



JANE REID KLEYN/The Springfield Sun

A Woodland Wonders student doesn't mind getting a little dirty as he explores an area of the creek that runs through the property.



JANE REID KLEYN/The Springfield Sun

A student shows off a frog or maybe it was a toad she caught on the property. She released it back into nature a moment later.



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A banner marks the location of the Woodland Wonders Forest School currently under construction on Valley Hill Road.

A different way to learn

BY JANE REID KLEYN
EDITOR@THESPRINGFIELDSUN.COM

“Turn off the screen, put down the books, we're having class outside today.”

For students at Woodland Wonders Forest School this isn't just a one-day outing into nature, it happens every day.

Educators Kelsey Kirsh, Halie Heller, and Teresa Henderson are well aware that not all children learn best sitting at a desk and reading or doing worksheets. All having experience in nature-based education, they are bringing a different approach to education to Washington County.

The school is currently home based with a handful of students, but a building is under construction on Valley Hill Road to expand the opportunity to more children in Marion, Nelson, and Washington counties.

Woodland Wonders operates as a Forest School, taking the students outside of the traditional classroom. Kirsh said the students are outside every day regardless of the weather, with the exception of storms.

“It is totally nature-based and outdoors. Children are outside 90% of the day,” Kirsh said. “There is no such thing as bad weather. Children are required to have rain gear, boots, and such.”

“Instead of using sand in a classroom, we go outside and use the dirt,” she said. “We are using real-life

learning, instead of inside the four walls of a classroom.”

Children are encouraged to play, explore, and learn in a natural setting. All core subjects are taught, just in a slightly different way.

The new building will house classes for Pre-K through eighth grade. The plan is to add a childcare center that

will also include before- and after-school childcare. Although a private school, all instructors are public school certified teachers who have taught in public schools and the school will meet all the requirements of public schools.

The campus is located in a rural area surrounded by nature with a stream running

through one side of the property. In addition to the school building, plans include a garden to be planted and tended by students, animals the students will care for, along with play areas. Wild turkeys and other wildlife often venture out into the open areas surrounding the school adding yet another element to the

learning.

Kirsh said the school on Valley Hill Road is scheduled to open in the fall with 52 students registered for 2026-27.

Heller will oversee the preschool program, Kirsh will oversee the elementary grades, and Henderson will handle the middle school grades.

Kirsh said hopefully they can add high school in the future.

Students will also be involved in community service and take field trips that coincide with concept learning.

“Students are getting the same education, learning the same things, just taught in a different way,” concluded Kirsh.

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