



# FOLK SCHOOL KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

## RESEARCH REPORT

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## INTRODUCTION

<b>Project Overview</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>LSSLN Background</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Project Background</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Project Goals and Objectives</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Research Method</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Results</b>	<b>5</b>

## FOLK SCHOOLING IN THE LAKE SUPERIOR WATERSHED 6

## PARTICIPANT PROFILES

<b>Antiquary Folk School</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Duluth Folk School</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Ely Folk School</b>	<b>9</b>

## STORIES FROM THE MEETING 10

## CONCLUSION 11

## BIBLIOGRAPHY 12

# INTRODUCTION

## Project Overview

The Folk School Knowledge Exchange is a research initiative led by Antiquary Folk School, with funding from the Lake Superior Living Labs Network (LSLLN). This project supports research, collaboration, and relationship-building between organizations across the Lake Superior watershed by bringing together folk schools of the region to share information and knowledge.

A Folk School Meet Up was held in Duluth, Minnesota from April 1-2, 2023, attended by Antiquary Folk School (AFS), Duluth Folk School (DFS), and Ely Folk School (EFS). An instructor from North House Folk School (NHFS) also joined the meeting for the first half day. Conversations from the meeting have been distilled into the research findings contained within this report, with a focus on the experiences of AFS, DFS, and EFS. This report was created as a resource for folk schools into the future, while supporting the goals and objectives of the LSLLN. It is written from the perspective of AFS.

## LSLLN Background

The LSLLN serves as a platform to connect academics and community groups to develop new partnerships and collaborative initiatives across the Lake Superior watershed. Evolving from a partnership between Lakehead University, the University of Minnesota-Duluth, Lake Superior College, Algoma University, a number of non-profit organizations, businesses, First Nations and tribal governments, the LSLLN has hubs in Thunder Bay and Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, Duluth, Minnesota, and Houghton, Michigan.

Each year, the LSLLN funds projects that take a collaborative approach to co-creating innovative solutions to sustainability challenges through interdisciplinary and place-based research, learning, and community-engaged action in the built and natural environments.<sup>1</sup>

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1 "Goals and Intended Outcomes," Lake Superior Living Labs Network, accessed April 16, 2023, <https://livinglabs.lakeheadu.ca/living-lab-approach/goals-and-intended-outcomes/>.

## Project Background

AFS is an emerging non-profit organization based in Maberly and Thunder Bay, Ontario that offers retreat-style courses for adults in craft and hands-on skills. Structured according to the Danish model of folk school education, our goal is to bring adults together in a non-competitive environment to learn skills geared towards sustainability.

A folk school is defined as a place where students engage willingly, without credentials and with access to peers and mentors to learn with. They are geared to local interests, operating with far more autonomy and responsiveness than formal educational institutions, and their immersive nature forges bonds between members of the learning community that yield both personal and societal benefits.<sup>2</sup>

Though they take many forms, all folk schools stem from the ideas of Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig and the Danish folk high school principals that enacted Grundtvig's philosophies. Using Grundtvig's framework for folk schooling, budding educators brought Grundtvig's ideas to fruition in mid-nineteenth-century Denmark<sup>3</sup>. The success of Denmark's folk schools led to the adoption of the model across Scandinavia, where they remain prevalent. The folk school model was later adapted into North America through the establishment of John C. Campbell Folk School in 1925 in Brasstown, North Carolina.<sup>4</sup>

While folk schools are well established in the United States and the movement is growing, they have been slow to develop across the border in Canada. With folk schools operating further afield in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and British Columbia, AFS finds itself with few peers to network with and exchange experiences.

AFS received a Micro-Grant from the LSLLN in January 2023 to support its continuing development as an emerging non-profit organization. Having completed our first season of programming at our Maberly campus, we are looking to expand our reach in bringing courses to Thunder Bay and surrounding areas. The Micro-Grant has supported AFS in exploring this idea through research with other folk schools across the watershed to determine a feasible path forward.

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2 Devon Lee, Literature Review, "Comprehensive Portfolio Folk Schools and Higher Education: Finding My Way", (Lakehead University, 2021), page 20-21.

3 J. Kulich, "Christen Kold, founder of the Danish folk high school: myth and reality," International Journal of Lifelong Education 16, no. 5, (2017), 439-453.

