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The boots of 18 Wintonbury preschoolers line up outside the classroom (left) as they await their first Auerfarm trip of the year, where they'll explore science, agriculture, and nature—meeting a bunny (right) and holding a worm (center).

Boots, Barns, and Baking: Wintonbury's Unique Farm Learning Experience

How preschoolers connect with agriculture through experiential learning.

A week before their first Farm Day, the preschoolers at Wintonbury Early Childhood Magnet School have their boots lined up outside their classroom door in eager anticipation. “My son never wants to miss school on Farm Day,” remarks one parent. The Wintonbury preschoolers have been visiting the 4-H Education Center at Auerfarm for the past few years, integrating farm-based experiential learning into their classroom curriculum.

Wintonbury has a total of 18 preschool classrooms that rotate through the farm. Three days a week, two classrooms visit the farm for a two-hour program that connects mind, body, and soul to nature. The curriculum directly correlates to the seasonal changes on the farm throughout the year. During the fall, the students pick apples from the orchard and turn them into apple cider. In the winter, they tap the maple trees and learn how we turn the sap into maple syrup. In the spring, they learn about baby animals and pollinators as they emerge from the cold.

“It’s an experiential learning program; it’s very hands-on for the kids,” said Kyle Conard, a lead Wintonbury farm educator. “Many kids are learning where food comes from for the first time, or they haven’t seen animals up close before.”

Each lesson is taught for three weeks as all 18 classrooms make their visits to the farm. This allows for different programs that are unique to the Wintonbury preschoolers, as some seasonal programs are also available as field trips for schools in the area. One such program is the grains lesson taught in December.

In this lesson, the preschoolers learn that gingerbread cookies *actually* come from the farm. They go on an adventure around the farm to locate flour, eggs, sugar, and spices for their cookies. Each step along the way teaches them something new about that ingredient and where it’s found on the farm.

We try to teach them that food comes from the farm. You know you don’t just have a bag of flour. Where does that flour *actually* come from?” said Kim Christophel, lead Wintonbury teacher.

Learning about the journey that food takes from fields to fork is magical. Little minds do not see a bus taking them to a farm; they strap on their boots that have been eagerly awaiting them and climb aboard the magic school bus which will transport them to the circus.

As soon as they arrive, they are greeted by a cacophony of lions, tigers, and bears. Their eyes widen. The adventure begins. Those roars might be coming from geese, chickens, and peacocks, but the excitement is all the same. They are met by the warm, familiar faces of their farm educators and are told that they will be making gingerbread cookies today; however, they need to go on a scavenger hunt to collect materials around the farm. The young minds are ready for adventure.

The scavenger hunt acts as a tour of the farm so that the kids will immerse themselves in the experience and learn while having fun. They’ll venture to the gardens and greenhouse to find wheat and spices for the gingerbread. Then they’ll trek to the sugar shack where they will find sugar cane. The sugar shack houses the maple syrup operation which the preschoolers get a brief introduction to before their maple lesson. It is also home to an observation bee hive so that they can safely watch bees at work inside it. The sugar cane, maple syrup, and bees all help to make connections between sweet things. The kids will then find eggs in the chicken coop and get a quick lesson in baby chicks before their baby animals lesson in spring. Lastly, they will find butter next to the cows and learn about different dairy animals and their products.

Kim recounts a humorous moment during a scavenger hunt: “We were doing our scavenger hunt one morning with heavy frost when one little guy stopped, crouched down to look at it, and said, ‘Ah! I think Elsa has been here!’ It was so cute, and then you get to teach on that for a moment.”

Why would frost appear, other than Elsa’s doing? Why does this happen in winter? What does that mean for any crops underneath? It’s those types of experiential learning questions that may not necessarily be tied to the curriculum but that kids get to explore while being on the farm.

“The biggest thing is hands-on experiences. It’s not just a picture of a cow; you know there is a cow. It’s so great because you do get those kids whose families don’t always get to go to a farm, so they get to have that experience through school,” said Kim.

The scavenger hunt ends in the classroom where the preschoolers will finally be able to make their gingerbread cookies. In the classroom, there are several different stations for kids to learn and play. The exploration station is where they make cookies. The imaginary play station allows children to model what they learned by playing with play cookies, baking tins, and other kitchen items. The sensory station allows children to grind up oats and wheat to simulate making flour as well as smelling cinnamon and spices from the greenhouse. The writing station includes worksheets with words and images for word recognition and drawings about the lesson.

