

# Fox River Academy Fact Sheet



---

## Mission

Fox River Academy will foster in its students the passion and curiosity necessary for lifelong learning, and will, through an integrated, multiage curriculum, increase students' proficiencies in the use of strategic learning processes and higher order thinking skills needed to be stewards of the environment and community.

## Overview

The Fox River Academy is a multiage, environmental charter school, for grades 1-8, focused on the environmental, historical, cultural, and economic importance of the Fox River. Core subject areas are taught through an integrated curriculum in multiage classrooms. The Fox River Academy has 4 classroom teachers and services approximately 100 students. The Appleton Area School District-provide for overhead costs: space, heat, lighting, and staffing.

## The Story

The Fox River Academy was started by two motivated traditional teachers, Sandra Vander Velden and Julie Spalding, who noticed at the end of the year what their students remembered the most from the past year were the hands-on lessons that often incorporated outdoor activity. With the support of the Appleton School District and community the Fox River Academy was started with the goal of providing real-world experiences.

Students develop the ability to make connections, transfer their knowledge from familiar to unfamiliar contexts, and learn to "do science" rather than just "learn about science." The Fox River Academy uses a broad, encompassing question or essential questions, to guide learning. These essential questions, based on major science and social studies themes, direct the focus of all core subjects. Reading, writing, math, and technology are taught as supportive thinking skills needed by informed citizens.

Students participate in at least one weekly outdoor field experiences. Most of these outdoor field experiences happen in their local school neighborhood. This style of teaching has opened a whole new dimension of teaching and learning for the staff and students at the Fox River Academy.

## EE Projects

Schildt Pond Restoration: In 2006 the Fox River Academy partnered with the town of Menasha to conduct a shoreline restoration project for Schildt Pond. Students planted native vegetation along the pond in hopes to improve the water quality over time. The students continue to use the pond restoration site as a citizen science project. Students monitor the stream once per month in September, October, April, and May. The students collect data, monitor water quality, collect and classify invertebrates, learn responsible fishing practices, view wildlife, and study the rivers hydrology. The Fox River teachers received training from the Water Action Volunteers program in water quality issues.

Storm Drain Stenciling: The students partnered with the City of Appleton to help increase awareness of water quality issues in the community by stenciling storm drains. The stencils act as a reminder to the public that the storm drains lead directly to the river, therefore dumping unhealthy items into the drain pollutes the river. Every year the City of Appleton provides the students with a map of construction areas to avoid stenciling and provides some of the spray paint need for the project. Heckrodt Wetland Reserve allows the school to use their stenciling kits which contain vests, protective glasses, buckets, and other useful tools to conduct the project. Stencils were obtained from the local UW-Extension program.

Gardens: Fox River Academy has four gardens: prairie, butterfly, rain, and a Simple Learning community garden. Classes use the prairie garden to study the life cycle of prairie plants, identify plants, learn about seed dispersal, and witness the relationships between living and nonliving things. The butterfly garden allows for the observation of the interdependency of plants and butterflies. The rain garden helps students study different types of water and soil conservation practices. The Simple Learning community garden is a demonstration garden for the City of Appleton. All the gardens are also great locations for students to participate in nature journaling. Fox River Academy's local Wild Ones chapter was able to give advice on choosing native plant species and helped cover the cost of some of the plantings with the Planting for Tomorrow Grant. The

school also received the AEA/AASD Mini-grant for the rain garden installation.

Rain Barrel: The students partnered with the City of Appleton to help the community learn more about the importance of water conservation through the rain barrel projects. Community members can sign up for a workshop hosted by the students to build their own rain barrel.

Appleton's Park System: The Fox River Academy has a strong partnership with Appleton's Park and Recreation Department. Students visit a variety of local parks to view urban forestry practices, check on bird nesting boxes, learn about storm water issues, and participate in physical outdoor activities such as snowshoeing and environmental games.