4 "A Brief History of Folk Schools", Folk School Alliance, accessed April 16, 2023, <https://folkschoolalliance.org/a-brief-history-of-folk-schools>.

## Project Goals and Objectives

Folk schools are natural incubators of discussion on social and ecological justice; sharing the goal of promoting inclusive, equitable education and the teaching of hands-on skills for a more sustainable future. This project connects the existing work of regional folk schools with the goals and initiatives of the LSLLN to broaden the conversation on sustainable community development within the Lake Superior watershed.

The Folk School Knowledge Exchange is a unique learning opportunity for AFS, as well as the other schools involved, presenting formal opportunities to build relationships across the region. A meeting of this kind is unprecedented for folk schools operating in the Lake Superior region, bringing organizations together across national borders to establish a new professional network. The purpose of the meeting and project, overall, is to connect folk schools around Lake Superior so that we can support one another and learn from each organization's challenges and strategies for success.

The folk school model in North America is based on the development of hands-on, practical skills that students apply to their own lives with increased self-sufficiency and understanding of the natural environment. The project contributes to the LSLLN's goal of addressing issues related to water, land and food, climate and energy, and individual and community well-being – all are topics of learning permeating throughout folk schooling and the conversations that take place there.

## Research Method

The Folk School Knowledge Exchange consists primarily of holding of a Folk School Meet Up that took place on April 1-2, 2023. Project activities that occurred before the meeting were related to meeting coordination, while work completed after was tied to the interpretation of research and creation of this report. AFS began the project by identifying a partner organization in a neighbouring hub. DFS agreed to partner with AFS to host the meeting at their facility in Duluth, Minnesota. We worked closely with Tim Bates, Chair and co-founder of DFS, to coordinate meeting plans and determine a list of potential attendees.

It was determined that the meeting would be open to staff and board members of each organization. A meeting invitation was sent by e-mail to:

- Ely Folk School
- North House Folk School
- Finnish American Folk School
- Raspberry Island Folk School
- Marine Mills Folk School
- Danebod Folk School
- Avon Hills Folk School
- Milan Village Arts School
- Pine to Prairie Folk School
- School of Yoga and Natural Arts
- Aspire Artisan Studios
- Folk School Warroad
- Algoma Trad

Though many indicated they were not available to attend, several folk schools made requests to meet with AFS virtually, and others indicated they would be interested in attending future meetings. With a list of confirmed attendees from AFS, DFS, EFS, and NHFS, we developed an agenda with detailed discussion topics according to the interests of each participating organization.

The meeting itself took place throughout the day on April 1<sup>st</sup> and the morning of April 2, with 8 participants on Day 1 and 7 participants on Day 2. DFS hosted the meeting at its downtown location, and AFS facilitated the meeting's discussions on topics such as governance, finances and fundraising, programming, staffing and volunteers, facilities and property, community engagement, communications and technology, and regional identity. We also took part in a tour of the building by Tim Bates of DFS, and Devon Lee of AFS delivered a scholarly presentation on the history of North American folk schooling. Our conversations from the weekend were documented, forming the basis of this research report.

## Results

The project has succeeded in connecting sustainability-focused organizations across the watershed while contributing research that will support AFS in delivering programming designed for the specific context of Northwestern Ontario. It has created partnerships among educational leaders of the region, and between academic and community partners (Lakehead University and AFS).

It has also provided tools and strategies for success among participating folk schools. We are better equipped with knowledge to support our own individual organizations moving forward, having exchanged lived experience and lessons from the field. Though the project included just one meet up, all participants agreed that the experience was valuable enough to plan to meet again in the future. In addition, as the only participating Canadian folk school, this project was integral to advancing the folk school movement in Canada. With folk schooling in its infancy here, the tools and knowledge resulting from this project will contribute to mobilizing a new type of adult education here.



*Participants of the Folk School Meet Up.*



*Tim Bates leading tour of DFS building.*



# FOLK SCHOOLING IN THE LAKE SUPERIOR WATERSHED

The three participating folk schools are connected by geography – existing within the Lake Superior watershed and surrounding area. At least 13 folk schools and adjacent organizations exist in the region<sup>5</sup>, with that number expected to grow as the folk school movement continues to develop. Though an invitation to the Folk School Meet Up was extended to organizations throughout the watershed, it was attended by representatives of folk schools closest to DFS in Duluth. The data therefore represents the experiences of folk schools operating in the Northwestern region of Lake Superior.

