

Our Village School: Education Reimagined

In the southern suburbs of Minneapolis-St. Paul, a thriving community of kids aged 6–14 spend their school days learning in the woods and the hills

By CASIE LEIGH LUKES

IT'S 9:45 A.M., and my tires crunch against the gravel parking lot as I join the drop-off line for my eldest child's school day. I park, and she hops out of the backseat.

"What are you going to do today?" I ask.

"Have fun, be kind, try new things," she responds as she shrugs her floral backpack on. She gives me a hug and runs up to meet her friends, tossing her backpack by a tree before joining her cohort of about 20 students, kids she sees twice a week from 9:45 a.m. to 3:20 p.m. Her group is one of several mixed-aged cohorts making up 151 students enrolled in the school.

I wave to the anchor leaders and a few parents before heading home. My eight-year-old daughter will have school today under a canopy of maple and pine trees, in a setting with rolling hills, giant tube slides, a lake, and some of the kindest and most creative teachers I've ever met.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, my daughter attends Our Village School (OVS) in Lakeville, Minnesota, founded by Maria Stalsberg, a former private school teacher with a master's degree in teaching and a background in corporate merchandising. Classes include cooking, drama, art, makerspace, movement, music, science, and more. The school's family-only Facebook feed is filled with photos of kids chopping vegetables, running their own farm stand before and after school, painting lakeside, sledding, making electric circuits, and building villages in the woods with branches, old sheets, and tarps they've scavenged from home.

All of the kids who attend OVS are homeschooled, learning through a variety of online, one-on-one, and hybrid models, depending on their learning needs. They study the traditional school subjects at home, with parents curating their child's educational journey based on interest levels, abilities, strengths,

and weaknesses. Between sessions at OVS, some families travel and "world school," others stay in the area meeting with friends from OVS, and others move into their own rhythms. My own family was drawn to OVS for the community it offers, because it allows for more family travel, and because we love the way nature shapes a childhood, fostering creativity and learning.



At Our Village School in Lakeville, Minnesota, interaction with the natural world is a core value. Students may spend a morning lakeside sketching and later painting their surroundings.

Several studies have demonstrated a correlation between spending time in the natural world and good physical and mental health. Researchers have also examined how being outdoors impacts children's learning. One study, published in *Frontiers in Psychology*, concluded that, "It would seem that lessons in nature boost subsequent classroom engagement and boost it a

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great deal; after a lesson in nature, teachers were able to teach for almost twice as long without having to interrupt instruction to redirect students' attention. . . . The findings here argue for including more lessons in nature in formal education."

Outside and at School

Recently, a few kids from OVS guided three of us parents down a winding dirt path, through a wooden gate, and into the woods to show us their collective make-believe village. They had a well, a kitchen, a doghouse, and, most impressively, a community gathering area with small gates built of sticks. They talked of bartering with others and trading to get certain elements for their homes. Inside, "chandeliers" made of colorful beads hung from branches, and welcome signs crafted with fabric were posted outside their doors.

As the kids showed us their creations, we peeled off layers of rain clothing donned for a gentle storm the hour before. Now the sun was shining in full force. Some kids were dressed up as favorite characters from books such as *Anne of Green Gables* and the *Harry Potter* series, having just attended this semester's book club party, planned by two of the older students.

School founder Stalsberg reflects on what makes the OVS experience distinctive. "I think one of the main draws is the community aspect of OVS and the fact the kids *aren't* doing traditional subjects," she says. "The kids get unique hands-on experiences that they would not get elsewhere. Before OVS existed, families could join an art class at a studio, or take an afterschool drama club class, but not with a consistent group of kids. At OVS the enrichment opportunities become much richer and more meaningful when they are done alongside friends."

Stalsberg also emphasizes the centrality of the school's outdoor setting. "The families who choose this model understand the importance of being out in nature. They are well informed on what the research says about the benefits of getting outdoors," she says, noting that outdoor schooling options in the United States overall are limited for children over age five. "If we know kids

and adults should spend an ample amount of time outdoors, why aren't there more options? At OVS, kids spend their days in the fresh air and sunshine doing things they love."

Each spring, the music classes perform for elders at a senior center and then walk a mile back to school. If it rains, the sidewalks are filled with smiling kids in rain gear and huddled under golf umbrellas. When it rains, the kids are at school. When it's sunny and hot, the kids are at school.

And when it's snowy and cold—a common occurrence in the Minnesota winter—the kids are outside, at school.