The immersive scavenger hunt along with different learning stations connects young children to nature and connects their foods to the farm. They explore lessons in myriad ways that are fun and playful but rooted in education. This model is used for most of Auerfarm’s educational programs and field trips.

The Wintonbury preschoolers remain at school for two years allowing for continued learning at the farm. “It’s nice when older kids help younger ones,” said Kim. “It’s like ‘Oh, it’s okay to do this,’ and younger ones will pair up with older ones.”

“We see [their development] in several ways. It might be that kids are afraid of animals; then they come to the farm and by year-end they love animals. Or you get a kid who is afraid of petting bunnies until they see all of their friends doing it; then they’ll try it too,” said Kyle. “It becomes such a breakthrough.”

The partnership between Auerfarm and Wintonbury is truly unique and equips these young minds with a strong foundation in agriculture, science, and nature. This program is enjoyed by all as many parents volunteer to chaperone these field trips to watch their children thrive while learning on the farm. The Wintonbury PTO also hosts several family fun days at the farm so that parents and families can get involved in all of its fun.

The lessons learned on the farm will stick forever. The next time they have apple cider they’ll remember visiting the farm, picking apples, grinding them in the cider press, and collecting fresh cider. When they’re baking gingerbread cookies at home they’ll remember that cows and chickens made this possible; that wheat, oats, and spices took weeks to grow on the farm for them to enjoy their cookies; that farmers tended crops and animals to ensure healthy and safe food for public consumption. But most of all we hope they remember the wind on their faces, dirt under their nails, and the fun they had at Auerfarm.

Did You Know?

Connecticut’s agricultural industry contributes \$4 billion to the state economy, generates up to 31,000 jobs, and contributes nearly \$1 billion in labor income, in addition to significantly enhancing all residents’ quality of life.

UConn CAHNR

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends,

As the seasons change, and daylight wains, we share the joy of Auerfarm. The honey has been harvested, the firewood has been stacked, and the maple trees are getting ready to be tapped. Flecks of red, orange, and brown take over the trees surrounding us in a warm embrace as the wind sings a cold tune. Leaves crunch with children's laughter as they run and explore the farm.

Auerfarm spent this summer growing. Growing vegetables, growing flowers, and, most importantly, growing young minds. Each week, over 130 youth spent their days at the farm connecting with nature and each other through the shared experiences of fishing in the stream, caring for farm animals, and reaching new heights, both on hikes and within themselves.

Our farm educator, Laura Pallandre was busy growing vegetables for the children at Wintonbury Early Childhood Magnet School. Wintonbury students use the produce as part of their Farm to School program and their weekly 'Try Day,' connecting foods to farms and children to the environment.

The Growing Opportunities students grew their culinary skills by learning to make healthy, balanced meals. Students learned the simple but necessary skill of navigating a grocery store and where to find their needed ingredients. Life skills that they will carry with them forever and are necessary for successful independent living. "Life changing," said Kristiann Vargas, culinary director, expressing her experience working with the Growing Opportunities students.

Enjoy reading about the Auerfarm harvest; stories of resilience, growth, and opportunities.

We invite you to be part of Auerfarm! Come walk, explore, learn!

Warm regards,

Erica

Executive Director

4-H Education Center at Auerfarm



Auerfarm by the Numbers

Do you know how many eggs our hens lay each week? Or how many acres of land we cultivate? Discover the numbers behind Auerfarm...

\$20,000

raised at Fall Festival



63%



of Auercamp staff returned
between 2023 - 2024



\$140,000

value of our volunteers



230

dinner guests



17,000+

hearts reached

5,504



field trip participants

CAMP
390

hours of camp

80+

campers each week



9,000+

youths engaged with Auerfarm



65

eggs laid per week



Growing Opportunities students spent the summer learning essential skills like navigating grocery stores and restaurants (center) and preparing nutritious, well-balanced meals for themselves (left), along with training for culinary employment. At the end of the eight-week program, they showcased their skills by preparing a graduation luncheon for friends, family, and teachers (right). Summer 2024

Cooking with Purpose: A Journey of Transformation

How Auerfarm's Growing Opportunities Program Nurtures Confidence and Independence Through Cooking