Despite being divided by the U.S./Canadian border, this cluster of folk schools shares aspects of a Northern identity rooted in place. The types of programming being delivered at DFS and EFS reflect lifestyles and traditions that are tied to the local environment, emphasizing connection to water and the land through courses such as canoe making and foraging. Though Ely is located on Shagawa Lake, not directly on Lake Superior, it provides a similar environmental context as Duluth, with shared climate and ecology.

While schools such as NHFS and the Finnish American Folk School are thoroughly immersed in the exploration of Scandinavian craft and traditions, others take an approach to their programming as being reflective of the many different cultures and heritages that exist in our Northern region. Increasingly, folk schools of this area are examining how Indigenous craft and traditions can be appropriately embedded in course offerings, as true connectivity with the land cannot take place without acknowledging the experiences of the region's original inhabitants.

It is crucial to look to other organizations within the region to see how they relate to the environmental contexts in which they operate. In doing so, we will find inspiration for grounding our own programming and identity in place.



Char Lewis, Bois Forte Elder at EFS's Anishinaabe Storytelling Evening.

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<sup>5</sup> "Folk School Directory", Folk School Alliance, accessed April 15, 2023, <https://folkschoolalliance.org/Folk-School-Directory>.

## Participant Profile: **ANTIQUARY FOLK SCHOOL**



AFS's founder and President, Devon Lee - a PhD candidate at Lakehead University studying North American folk schooling and board member of the Folk Education Alliance of America - started the folk school in 2022 after years of research into the folk school model of education.

Through funding from a tourism relief grant, AFS launched its inaugural program in September 2022 from a rural property in Maberly, Ontario, becoming the first retreat-style folk school in Central Canada. Their inaugural fall program included 10 courses, ranging from 4 hours to 4 days, attracted a mix of locals who attended for the day and tourists who stayed overnight at the folk school. AFS is now working toward implementing a second season of programming in Maberly and establishing a chapter of its operations in Thunder Bay. Their greatest challenge so far is in accessing financial resources to get the organization operating at a continuous, functional level.



**MISSION:** *To create immersive leisure and learning experiences in folk arts and traditional skills, while supporting local artisans and artisans of colour*



## Participant Profile: **DULUTH FOLK SCHOOL**



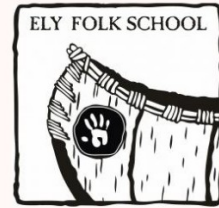
DFS was founded by Bryan French, Tim Bates, and Carmel Demaoribus in 2015 to fill a need in the Duluth community in teaching people how to make things. They started at a grassroots level, finding program space where they could. Though they began as a for profit business (LLC), they made the switch to become an incorporated non-profit just over two years ago, allowing them to welcome new perspectives and brain power into the organization.

DFS's programming is by people from the Twin Ports area, for people in the Twin Ports area, focusing on locals as their target audience. Located in downtown Duluth, the folk school has become a vibrant gathering space in the neighbourhood that is shared by the Dovetail Cafe & Market. They offer programming year-round, hosting about 192 courses and 1,100 students a year, with courses ranging from 2 hours to 30 hours spread over 10 weeks. Currently their biggest challenge exists in finding the organizational capacity and human resources needed to achieve their vision.



**MISSION:** *To build community through joyful experiences of handcrafting, art, and gatherings*

## Participant Profile: **ELY FOLK SCHOOL**



Ely Folk School was founded in 2015 by a group of board members, including Paul Schurke and Tanner Oh. The folk school began with a building owned by an original board member, and has grown from there. They operated for a number of years entirely on volunteer/board member support, hiring their first staff member in 2018. Since then they have opened a blacksmith forge and popular ceramics studio, as well.

EFS offers programming year-round, with 202 classes, 99 free events, and 2631 students/attendees in 2022. Their courses, which range from 2 hours to 3 days, primarily target locals but they are looking to attract more tourists. Ely, with a population of 35,000, has a growing tourism industry and shifting demographics that present many opportunities for expanding their reach. One of their biggest challenges is in the use of their facility, as they navigate ongoing building issues and are looking to locate outdoor programming space.