Bird Nesting Boxes: Students partnered with the Blue Bird Restoration Association of Wisconsin, the Northeastern Wisconsin Audubon Society, and Kent Hall to build, fund, and install nesting boxes in a variety of locations around the Appleton's park system. Students use this as a citizen science project and collect data on the birds nesting in the boxes.

Composting: The school has multiple types of composting bins available, including vermicomposting bin which is used during the winter months. Students compost their snacks and some of their lunch food waste. Even some of the school's yard waste is able to be composted. The composted material is then used to enrich the soil for the community garden. Composting activities help students learn about the flow of energy and nutrients.

Elk Calf Project: Every May the 7th and 8th grade students have the opportunity to travel to Clam Lake, WI to help DNR biologists search for elk calves. The students are able to participate in this unique project because of their partnership with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Once a calf is found the students are able to observe the calf being radio collared and watch how professional biologist conduct a general health check on the animals. Students record the collected data along with the biologist for further analysis once back in the classroom.

Green Teaching Building: This building is owned by the City of Appleton but is leased by the Fox River Academy. The students, families, and the community saved this building from potential demolition and have been involved in retrofitting this building with more green features. The building features green technologies for lighting, heating, and water conservation. The building recently had solar panels installed which allow students to calculate and monitor their CO2 use in the building.

Earth Day Workshops: This annual event happens on the Saturday after Earth Day. The Students partner with Habitat ReStore. Vendors and non-profit groups are invited to have a booth. The students promote their storm water projects that they have been working on throughout the year.

Special Events: These many special events build a stronger school by encouraging active student learning, community involvement, and partnership development. Special events include: Leopold Weekend Observance; Earth Day celebrations with Paper Discovery Center, Habitat ReStore, and Harmony Cafe; EE Week observance with Jefferson Elementary School; Outagamie County Environmental Speaking Contest; Outagamie County Land and Soil Conservation Poster Contest; KEEP Bookmark Contest; KEEP's Bright Idea Fundraiser; Conservation Lobby Day.

Family Fun Events: The Fox River Academy encourages family involvement to build a stronger community and provide opportunities for meaningful family activities with an environmental focus. Family events include: Winter Outdoor Fun Sundays (snowshoeing, geo-caching, animal tracking); Stargazing; Frog Hike; Bat House Building; Rain Barrel Workshop; Storm Drain Stenciling; Family Campout.

#### Partnerships

Fox Trackers: The Fox Trackers is a non-profit booster organization dedicated to creating family involvement, social networks, and fund raising in support of the Fox River Academy, its families and teachers.

Northeast Wisconsin Outdoors: a non-profit organization dedicated to fostering a respect for nature and love of the outdoors by providing and enhancing outdoor experiences for families and individuals.

Wisconsin Green Schools Network (WGSN): WGSN invites all types of schools - traditional, charter, private, independent - to join. Membership benefits include social networking, student summits, professional development, and more.

Professional learning for Fox River Academy faculty: KEEP Training; LEAF, Project Learning Tree, Project WET, Project WILD; Midwest Environmental Education Conference; Wisconsin Association of Environmental Educators Conferences and Workshops; Renewable Energy Summit; groundwater education workshop; Water Action Volunteers training, National Archery in the Schools Program, and Alliance for the Great Lakes: Wisconsin Great Lakes Education Certification Program.

#### Hours of Operation

8:10 am to 3:04 during the school year with special evening, weekend, and summer events scheduled.  
For full details, please visit our website.

#### Address

1000 S. Mason St.  
Appleton, WI 54914

#### Phone

(920) 832-6260  
(920) 993-7060 (fax)

#### Website

[www.foxriveracademy.org](http://www.foxriveracademy.org)

#### Contact:

Sandra Vander Velden  
Co-founder and Teacher, Fox River Academy  
[vanderveldensa@asd.k12.wi.us](mailto:vanderveldensa@asd.k12.wi.us)