The August sun beat down on Auerfarm as the smell of roasting chickens floated from the cracked kitchen windows down the main archway. Inside the kitchen, the students of the Growing Opportunities program formed an ensemble of players, all sure of their roles and perfectly on cue. One student turned on the lights, another pre-heated the ovens, another prepared the meat table and yet another set up the wash station. All this was done under the subtle direction of Chef Kristiann Vargas, Resident Chef at Auerfarm and Creative Director at Distinctive Ideas. She stood back with a coffee in hand, admiring her team as they effortlessly moved around the kitchen to prepare the meal for their graduation luncheon. A smile grew on her face as she reflected on how far they had come since the program started eight weeks ago.

The summer Growing Opportunities program is a workforce development initiative at Auerfarm that employs students aged 18 to 22 from various high school transition programs. These students have a range of developmental or intellectual disabilities and are transitioning from high school to the workforce or independent living. The transition program meets the individual needs of students, which may include independence, self-care, and other daily living skills, including workforce development. This is where Auerfarm comes in. At Auerfarm, students learn skills in agriculture, facilities management, and culinary arts. The summer program includes working at Auerfarm as well as taking trips to local businesses for on-the-job training in stores that are likely to hire people with disabilities, including ReStore and Fitzgerald's. However, perhaps the most indelible part of the program is preparing lunch every day with Chef Kristiann.

"I taught them how to cook in a way that they should know for themselves, with the idea that some of them might have opportunities to work in commercial kitchens," said Chef Kristiann.

Like any recipe, the program started from scratch. On day one, Chef Kristiann chose the menu and did all the grocery shopping. She set up each station and laid out all the necessary equipment. As the students arrived, she walked them through every step needed to prepare their meals. Each meal included a protein, a fruit, and a vegetable, along with discussions on nutrition and balanced diets. "At first, they wanted to make the same things over and over," Kristiann recalls. "That meal was fun and delicious but maybe not the most nutritious; we can't eat that three times a week or even three times a month—we need to switch it up."

As the weeks went on, the students learned kitchen safety, food preparation, and sanitation. They learned to navigate a grocery store, measurements, and how to read recipes. They also became familiar with different kitchen equipment and tools—elements that are built in organically when learning how to cook.

Students worked directly with farmers to harvest produce. They learned to see, smell, and taste how vegetables differed when fresh compared to when they were cooked. They discovered how dried and fresh herbs alter a dish's flavor.

Every meal included conversations about accessibility, allergies, and alternatives to ensure that each student's needs were met. Kristiann recalls a student who had only one functioning hand trying to make pizza from dough.

"I remember him looking at me and saying, 'Well, I can't do dough.' I asked him why he couldn't do dough, and he said, 'I only have one hand.'" Kristiann puts her arm behind her back. "Okay, well I only have one hand now too; this is how we're going to do it with one hand." Just seeing him have that lightbulb moment was rewarding; by the end of class he asked, "Can I take a picture and send it to my mom?" "Yeah," she replied with enthusiasm. "You can totally do that!"

The accessibility of this program ranged from physical handicaps to dietary restrictions. Students were able to try new gluten-free items and adapt regular recipes to fit their needs.

They learned to navigate challenges but most importantly—they learned to embrace mistakes. "I've learned that if you make some tasks part of the overall process, you learn better; it makes it less daunting," Kristiann explains. "We learn from our mistakes. If they open a pack of strawberries and see some moldy ones, they can decide: 'Okay, these I'm not going to eat—but that doesn't mean we have to throw away everything; this is how we handle it.' With kids with disabilities, if it's not exact—it's wrong; we have to start again." Her kitchen gives students the confidence to make mistakes, play with their food, and try new things.

And they really would play with their food! One day they wanted only red fruit; another day they picked "funny-looking" vegetables to taste and cook. They experimented with different flavors, textures, and combinations. During a grilled cheese cooking competition, one student added kimchi because of her love for Asian flavors while another brought in macaroni and cheese from home to add to their grilled cheese creation. The best part was that everybody tried everything.

"Everybody cooked; everybody participated; everybody did all the things," beams Kristiann. The instructors served them every meal after they worked so hard preparing it—Owen, August, Kimbrae, and Patrick would get in line serving everyone until everyone had their plate before sitting down together—including Kristiann—to eat before cleaning up.