**MISSION:** *To build community by providing learning experiences that celebrate the wilderness heritage, art, history, culture and craft of the people of Northern Minnesota*



# STORIES FROM THE MEETING

It is our hope that participants of the Folk School Meet Up found value in attending and sharing with their peers. From our perspective, the Folk School Knowledge Exchange has ignited an invaluable conversation on folk schooling within the Lake Superior watershed that will continue indefinitely. It is clear that although the participating organizations are in varying states of development, the folk school movement is growing each day in response to shifting socio-cultural interests and needs. The COVID-19 pandemic has ignited widespread cultural interest in reclaiming skills for enhanced self-reliance, which folk schooling is all about.

In alignment with the Danish model of folk school education, each participating organization strives to offer an environment in which people can learn new skills, free of evaluation or competition. We each embrace an educational approach that is shared by folk schools, broadly, placing relationship, culture, and personal and community empowerment at the centre of learning and life.<sup>6</sup> It is Grundtvig's distinct vision that unites us across the geographic expanse of the Lake Superior watershed and nearby areas, and we are connected through this shared philosophy. While each organization is taking a unique approach to the folk school model that is shaped by their geographic and community context, as well as the leadership involved, the research makes clear that the participating folk schools have far more in common. A number of common "threads" have emerged from the research, worth discussing.

Firstly, each organization aims to lean into the powerful social dimension of folk schooling while working to reach new audiences and unmet needs through their programming. Another common thread exists in the leadership within each organization as a formative aspect in each folk school's development. It appears that leadership style and individual connection to the folk school movement plays a significant role in the momentum each organization is building. Lastly, the fluidity of folk school programming can be considered as a strength that folk schools can use to respond to shifting demand.

An important outcome of the Folk School Meet Up was in the realization that we also share many issues and challenges – and in doing so have taken comfort knowing that our organizational struggles are also experienced by our peers. Shared challenges among participants include human resources, fundraising and finances, and building/property constraints, all of which limit each folk school's capacity and ability to grow and flourish.

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6 "A Brief History of Folk Schools", Folk School Alliance, accessed April 16, 2023, <https://folkschoolalliance.org/a-brief-history-of-folk-schools>.



# CONCLUSION

The Folk School Knowledge Exchange is a first step toward establishing a network of folk schooling peers within the Lake Superior watershed. Through a weekend of conversation, we are now connected with Duluth Folk School and Ely Folk School, achieving the project's goal of establishing cross-hub relationships throughout the region. AFS left April's Folk School Meet Up with new relationships and a body of research that will support us in moving our emerging organization forward as we look to expand our operations to Northwestern Ontario. The report will also be provided to DFS and EFS as a continuing resource into the future.

This project was designed in alignment with the goals and objectives of the LSLLN and its focus on finding collaborative, innovative solutions to sustainability challenges through place-based research, learning, and community-engaged action. The research demonstrates how folk schooling embodies sustainability in its many definitions, centring inclusive, equitable education and the sharing of hands-on skills. They empower people with knowledge while building community, connecting back to the original concept of 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish folk schools that were born from a movement to build a co-operative, equitable society. Though each participating organization has adapted the folk school model in a unique way, we are united in our commitment to building a more sustainable future for the communities we serve.

We operate with an awareness that education exists at the heart of social change, navigating the many challenges of folk schooling with a larger purpose in mind. In one of our final discussions during the Folk School Meet Up, Devon Lee posed the question, "Are folk schools radical?" to the group. Though it may not appear that a 2-day course in blacksmithing or herbalism is in any way radical – we all agreed that beneath the surface, these seemingly simple learning experiences are, in fact, intensely powerful transfers of knowledge between individuals who comprise the broader community. We concluded that, within a capitalist, consumer-driven society set on an imperiled earth, it is fully radical to equip ourselves with practical skills for improved quality of life and community connection.

This project provides a foundation on which to continue building, using ongoing discussion between our newly formed network as a key tool. With plans to meet again next year, the multifaceted conversation on sustainability will continue as we work toward improving our organizations for the enhanced well-being of our communities and our shared region, overall.

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