

Community Coffee with Megan

August 25, 2017

Welcome: Introductions and share about your children/levels/how you found Oak Farm

We're all human beings, there will be bumps along the way; please know my door is always open. Talk to me, talk to the teachers. Thank you for sharing all your kind comments about the school

This is an exceptionally unique place; all the right variables for this school were present in order for it to come to fruition. There is a dearth of educational opportunities, but there are not a lot of types of schools; especially in Noble County or even in Ft. Wayne. Most are either: Traditional, parochial and a few spattering of non-traditional. Most systems are about creating a product, not concerned with the process of the education.

Lorene Salsbery was a philanthropist and grew up in Kendallville. Her father was a billionaire businessman who provided a lot to the local community; it was a complicated but dynamic relationship with the people of Noble County. This provides an interesting backdrop for the school, especially since we are so different and often misunderstood already because of our approach to education. We are always trying to reach out to the local community; so they can see us as an asset and to understand what we can give back. Lorene really took from her father this very passionate commitment to encouraging education and to provide economic diversity. When Chuck Dekko passed away, he created the Dekko Foundation. It is there to support education and those who are trying to encourage diversity in education. Variables for support from the foundation include: Is it in one of the counties or districts that the founder supported during his lifetime? Does it concentrate on the education of young people?

Lorene became president of the foundation, but once she became a parent she began to look at it from a different perspective. She looked first to Ft. Wayne and sent her own two girls to 3 Rivers Montessori, now Peace Montessori, and served on the board of directors. Later, she realized that what she wanted to do was to create an option for families that was a unique Montessori environment, but without the price tag that would make it an exclusive resource that would be unavailable to most families. She decided to set it up in Avilla to serve the communities around where her father's foundation existed. Originally, she used her own money to purchase and set up the school; even providing the tuition to establish this school as a very principled school. This is unheard of in today's world. It is a democratic school with lofty civic minded goals.

The school started in 2000 with 13 kids. The Green Farmhouse was the original site for the multi-aged classroom. There was massive growth in a short amount of time. Lorene's Vision included: choices for children, choices for families and a school community about who you are, not what you have. Additions to the original program over the years have included: 2001: Infant and Upper Elementary, 2006: Middle School, and in 2017: High School. I learned

recently that Lorene and I were only one year apart at Montessori training at the same school....our paths almost crossed.

The main thing that prevented the high school from happening earlier is that very few high schools offer a Montessori version and it would be hard to build from scratch. The original model we looked at would not fit with the socio-economic situation unique to Oak Farm. We had to develop our own model that fits the needs of the Oak Farm Community.

South Campus: Infants through Third grade: I/T (3 classrooms), Primary (4 classrooms), LE (3 classrooms)

North Campus: Fourth through Ninth Grade and Arts Center: UE (3 classrooms), MS: (1 class) & HS: (1 class)

Each year over \$700,00 in tuition grants and discounts are given back to our families.

Over 50% of Oak Farm students receive tuition grants each year.

Enrollment Snapshot:

	<i>Current</i>	<i>Potential</i>
IT:	36	(32-36)
Primary:	81	(78-81)
LE:	65	(68-75)
UE:	66	(68-75)
MS:	19	(45-50)
<u>HS:</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>(80-120)</u>
Totals:	275	(400-425)

Anticipation for maximum capacity: 2022-2025

We have had some growing pains, shifts in the way we handle learning differences, etc. over the years. But really over the last 2 years we have been able to figure out how to handle these differences. I/T and Primary are totally full. LE has a little room; mostly due to the fact that we do not generally accept new students in that 3rd year because it is such a big transitional time for them. The Middle School has room to grow; we will probably have 30 students next year. The High School will build momentum. We had hoped for 3 students to start the program and currently have 8; with the potential of even a couple of more students being added yet this year. In 5-8 years we anticipate full enrollment at all levels.

The Portrait of the Oak Farm Graduate: Life Long Learner, Emotionally Literate, Leadership and Global Citizen. If you ever have an opportunity to speak with an Oak Farm graduate; take it! They are amazing people who present themselves as principled people who know themselves and have values and an intrinsic love of learning. They are really extraordinary human beings.

Board of Directors: Erica Dekko, President (sister of founder, Lorene Salsbery) Mike Axel, VP (parent of two Oak Farm graduates) Casey Weimer (Executive Director of Cole YMCA), Mike Yoder (Attorney/Local Businessman), Olivia Salsbery (daughter of founder, Lorene Salsbery)

They respect the autonomy of the school, but also support the growth and well-being of the school. Their goal is to look at the very high level strategic plans and needs for the school.

Strategic Plan Development and Approval

- Setting of Tuition
- Annual Operating Budget Review
- Faculty and Parent Policies Approval
- Head of School Evaluation and Support

Oak Farm Operating Snapshot:

- \$3,478,000 in
- \$3,523,000 out
- Approximately \$45,000 budgeted shortfall this year
- Fundraising goal: \$155,000
- All buildings/assets owned by the non-profit (no individuals): worth about \$14,860,000
- *Debt Free*
- Investment Account = \$1,236,000 (board regulated fund)
- Other designated funds as well: Capital Repairs and Maintenance, High School Startup (A lot of the financial support for the startup of the high school was from the grants that were already allocated from the Dekko Foundation for students who wished to go to the Cleveland Montessori High School. Very few students were taking advantage of this generous grant and the board approved those funds being re-allocated to the startup of our own high school.)

