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Daniel Beletsky, left, and Nikita McGee, both 6, spent recess playing on old farm equipment in the woods behind the Michael Frome Academy. Twice a day the kids go outside to the wooded area or for walks to a nearby stream. Beletsky said he would rather play in the woods than play video games.

A new charter school uses nature to teach kids about conservation and their ABCs.

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New learning environment in Woodbury

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In a clump of trees on a rise off Radio Drive in Woodbury several clumps of children gather. One group watches while two of its more daring members climb a little tree. Another clutch of first-graders and kindergartners surrounds the rusted remains of a manure spreader and wonders what it could be. Smaller groups of two or three take turns visiting the "castle" -- the name they have given the foundation of what once was a barn and silo.

This is no school trip intended to connect the kids to local history while buses warm their engines nearby and parent volunteers keep an eye out. It's not even recess. It's class -- everyday -- at the new Michael Frome Academy.

A so-called "green" charter school, it is the newest in Minnesota and one of about 130 that have sprouted up around the nation in recent years. Their mission is to instill an appreciation of nature and environmentalism in the kids, and use the natural world as a basis for education. At this school, No Child Left Behind also means no students left indoors.

Michael Frome Academy opened two months ago, following a whirlwind of planning and building over 18 months that was touched off by co-founders Jim and Laurel Tangen-Foster and propelled by a group of parents, education professionals and a real estate developer who believe in the calling.

Currently the school has 40 students spread from kindergarten through third grade but hopes and plans to grow much larger.

"We're using the environment as the integrating context of the school," says Kendra Hunding, who teaches a combined first- and second-grade class. For example, students learn math through measuring the trees and leaves, and they learn relative differences as they learn that elms are taller than box elders.

Twice a day the kids go outside to the wooded area that is a barely more than an acre, but an ample playroom for a 5-year-old. Other times they go for walks to a nearby stream.

Hunding also uses the outdoors to teach basic earth science -- that this east-central section of Minnesota is home to deciduous trees that lose their leaves and if they go up north they'll see coniferous trees, evergreens, which don't. And if they go south and west they'll come upon prairies that have almost no trees at all.

"We want them to understand where they live," Hunding said.

She also wants them to understand the alphabet and spelling, and that also is done within the context of the natural environment. Thus, at the school "A" is for aspen, "B" is for bison and "E" is for elm.

Green concepts also apply to the 4,100-square-foot facility the school occupies. Soon after the Tangen-Fosters got the initial approval from Minnesota officials they began discussions with Bob Engstrom, a developer noted for efforts to include ample open space and resource and energy conservation in his projects.

Engstrom, who owns the land the school is built on as well as the building, included the more efficient and kid-friendly in-floor radiant heat, lots of south-facing windows, extra wall insulation and even paint and carpeting that have no VOCs (volatile organic compounds) in them. Outside he included native prairie plants and a rain garden to collect surface storm water rather than allowing it to run into the sewer system.

The school also is planning to serve the children organic-only lunches once they get a caterer in place.

Parents say they were drawn to the school for its environmentalism but also for two other attributes: The small size of its classes and the direct input it allowed them into its operations.

"My son is a visual learner, a hands-on learner," said Jane Husnik, parent of a kindergartner and co-chairwoman of the school's board. She describes her son as the type of child who will want to stand up and walk around during a lesson, and at the school it is OK for him to do so.

What's more, said Husnik, "I am welcomed here. His teacher sees me on a daily basis." A former public school teacher, Husnik says she also likes the individual attention her son gets, with three full-time teachers and one part-timer.

"I looked around at a lot of schools," Husnik said. "This was a great opportunity."

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