, KVFS Governance Council President

Echoes of learning and laughter have once again filled the upper classroom spaces of the historic 1901 Building located on the La Farge School District campus.

Kickapoo Valley Forest School (KVFS) students in 1st through 4th grade (with remaining room for next year's 5th grade) have officially moved into the historic building and have helped to breathe new life into the upper classroom spaces.

This building historically served as a school for a small community that has long been a champion in innovative education. Many years ago, when most rural schools in the area were small, one-room buildings, La Farge's 1901 Building stood out as a proud centerpiece of the community. It offered learning opportunities previously unavailable in the village—such as a four-year high school, the area's first Foreign Language Lab, and even the Midwest's first Talking Typewriter to support communications. Staying true to its roots, it now houses students for a new chapter of revolutionary and unique education.

KVFS was founded in collaboration with the Kickapoo Valley Reserve (KVR), and during the first four years of serving students, KVFS rented classrooms from the KVR. In June of 2023, the Kickapoo Reserve Management Board took action to halt plans for the construction of an additional education building at the KVR, and set an expiration date of June 2025 for the KVFS lease of classroom spaces. This motion also included the formation of a joint ad hoc committee convened to study the potential for a relocated KVFS campus elsewhere on the KVR. The committee was unable to identify a feasible plan resulting in the school needing to pivot their facility plans. Over the course of several years of study and with support from the Governance Council and the school community, KVFS ultimately discovered that the best solution was closer than they had expected.

"KVFS is currently in its fifth year of providing innovative and hands-on, place-based learning and an exceptional academic experience for its students," explained KVFS Development Director and Founding Member, Jonel Kiesau. "The KVFS curriculum aims to keep students engaged with their bodies, hearts, and minds while teaching real-world skills that will prepare students for middle school and beyond. Our relocation creates a new beginning for KVFS and new opportunities to more deeply engage and foster a culture of collaboration within the district. We have worked diligently to ensure that KVFS is able to provide dedicated indoor classrooms and proximal outdoor learning spaces.





Being able to move to the beautiful upstairs of the historic 1901 Building, where we can exist rent-free, is a huge advantage, allowing us to invest resources in our staff and curriculum.”

The large brick building, which also houses the La Farge Middle School, was constructed in 1901 when a fire destroyed the village’s original school the year before. It was completed for the hefty sum of \$12,000 - which is approximately \$456,067 in today’s dollars. Upon the completion of this building, the residents of La Farge also voted to make the high school last four years, instead of just two, according to the video “A History of La Farge Schools,” an oral history project completed by students at the La Farge High School in 2006.

The first class graduated from the new school later in the year following its completion, with the entire class (consisting of only four young women) attending the graduation held in the Opera House which was above today’s Phil and Deb’s Town Tap. By 1915, the class grew to 15 students. Today this rural district school is still small. The graduating class of 2026 is projected to be 20 students with the entire La Farge School hosting 275 students. KVFS now adds another 90 students to that mix of 275.



Things were quite different back in the early days, with the building lacking some of the modern amenities we take for granted today, such as indoor plumbing. In the video, Maxine Shird, a 1936 graduate of La Farge High School, reflected on the rows of outhouses once tucked among the trees outside the school—now the courtyard area. Today, that same space is where students enjoy lunch surrounded by raised beds of perennials and a nesting mother robin. Prior to KVFS students occupying the upper classroom spaces, it had been primarily used for special projects, testing, and most recently students occupied the building in 2021 during the renovation of another wing of the school.



For the past two years, KVFS 4K/5K classes have been located at the La Farge District campus, piloting a “school-within-a-school” model. The experience was very successful and helped build momentum and excitement over the unifying of the school under one roof. The transformation of the space was a labor of love, with many folks coming together to get the work done. School custodial staff and parent volunteers worked to patch drywall, tear up old flooring, paint, and more, to help prepare for the school year.



Recognizing the transformative work being done on the upper floor, area businesses like Sherman Williams of La Crosse, Home Depot of Onalaska, and Shumski's Flooring of Winona, Minnesota, and Keith Waldner of Arcadia donated both supplies as well as their time to help make the improvements accessible and affordable. Their generosity and hands-on support not only made the renovation possible—they infused the space with a spirit of community and care. We are deeply grateful for the time, energy, and heart each person and business gave to help bring this vision to life. The work was also done with the support of the La Farge School District Board of Education, that continues to help KVFS champion the goal of enhancing and sustaining public education together.