Throughout the summer, students became more comfortable brainstorming menus, giving opinions on recipes, grocery shopping together, and preparing their meals. By week eight, they were fully self-sufficient in the kitchen and cooked their graduation luncheon from scratch—six well-marinated and seasoned chickens along with sides and dessert. Over those eight weeks, these students transformed from being shy and unsure into taking pride in their creations. Parents shared stories about how their children sent them photos after every meal over the summer—proudly taking ownership of their nutrition—and family members noted how their nieces or nephews gained confidence in their abilities.

Kristiann had been warned there might be pushback since certain disabilities can lead to rigidity regarding food choices; however, this was not her experience. "They thrive on routine," she explains. "You show up at the right time; you do the same thing over and over; you give them repetition—and it went well." Kristiann leans back with a proud smile on her face recalling what she describes as a life-changing summer experience.

As the summer came to a close, the Growing Opportunities program at Auerfarm not only equipped students with essential culinary skills but also fostered a sense of community, confidence, and independence. Through hands-on experiences, meaningful conversations, and the encouragement of Chef Kristiann, each student discovered their unique strengths and capabilities.

The joy of cooking together transcended the kitchen, creating lasting memories and connections that would extend beyond the program. As families celebrated their loved ones' achievements, it became clear that this transformative journey was about more than just preparing meals; it was about nurturing self-esteem and empowering young adults to embrace their potential in all aspects of life.

Giving



Auerfarm wants to sincerely thank all the visitors, vendors, volunteers, and sponsors who attended the Annual Fall Festival on Sunday, October 6, 2024. This year's fall festival saw a record \$20,000 raised in sponsorships, donations, ticket sales, raffles, and more. As a non-profit, all contributions to Auerfarm greatly impact our educational programming, facilities maintenance, and agricultural production. Your visits, sponsorships, and donations keep the farm running and allow us to keep our doors open year-round, seven days a week from seven am to seven pm. Thank you.

Teaching



This past summer, 20 fourth graders from McAllister Intermediate School in Suffield were paired with Montessori Magnet Batchelder students from Hartford to spend a week of day camp together at Auerfarm. Divided into smaller groups, the students explored the farm and learned about science, agriculture, the environment, and most importantly, each other. Through shared new experiences like fishing together in the stream and brushing donkeys, these students bridged the 22-mile gap between their schools, forging new friendships and a sense of community. Auerfarm became a neutral ground where diverse backgrounds melted away, replaced by common interests and mutual understanding.

Staying

"We loved our stay at Baldwin Cottage. It was the perfect size for me and my 8 year old son, with all the amenities we needed for our 5 night stay. The black out curtains in the bedroom was one of my favorite touches, and something often overlooked at other places! We loved eating breakfast in the screened-in porch. The kitchen had everything we needed, the towels were soft, and the A/C and ceiling fans worked well during the heat wave. We were out of the house all day, so regretfully were not able to engage much with the property and its many inhabitants, but next time we would plan our trip differently to be able to take advantage of all the cool stuff at the farm and surrounding trails."

~ Elizabeth P, Farmstay Guest.



Fourth graders from McAllister in Suffield, CT and Batchelder in Hartford, CT proudly wear their self-made tie-dyed T-shirts while joining hands and playing a singing game (left). The students grew close to each other as they explored the stream (right), barns, and gardens on the farm and examined their findings in homemade nature journals (center).

A Stream of Possibilities: Connecting Students to Nature and Each Other

“It’s a lizard!” “It’s a salamander!” “It’s a Dicamptodon,” said Chiki, holding out her phone. She had taken a picture of the small stream creature the students had caught and looked up the exact type. “It’s a type of brook salamander,” she explains, “That’s the first one I’ve seen around here, nice job!” she high-fives the student.

Splashing, laughter, and the occasional reminder to share could be heard in the stream that courses through Auerfarm. A group of 14 fourth graders from McAllister Intermediate School in Suffield and Montessori Magnet School at Batchelder in Hartford participating in the Interdistrict Camp Program at Auerfarm worked together to catch minnows, crayfish, and anything else they could find in the water. Knee-deep in muddy water was Chiki Santillan, a seasoned assistant camp director who enjoyed the stream probably more than the students did. Up on the bank was Hayley Yaros, the slightly more responsible of the duo in charge of the “Daisies” group, a name the pair had affectionately chosen together.

