

Kokosing Valley School: A nontraditional place of learning

By PAM SCHEHL

News Staff Reporter GAMBIER — Located just north of Zion Road, Kokosing Valley School, which opened in the fall of 2015, provides an environment where children spend their days following their own interests and passions. Modeled on the Sudbury system, there are no grades, set classes or tests, and the students have an equal voice with staff members in every aspect of the school's operation.

Co-founder Anastasia Congdon said the philosophy of the private school is that children have the right to pursue life, liberty and happiness as they self educate and grow into adulthood. She outlined the basic principles by which the school operates.

"First," she told the *News*, "is the equal voice in governance of their school and their community. Every student has a vote equal to every adult in the running of every aspect of the school and students are elected to be school chairperson and judicial clerk."

In fact, the entire student body and staff had a meeting to determine whether the *News* would be welcome to do an article about the school.

"Second," Congdon said, "is the freedom to decide how to spend their time and to chart their own path toward independence as an adult. The school believes that children are inherently curious, and given the freedom to pursue their own interests, they will do so with great passion and intensity.

"It is odd that in the early years of a child's life, when they are learning the most challenging things they ever will face: To talk, to understand speech, to walk, and to relate to other people, adults do not 'teach' them. They learn through playing, 'talking,' falling and failing a lot, and remarkably quickly they are fully competent in these skills. Yet when it comes to all other forms of learning, we do not trust them to be able to do it themselves. The idea that a first-grader should learn to take a test rather than to explore what is exciting and invigorating to them at their particular point in development begins to sound very inhumane."

Student Sasha Deever, 13, the co-chair of the school meeting (the school's governing body), said she thinks Kokosing Valley School is better than her former public school.

"There's a lot more freedom," she said. "I've been really interested in cetaceans (large sea creatures) so I've been researching that a lot. I've also been doing a lot of art. I like the variety because what I do can change every day."

By not having set classes or a set curriculum, Congdon continued, there is no time wasted on things in which the students are not interested. The pupils are free to explore the school grounds, to investigate literature, poetry, art, sewing, computer technology or music. They may do cooking projects and make their own lunches if they so desire. When the *News* was at the school, one pair of students was building a dam in the creek, three boys were playing ball, one girl was at driving lessons and two students assisted with the tour.

Sasha said, "I really love that Kokosing Valley School allows students to practice and explore creativity. I think that creativity is a skill many public schools are having a difficult time teaching. It is, in my opinion, possibly one of the most, if not the most, consistently useful talent to have. Everyone at Kokosing Valley School has the chance to be creative every day, something I believe most students in public schools miss out on."

Asked how the children learn the basics such as the alphabet and math facts, Congdon replied that the students learn to read and to do math, but it happens at very different times than in traditional school. "The third concept," said Congdon, "is learning by example, in an environment where students of all ages mix and share time and resources. Young children learn from debating things with their older peers, and also by playing with students more experienced than they are. Older children learn by teaching, by exploring through play with younger kids, or by watching and

relating to each other.”

Sasha said, “I like the age mixing a lot. It’s more fun.”

“The fourth principle is that with this freedom comes responsibility: For their education and for the community they are a part of,” Congdon said. “The best way to become a good citizen is to be given equal say in how your community is governed. The best way to love learning is to seek out what interests you. The best way to become an adult is to learn early how to structure your time and make good use of it.”

Congdon said she loves seeing the children get excited about learning.

“I like being able to encourage and foster the students’ joy of learning and discovery,” she explained. “They are learning for life as opposed to learning for the test.”

Tom Noonan enrolled his son in KVS as an alternate to what he calls a test-based education system.

“The model that our kids are educated under was developed during the Industrial Revolution, and it hasn’t really been modified in any way since then,” he told the *News*. “Sit down, shut up, take notes, answer the questions. Not the fertile ground for dreamers or those who think outside the box. ... Kokosing Valley offers a great alternative to the madness of standardized education. We believe the Sudbury system of education allows for the continued development of natural curiosities, and we want our son to be curious.”

For more information, visit kokosingvalleyschool.org.



Virgil Shipley/ News Kokosing Valley School co-founder Anastasia Congdon, left, watches as Kokosing Valley School student Cora Gunderson works on an art project.

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04/19/2016