In addition to the sweat-equity that has been poured into the building, community relationships have been leveraged to ensure that students will continue to have access to nature. Through developing partnerships with surrounding landowners, as well as Organic Valley, students now have access to various easy, walkable locations, for daily play, exploration, and project-based learning. Additionally, students will also benefit from short bus rides to the many public lands that surround La Farge, offering them exposure to diverse landscapes within the Kickapoo Valley.



Staff and students of KVFS are also working to give back and support the spaces that support them. Plans are in place for upper elementary students to learn about invasive species and citizen science work while assisting Organic Valley in the removal of garlic mustard and other non-native plants. KVFS has used funds to enhance the La Farge School District courtyard by installing raised beds. These efforts also support the ongoing care of the village park and school garden—spaces that younger KVFS students have proudly contributed to over the past few years.

Although this chapter will be a change from those that came before it, the “KVFS Way” will continue to shine through programming, curriculum, and culture of community. KVFS represents the strength and determination of the school community. We are grateful for the continued support from our KVFS families, educators, and leadership as well as the La Farge School District as a whole for their unwavering support.





What is the “KVFS Way”?

We exist to welcome and see children as they are, in their full spectrum of growth, as small human beings. We look upon our students with the same wonder we bring to nature- seeing their growth, understanding their needs and guiding toward becoming their best selves.

Every day with students we strive to nurture:

- **Deep Focus and Problem Solving** through experiences such as safe risk taking, guided challenges, and quiet connection with each other and the world around us.
- **Ecological Literacy** through learning deeply about the natural environments around us. (Including the language of birds, the tracks of animals, and the names of the plants and trees.)
- **Creativity and Expression** through time to play, explore, make nature art, build forts, sing songs, and tell stories.
- **Resilience and Confidence** by learning from our mistakes, negotiating peer interactions, and mastering skills over time.
- **Academic skills** which are woven between classrooms and time in nature. This is learning that prepares students for middle and high school by engaging their minds, bodies, hearts, and hands.





**"I don't need dry socks,
I'm a forest school
kid."**



**"I love winter
because it reminds
me how beautiful
the outside world is,
especially when I see
the lovely little snow
flakes."**



**"My favorite things to find
are 'bubs' which are
caterpillars, the green
ones."**



**"Mud tomato soup
is really good!
This mud is
smelly though."**



**"We are going on an
adventure through the
prickers because
we are tough!"**



**"Mom, I can handle all
sorts of weather. I've
seen it all
at Forest School!"**



**"I really like wondering
about new things."**



**"Everyone needs
some personal space!
Especially
caterpillars!"**



**"My favorite thing is
to make my friends
laugh!
It's beautiful!"**

Meet Our 2025/2026 Staff



Julia Buckingham
Principal



Hannah Bigjohn
4K



Rose Bruce
4K



Noel Battista
Kindergarten



Ellie Sheehan
First Grade



Ruth Stenz
Second Grade



Justin Nemec
Third/Fourth Grade



Arianna Sickler
Paraeducator



Celia Carr
Paraeducator



Elayne Waddell-Zdeb
Paraeducator



Steph Polnow
Paraeducator



Nicholas WazeeGale
Naturalist



Jonel Kiesau
Development Director



Ximena Engel
Teacher Mentor



Meaghan Gustafson
District Administrator



Robin Hosemann
SEL Teacher Mentor

Meet Our Governance Council



Emily Schendel
President



AnneMarie Fryer
Vice President



Danielle Olson
Secretary



Lauren Larsen
Treasurer



Laurie Drake
Member



Jen Oium
Member



Phoebe Devitt
Member



Dan Soukup
Member





Highlighting Community Partnerships with Local Landowners



During the 2024-25 school year, Kickapoo Valley Forest School (KVFS) piloted working with local land stewards to further student exploration. At ‘Camp Tamarack,’ tucked up in a hollow of Joanne and Freddie Shird’s property, students were able to take their forest schooling experience to the next level.

Land steward, Joanne, says opening up her property to students just makes sense, but also brings back memories from her childhood outdoors.