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"Doing School" in a Different Way

The school year runs for 11 weeks in the fall, five weeks in the winter, and 10 weeks in the spring. Tuition for each session breaks down to about \$65 per day, plus a supply fee. During the summer breaks,

families travel, kids write snail-mail letters to each other, and parents plan meetups for their children at parks.

This unique setup helps kids and families form a creative, solid community, and "do school" in a different way. For my part, this model also lets me share with my daughter (and soon, her two younger brothers) some of the nostalgic aspects of my own childhood and education. I grew up in a small Midwestern town with a population just north of 1,000 residents. At the time, the town's public school was thriving under the care of a

strong and close-knit community. My elementary school teachers lived a block away, I saw our principal at the post office, and I could ride my bike home for lunch. The neighborhood kids walked to school together on a path through the woods we called the "magic trail." At school, we were surrounded by a fascinating group of adults who were vastly different from one another yet pulled together to create and sustain a beautiful community for the next generation. When I grew into an adult and had kids of my own, I found myself yearning for this type of steady community for them, one that would foster their imagination.

As a public school kid who attended several public universities, studied abroad, and earned a master's degree in library and information science, I never imagined myself homeschooling, but when Covid-19 hit, we pivoted. We found



Students are likely to be outside—rain (snow) or shine—perhaps growing vegetables to sell at their farm stand.

OVS and a different and dynamic way to educate our kids. Fall 2024 marks the beginning of our fourth year at the school.

The activities at OVS are many and varied. Students learn pickleball, soccer, and track-and-field sports. They make stained-glass projects and sketch live bunnies. The older kids take shop class, and some even start their own businesses. Last year, one group launched the before-school Village Coffee Co. in the parking lot. They created branding and banners and ran their own market-research questionnaires and ads. Watching parents and students order coffee through the drive-through and walk-up lanes was a lot of fun. Seeing these kids start and run a legitimate business was inspiring.

In cooking class, local private chef Sarah Lang leads students through the Global Passport to Cooking curriculum. Students learn about the cuisine and culture of another country by reading, listening to music, dancing, touching on the geography, culture, and history of the nation they're studying, and learning a few words of the main language. Then everyone gets busy in the kitchen, chopping, stirring, seasoning—and eventually tasting—food from China, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Mexico, France, Japan, and Italy. They clean up, too, taking turns washing utensils and cooking gear in sudsy water. They even served as recipe testers for Lang's cookbook, which she published this year.

Students also venture away from their campus for field trips to baseball games, historic flour mills, hands-on electric circuit making, professional theater performances, living museums, orchestra concerts, and working farms. They can choose to enroll in separate activities such as French class and band outside of school hours. Older students take longer trips to Lake Superior and the Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center, where they learn about Native American cultures and challenge themselves on ropes courses high in the trees.

In the fall of 2025, OVS plans to extend its program to include students older than 14, though currently most kids who “age out” continue on the homeschool path through other academic co-ops, college and college-prep courses, or hybrid models of schooling. Others choose to enroll in public or private schools.

On the last day of school in the spring, my daughter slings her backpack into the car with mud on her legs, her face warm with sunshine, and tears in her eyes. She's not ready for this type of learning to end—even if it's just to take a break. The community and the rolling hills have become a sanctuary of safety, adventure, learning, challenge, growth, friendship, and so much laughter. A village. A fairytale come to life.

Casie Leigh Lukes is a Minnesota-based writer.

SCALIA'S CONSTITUTION

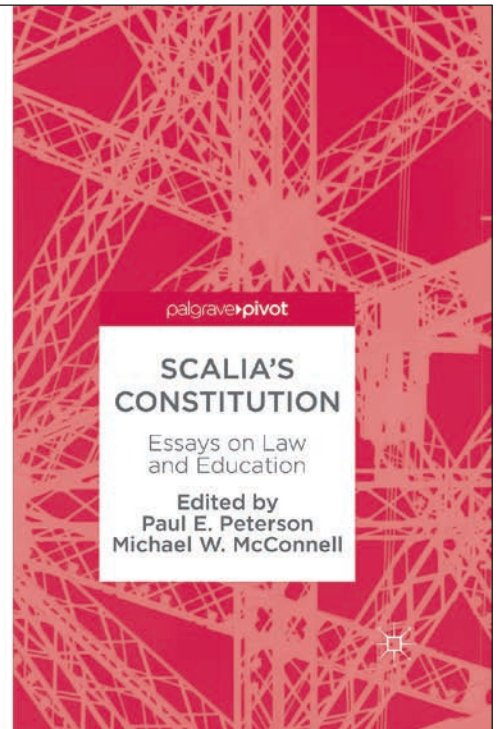
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