Santillan and Yaros have worked together at farm camps every summer for the past nine years, having spent the last five at Auerfarm. Recently promoted to co-assistant camp directors the two have revamped the camp’s programming to foster an environment of play-based learning through a social-emotional framework.

“We try to create a place where kids are free to be themselves and are free to explore. That’s where you draw out their natural curiosities about the world and can teach them things based on what they’re interested in,” said Santillan. “Taking ownership in their education gives them a sense of confidence that will propel them forward in life.”

This grant-funded interdistrict program brings students from a rural and urban school together to reduce the racial, ethnic, and economic isolation of students and create spaces where students can gather, interact, and learn together in a week-long camp program. Each morning started with a morning meeting and a game. The game would be about team building, inclusion, and communication. Students would have to work together towards a common goal. This helped to observe differences amongst the group and break down any barriers. It helped to reach a common ground. Then students would move into their explorations; either the barn, stream, garden, or a science exploration. In the barn, students brushed donkeys and learned about animal safety. They walked goats and observed chickens. In the gardens, students learned about edible and medicinal weeds. They learned about plant dyes (pictured above) and flower pressing. In a science exploration students collected water samples from different areas of the farm and examined the contents under a microscope to record their observations.

However, the most beloved aspect of the program was exploring the stream every day. Every student enthusiastically participated when at the stream. The group arrived with shovels, nets, trowels, and buckets in tow ready to fish. Before each stream session, the students received a talk on respecting habitats and the wildlife that call the stream home. With that, they were off to see what they could find for the day. Many crayfish and tadpoles were caught, the occasional frog or toad, and for one brave soul, a baby water snake.

“The excitement from the students when they catch something, or the wonder on their faces when they place rocks in the stream and change the flow of the water are the windows of opportunity for learning. Why does the water change flow patterns? What is it that we caught? Why was it found here and not there? You introduce the topic by playing in the stream, then we can zoom out and say ‘Okay, we can talk about habitats or the water cycle. Then you can expand that, and talk about water conservation, recycling, and the environment. And you’re connecting it back to the experience in the stream. They feel centered in what they are learning, they retain it better, and they have confidence in their intelligence,” said Santillan.

The interdistrict program at Auerfarm not only bridges the gap between urban and rural students but also fosters a deep connection with nature and scientific inquiry. As the day winds down, the students gather to share their discoveries and reflections. The excitement is palpable as they recount their adventures in the stream, the barn, and the gardens.

This interdistrict program at Auerfarm stands as a shining example of how hands-on, experiential learning can break down barriers, inspire young minds, and cultivate a generation of environmentally conscious citizens. The program, like the stream itself, is a place of discovery, growth, and connection. It’s a testament to the power of nature and the importance of fostering a love for the natural world in our young people.

Support Our Work

Your support makes a difference. We rely on your generosity and that of the “Auer” community to protect the magical resource Auerfarm provides. Here are a few ways you can help...

- 1 **Donate Online.** It is easier than ever to support Auerfarm. Visit auerfarm.org/donate to make a gift using your credit card. It is quick, secure, and hassle-free!
- 2 **Participate in workplace giving and double your donation.** Many local businesses will match your donation. Check with your human resource department.
- 3 **Giving Through Your IRA.** Qualified Charitable Distributions (QCDs), also known as IRA Charitable Rollovers, are an easy and savvy way for individuals age 70½ or older to use their IRAs to maximize their charitable impact. When you make a QCD from your IRA, you can support your favorite charity without paying income taxes on the contributed funds.
- 4 **Giving Stocks, Bonds, Mutual Funds** Donating appreciated stocks, mutual funds, or bonds to charity is an efficient way to contribute that can provide you with significant tax benefits. You gift appreciated securities to Auerfarm while avoiding capital gains tax.
- 5 **Planned giving.** A planned gift is one of the most meaningful ways you can show appreciation for Auerfarm and support our mission. You may be able to save on taxes, receive income for life, or enjoy other financial benefits - all while creating a lasting legacy that helps Auerfarm thrive for generations to come.
- 6 **Give through your donor-advised fund.** It is easy to make a gift to Auerfarm through your Donor Advised Fund (DAF). An increasingly popular charitable vehicle, DAF’s are an excellent way to both simplify your charitable giving and facilitate your strategic philanthropy goals.