Joanne explained, “When we were asked if we would be interested in having the forest school come to our property, we thought, ‘what a wonderful idea!’” She went on to share, “As people who love the out-of-doors, and the idea of immersing children in the outdoor world, we were eager to share our property, our woods, and fields with children eager to be in such a setting. As a young girl growing up in the country, surrounded by fields, woods, and creeks, I lived out of doors-especially in the summer when school was out. I fondly recall on summer days, packing a lunch in the mornings, and with paper bag in hand, trekking past my grandmother’s garden to the woods behind our house. There, I would spend hours, either alone or sometimes with a sibling. I recall walking along a small stream, and lying down with my cheek nestled in the moss covered ground and knowing I was part of all things.”

Led by KVFS staff Naturalist Nicholas WazeeGale, the ‘24-’25 third grade students had the opportunity to fell trees, build fires, and create a permanent structure on the Shird’s property. Thursdays at Camp Tamarack quickly became a highlight of their days.

The property abuts the 8,600 acres of the Kickapoo Valley Reserve, and offers access to unique driftless area rock outcroppings and land formations as well as acres and acres of untamed woods and fields, while Jug Creek meanders through. Tales of Camp Tamarack quickly spread through the student body and created buzz and excitement for going beyond the typical learning spaces. The younger students now look forward to visiting the Shird property and Camp Tamarack.

With the relocation to 1901 Building within the district campus, maintaining opportunities to get out onto wild spaces remained a priority. After a year of experience with Camp Tamarack, KVFS staff recognized the unique value of partnering with local land stewards—a collaboration they knew would help this work flourish.

Chuck and Gwen Hatfield became the second local land stewards who agreed to work with KVFS and allow children on their land.

As a long time resident of the area, and an experienced and innovative educator himself, the opportunity was just as exciting to Chuck as it was to KVFS.

"I really like the idea of our land being accessible," Chuck shared. "It's interesting to know and share how complex 90 acres can be, and how many natural areas it can hold."

Part of the property has a large prairie, with a unique rare apple tree, a Pippin, that the Hatfields have traced the ancestry of all the way back to New York. The landscape also touts sand bluffs, goat prairies, a forest of pine trees, and sugar bush of maples, that the couple hopes the students will be able to tap in early spring.

"Over the years, it's been an awesome place for kids to play," Chuck noted of the sand bluff near his home.

"Opportunities like this really enhance not only the school days for the students, but strengthens their ties to the community," explained KVFS Principal Julia Buckingham. "Students can engage in seasonal rhythms, explore different areas, and learn about the variety of ecosystems just steps from their classroom doors."

Part of the draw for the Hatfields to open their property to students is that it calls back to their own early days of learning and teaching.

"When I was growing up, I wouldn't have called it forest schooling, I would have called it my regular school day, and 'before school' and 'after school,'" Chuck said with a laugh recalling his young days, walking a mile to school, checking trap lines, and working on forts just up river near Ontario. "I remember days when I would cut a log on my way to school, drag and notch it after school, and work on building my cabin - all before I went home for supper." Later in his life when Chuck became an elementary school teacher himself, he was known for getting students out in the Green Bay area to take learning to the next level. Loading students up to visit paper mills, airports, dragging sticks and logs into their classrooms to construct buildings, and taking nearly 40 field trips a year for hands-on learning, was just the norm for Mr. Hatfield.

KVFS Development Director Jonel Kiesau noted that Chuck's long experience with creative and innovative teaching is why, she suspects, he would make their land accessible to kids. "He knows better than most - that students learn well and enjoy learning by building things, experiencing things, and questioning. It's so exciting to have this opportunity of an experienced educator like Chuck nearby to come down and interact with the kids and share with them the special parts of this property."

In addition to the Hatfields, students have been exploring the properties of other local land stewards as well as surrounding local, public properties managed by the Mississippi Valley Conservancy, and the State of Wisconsin. We hope to continue to grow our roster of land stewards willing to share their unique and beautiful property with us. If you are interested in learning more about this opportunity, please reach out to kvfs@lafarge.k12.wi.us.





What is a Charter School?