Capital vs. Operating

- Past & Current Capital Grants
 - Buildings
 - Classroom setup
 - Major Renovations
 - New property infrastructure
- Annual Operating (about 58% from the annual grant)
 - Salaries/benefits
 - All program costs
 - Supplies, utilities, vendors, fees
 - Repairs/maintenance including equipment
- Capital Campaign - \$1000,000
 - Eco-literacy – naturalization, science pavilion, sustainable technologies for learning

- Arts & Wellness furnishings – beyond the basics

What are we working with?

- Cost per student: \$12,000
- Average Gross Tuition \$6000
- Actual average cost per student \$3800

We do professional development both in house and opportunities through workshops, continuing education and seminars. We also have collaborative peer groups and they set professional learning goals while the study groups work together and then share their findings/results with the rest of the team.

Copies of the strategic plan were offered and handed out to attendees. Additional copies are always available to anyone at the Vic House front office. We are working on many themes; including the creation of the high school and capital campaign projects. We are also working to create consistency across classrooms/levels to promote respect and peace among the students and campus wide. 1) Want to *diversify* learning opportunities in the areas of STEAM and creative problem solving 2) *Internal creation*: students who may not be drawn to simple pen and paper 3) *Math education*: in particular, we have a very clear goal. When our kids finish Algebra 1 in 8th grade we want to make sure they test out of that class in the High School program. Ensuring they can translate the knowledge learned in an end of course assessment; be able to articulate their understanding. We want to maximize their potential through the education/subject area. We found that we needed to make our own assessments that complement the Montessori learning while also incorporating some of the values expected from a traditional Common Core test. We do not want our students taking standardized tests, but we do want to know what they have learned and make sure that they have achieved mastery.

Having a really strong HR pool is really important to creating the best school as we go forward. At one time it was difficult to recruit highly qualified candidates due to our rural setting and special economic circumstances. However, that has changed over the years as we have grown.

Questions/Comments:

QUESTION: We are one of those rare Angola families. One of the biggest deterrents from people I talk to is the distance to travel to get to Oak Farm. Will you ever look at bussing to areas further away?

ANSWER: Busing is an extraordinary problem for us. It is very, very difficult to find a bus driver; we have to create a full time position. Plus, we have to take into consideration the cost of purchasing a bus; about \$100,000. We would love to have busses going in every direction, but right now it is just not possible. We are looking at a car pooling software now and will keep you posted.

QUESTION: High School programs have relationships with neighbors/community businesses. Will we do that?

ANSWER: Yes! We have both specific and general mentoring programs in the works for the high school program. We have several partnerships that are already in the works, including: 80/20 outside of Columbia City, Lake City Bank in Auburn, Sechler's Pickles in St. Joe, John Brittenham discussing invasive species (today they will be eradicating cattails, Blue Herron, Field experience with the Journal Gazette, a composer from Sweetwater, Dan Wire is doing a project along the riverbanks in the fort Wayne area (our connection with NPR), a magazine publisher who is mentoring a high school student who is working on their own magazine, Heather Miller also has a publisher who is coming to work with our students as well. We also have a great social connection with Garrett High School. In fact, one of the new HS students landed the lead in the Garrett musical. They will be invited to dances, social events, etc. (No sports as IHSAA has strict guidelines. We will have our own teams however. Some unique options this year include aerial yoga and fencing!! The Arts and Wellness center to be completed in the fall of 2019 will work in connection with the Cole YMCA. Currently, their recreational activities are geared mostly towards elementary aged students, so having a relationship with Oak Farm will allow them to reach out to older adolescents. It will be a great fit for our athletic objectives: skill building, not just being the best. We are also sharing our curriculum, greenhouse, farm, bike shop, etc. as a reciprocal relationship with Garrett High School. Often people will offer us services and then come back to us and request monetary compensation. We want them to come back and so many times if we offer something up front so there is less confusion.

QUESTION: Any plans to make this a boarding High School?

ANSWER: No, the board decided that it would put the school in a position that presents a lot of risks for the program. When dealing with adolescents there can sometimes be issues that are far too far reaching for this school. We did consider that because of our location and its isolation, it would not be conducive to put students in the position of driving all the time to have a life outside of their classes. It was originally part of the program, but no longer is.

QUESTION: Will Juniors and Seniors be allowed to drive to school?

ANSWER: YES. It is absolutely developmentally appropriate. We will have some pretty strict guidelines however, with regards to the wide spread in ages, can older siblings pick up younger siblings,...etc.

QUESTION: How will you choose what sports will be offered?

ANSWER: Our objective with adolescents in terms of athletics is in terms of exposure. What speaks to them most and will lead them later in life; not necessarily being isolated to only one sport and excelling in only that. We want them to be confident that they can try new things and be good at them. We will not have “cut” sports.

QUESTION: Is the high school open enrollment to any student or only Montessori?

ANSWER: Any student; open enrollment. Currently, we will accept any Freshman interested in the program. When the program is in year four, we will accept students as late as Juniors; but not as seniors. The secondary program is (2) two-year cycles and would not be productive to the student with only one year of attendance.

QUESTION: What about languages?

Answer: We currently have Spanish from Infants – HS. At the HS we are only currently offering Spanish, but we would also like to offer Mandarin and American Sign Language.

QUESTION: Will we ever have band or an orchestra

ANSWER: I would say it is very possible once the HS is up and fully running. If we have enough students interested, then absolutely. We probably won't have a marching band because we won't have a football team. A lot of the music program at the adolescent level is very individualized; there just has to be an interest from the students.