

Bon Homme Colony

The Hutterite Way

Hutterite Settlements Like Bon Homme Colony Offer Education Settings That Mix State Standards And Unique Culture

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Bon Homme Colony Elementary School was recently recognized by the State of South Dakota for exemplary academic achievement, ranking in the top 10 percent of all South Dakota elementary facilities.

The school has also fostered two national award-winning writers and fostered development of many individual talents.

But few Bon Homme County residents are familiar with the school. Bon Homme Colony Elementary is the two-room school located about 20 miles west of Yankton where currently 49 children from Bon Homme Hutterite Colony complete their education.

Hutterites originated in Moravia in 1528. They are one of many Anabaptist groups that arose out of the Protestant Reformation during the 16th century. Communal living has been one of the group's central principles since their inception. In 1533 Anabaptist preacher Jacob Hutter became pastor of a Moravian group, firmly establishing the communal living pattern.

Between 1874 and 1879, practically all Hutterites fled Russia, fearing religious persecution. Bon Homme Colony is the site where approximately 100 Hutterite families arrived during that time period. Some of those families settled on private farms. Others chose to live in colonies.

Jill Kotalik, head teacher at Bon Homme Colony, says she grew up just 10 miles from the colony and has always known it existed, but she knew little about the group's lifestyle and school until she began teaching there 15 years ago.

"The biggest challenge for me has been assisting our kindergarten classes with learning English," Kotalik says. "When they first begin school, they speak very little English."

The German language native to the school's students, Hutterish, isn't a written language, so Kotalik has had no choice but to overcome the challenge of communicating with her young learners.

"Sometimes the kindergartners and I have to rely on older students to interpret," Kotalik says. "Once the students learn English, that's all they're allowed to speak in school. However, they do study their own language, too."

A typical day for students at Bon Homme Colony Elementary begins at 7 a.m. when they



Jill Kotalik serves as Bon Homme Colony Elementary's head teacher. She and the school are under the supervision of the State of South Dakota and Bon Homme School District, which is overseen by Dr. Bryce Knudson. Students at Bon Homme Colony Elementary meet in a two-room building located at the center of the colony west of Yankton. As seen here, students regularly receive art and music instruction along with learning core subjects.

PHOTO: LORETTA SORENSEN

gather at a central hall for breakfast. By 8 a.m. they are in class, studying their native language. At 9, they make their way to the schoolhouse, where they will work through classes until 3:45 p.m. At that time, school is dismissed and they return to the German class where they began their day.

"We teach these children the same standards that any child in school learns," Kotalik says. "We don't have sports but a Physical Education teacher does come in regularly. Because these children grow up in a culture where physical work is valued and everyone has a job, they're in good physical condition."

Music class is devoid of any instruments, but the students sing often — in school, as they work and in their church services.

"They don't sing much in public, but sometimes sing at funerals or for some special occasion in their community," Kotalik says. "We do a major Christmas program here and all of us teachers greatly appreciate the parental support we receive."

Parent-teacher conferences typically bring both mother and father to the school to receive a report on their child's progress.

Eighth grade graduation is also a major milestone celebrated at the colony.

"We have some boys who attend high school through correspondence courses," Kotalik says. "A teacher is here every day to work with them, too."

Kotalik and her six teaching peers find working at the school both rewarding and challenging. Because there are two classrooms, students are grouped according to age, with kindergarten through fourth grade in one room and fifth through eighth in another.

"You have to be an effective time manager," Megan Winckler says. "With that and some creativity, we find our students learn what they need to learn and help each other learn, too."

A typical morning for Winckler involves 30 minutes of teaching a class such as math. After 30 minutes, a paraprofessional will assist students for 30 minutes, they move to a work sta-

tion for 30 minutes and then complete the equivalent of homework for 30 minutes.

"There's always some cross-grade teaching," Winckler says. "It's not uncommon for me to observe a younger student who's really tuned in to a class I'm teaching. Sometimes, once my younger students reach a certain level in math or reading, I recognize that they've picked up lessons I taught in the past. Each day I teach math, social studies, social studies and science. Throughout the day I just teach at different levels for those classes."

Because students spend four or five years with one teacher, it's not unusual to see development of close, lasting bonds.

"I've been here five years now and was very emotional when the students I started teaching in fifth grade graduated from eighth grade," Winckler says. "That continuity doesn't happen everywhere. In some ways,

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