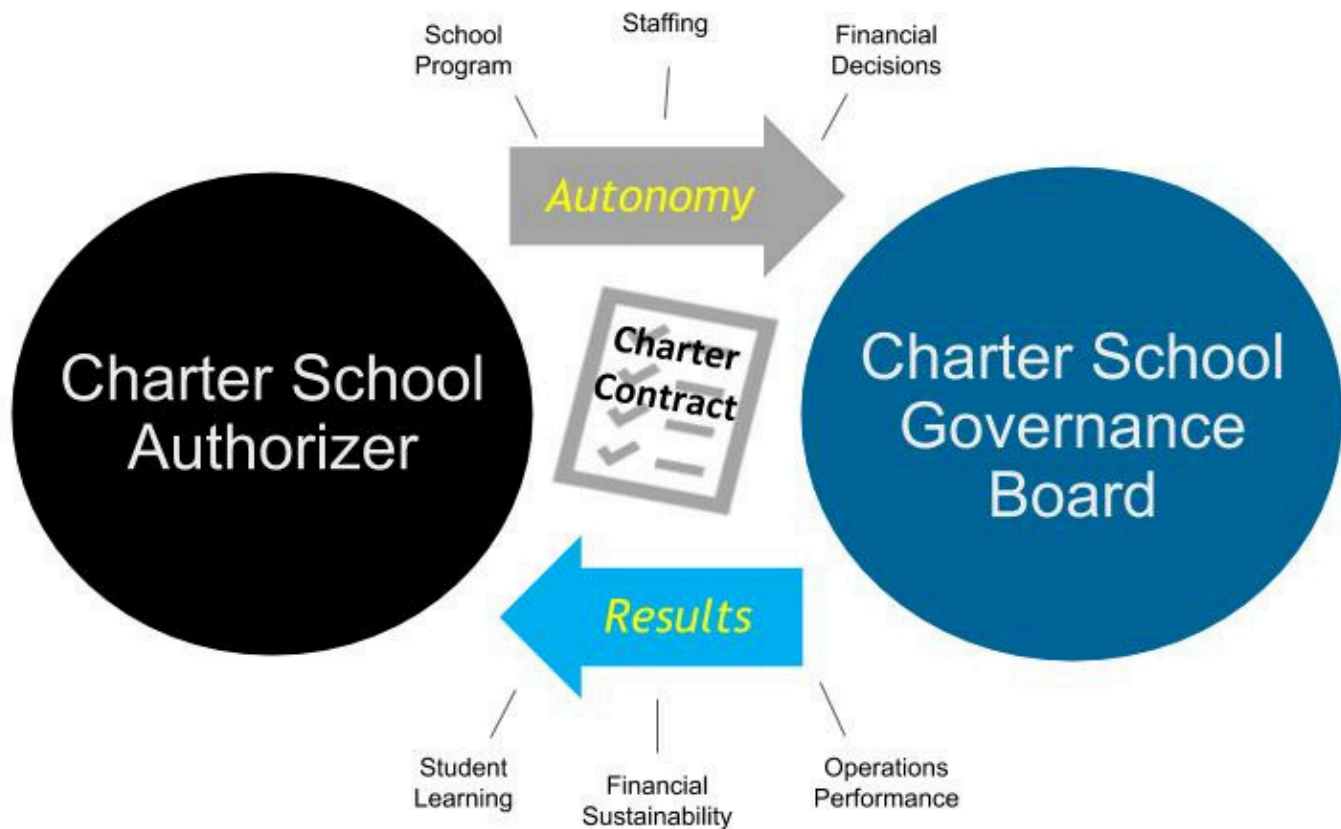
“KVFS is a tuition-free, public charter school” but what does that really mean?

According to the Wisconsin Department of Instruction (DPI), all charter schools in Wisconsin are public, nonsectarian schools, created through a business-like contract or “charter” between the Charter Governance Board and, in KVFS’ case, the authorizer (local school district).

Wisconsin charter school law gives charter schools freedom from some state rules and regulations in exchange for accountability for results. Accountability for charter schools is measured through performance frameworks that include academic, financial, and organizational indicators. Across the state, charters vary in their mission and approach to innovation. Wisconsin’s charter schools include everything from Indigenous, Hmong, and Spanish Language Immersion Schools, Montessori Schools, Career and College readiness academies, Nature and Environmental Learning schools, Virtual schools, and Science and Tech schools to name just a few.



To find a complete list of current charter schools in WI and what makes each one unique, visit www.yearbook.wrccs.org



Why Have Charter Schools?

Each charter school fulfills a specific local need in education

To foster an environment for innovation and parental choice



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The Kickapoo Valley Forest School is a tuition-free public charter school authorized by the La Farge School District.

For more information visit kickapoovalleyforestschool.org

KVFS Office: 608.625.0159

La Farge School District Office: 608.625.2400

Email: kvfs@lafarge.k12.wi.us

Address: 301 W. Adams St. La Farge, WI 54639