



School District of La Farge

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January 20, 2020

To: Fellow Community Members
From: Kickapoo Valley Forest School Steering Committee
Re: Early Childhood Forest School Initiative

The Kickapoo Valley Reserve (KVR) and the La Farge School District are seeking community input on the opening of a PreK/K Forest School in the Fall of 2021. This public charter school, which will be authorized by the school district and implemented at the KVR, will serve families interested in the benefits of nature immersion education. Year one will be open to children ages 4 to 6. In subsequent years, one grade will be added each year until the school includes four- and five-year-old kindergarten, first and second grades. The forest school will be available to any age-eligible child enrolled or open-enrolled in the La Farge School District, as space allows.

The forest school model engages children in the natural world for the majority of each day, and is gaining popularity across the country. While many families intuitively know that exploring the woods, climbing trees, or listening to birds supports their child's growth, research also demonstrates the value of making the outdoors our children's classroom. For instance, studies show that children engaged in outdoor education experience benefits like these:

1. A strengthening in skills of inquiry, language development, environmental literacy and self-directed learning;
2. An improvement in attentiveness and school preparedness;
3. An enhancement in overall mental health; and
4. An increase in scores on a wide range of tests of academic ability and performance.

This collaboration between the KVR and the La Farge School District brings together the strengths of both institutions. The KVR has piloted nature immersion programs at the early childhood level for the past three years, and has been offering outdoor education programming for over 17 years. The La Farge School District has a strong commitment to innovative and expanded early childhood programming, and connecting education with the area's valuable natural and community resources.

Together these two organizations will provide a unique option in our area's diverse educational landscape. On the KVR's 8,600-acre property, children will creatively engage with early literature, real-world math, hands-on science

and problem-solving skills needed to prepare them for the middle grades. In the hills and valleys of the region, children will gain social competence and engage in self-directed learning through constructive play.

The rich educational options in our region – public schools, Montessori schools, homeschooling, a Waldorf school, public charter schools, private faith-based options – are one reason our rural community thrives. The intent is to provide a powerful path for learning that does not currently exist here: a nature immersion early childhood program that is available to all. Along with that, the forest school, over time, can become an incubator for developing environmental literacy in the upper grades of La Farge’s public schools and in the community at large.

The forest school is designed to provide additional, not replacement, programming to the students of La Farge and the surrounding areas. This public charter school will be funded by the Wisconsin DPI Charter School grant and per pupil funding from the state, and will not require additional taxpayer funding.

This project is currently in the planning stages. In February, the steering committee will submit a grant application to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. Community input is essential in helping shape and grow this vision. You are invited to give feedback in a forthcoming survey.

With questions or comments, or to request a survey, please contact: Jonel Kiesau, Education Director, Kickapoo Valley Reserve at jonel.kiesau@wisconsin.gov or 608-625-2965.

Specific questions for the La Farge School District can be directed to Meaghan Gustafson, District Administrator, La Farge Schools at gustafsonm@lafarge.k12.wi.us or 608-625-2400.

We look forward to hearing from you!

Respectfully,

The Kickapoo Valley Forest School Steering Committee

Meaghan Gustafson, District Administrator, La Farge School District

Jonel Kiesau, Education Director, Kickapoo Valley Reserve

Robin Hosemann, Education Program Assistant, Kickapoo Valley Reserve

Josh Hansen, Elementary Principal, La Farge School District

Ximena Puig, Instructor, Kickapoo Valley Reserve

Barb Sarnowski, Instructor, Kickapoo Valley Reserve; Special Education Teacher, Retired

Joseph Orso, Parent & Area Resident

Eric Hartwig, Steering Committee Advisor, Organic Valley

Greg Blackdeer, Steering Committee Advisor, Ho-Chunk Nation