



## **Prairie Hill Learning Center Strategic Plan 2021-2025**

One thing is clear when talking with the families, staff, and alumni who comprise the Prairie Hill community: they have an abundance of love for it. They are eager to share their enthusiasm for the ways students connect to nature, the emphasis on curiosity and love of learning, and appreciation for the individuals who make it possible. Visioning conversations also identified areas for growth and improvement to enhance a community and school that is greatly valued and beloved by its members. In general, families want to know that children are thriving, and that Prairie Hill will continue to be a successful and sustainable school.

## About Prairie Hill Learning Center

Prairie Hill is an independent non-profit Montessori school located just outside of Lincoln, Nebraska on a beautiful 12-acre farm. Founded in 1981, we are committed to environmental sustainability and are Nebraska's first wind and solar powered school. The campus has several acres of woods and pasture; a big red barn with horses and cats; gardens; and a small fruit orchard. We have a historic Farmhouse, new Meadow House, versatile Prairie House, and innovative Earth House for the children's learning environments.



Prairie Hill is a year-round learning center offering Montessori programs for children ages 18 months through 8th grade. The individual and small group Montessori instruction within multi-aged communities offers rich social and academic benefits to children. The children participate in planning

and cooking healthful meals each day, composting, recycling, caring for the animals and earth, as well as service opportunities. There are just over 100 students on campus. The Young Children's Community (18 months-3 years old) and the Primary Community (3-6-years old) are year-round programs. The Younger Elementary (6-9-years old), Older Elementary (9-12-years old) and Adolescent Community (12-14-years old) operate from mid-August until the end of May. In June, July, and part of August summer camps are available for the community at large. Prairie Hill employs approximately 25 individuals during the school year and some seasonal summer camp staff as well. All lead Montessori guides are certified through Association Montessori Internationale or the American Montessori Society.

## Mission

The mission of Prairie Hill Learning Center is to offer education in an atmosphere that promotes individual growth as well as caring for others and the Earth.

## Guiding Principles, Goals, and Outcomes for 2021-2025

For this strategic plan one of the key take-aways was all that Prairie Hill is *getting right*. The list of things people didn't want changed was longer than the list of things they did want to see improved. As a result, this strategic plan is organized in a non-traditional way. Feedback from the community coalesced around a series of shared values; and this strategic plan is organized around those values. This approach feels fitting for Prairie Hill.

In this strategic plan, five principles guide Prairie Hill. These principles grew out of the unified feedback about what is most important to our community and are presented in no particular order. Organizing goals around these values builds on our 40-year legacy while keeping our sights on continual growth, development, and refinement. The goals and outcomes give action to these principles and emphasize current priorities. As we work through these goals over the next four years, we will capitalize on our strengths, our history, and work creatively within the context of our environment.



## Provide high-quality Montessori education

Families and staff rank the quality of education—including the staff and campus that make it possible—as the greatest strength of Prairie Hill. It is vital to maintain the high standard of education that the community has come to expect at all levels. There is an opportunity to communicate curriculum outcomes to families more effectively which would significantly support retention of students and families.



### Goals

- Articulate curriculum for each community and clearly communicate it to families.
- Complete a self-study to better understand the quality and integrity of the school's educational program and operations.
- Increase wages for staff.
- Improve staff recruitment and retention.
- Support staff training and professional development.
- Create succession plans and a pipeline for staffing.
- Improve internal staff communication.

### Outcomes

- Students are academically engaged and prepared.
- Staff and guides feel fulfilled and valued.
- Increased retention of staff and families.
- Increased stability in leadership.

## Care for the whole child

At Prairie Hill, children explore their innate love for learning, joyfully pursuing their academic interests. Students feel confident in who they are, thinking their own thoughts, and being their own people. Staff expertly facilitate individualized learning at the child's pace supporting the child's intrinsic motivation. In turn, children learn to value the experiences of others, both caring for others and developing leadership skills to teach and be taught by peers.

Retaining more students through 8<sup>th</sup> year will strengthen Prairie Hill. The majority of parents indicated a desire for their student(s) to remain through the full experience and identified two areas that would impact that likelihood: decrease transition stress and increase family engagement with academics. Transition from Prairie Hill to another school was a concern for families and children which often precipitated transition prior to 8<sup>th</sup> year. Families expressed the desire for more engagement with their children's learning. Investing time in more substantial education of families could reap a multitude of benefits for student success and retention.



### Goals

- Retain more students through 8<sup>th</sup> year.
- Detail a transition plan to high school, including readiness for transition.
- Share with families what children are learning and how they are progressing to keep parents engaged in learning and understand their child's development.
- Explore social opportunities for children and families (e.g., extra-curriculars) to support student learning and help avoid students transitioning to public schools early.
- Explore ways to engage students and families in language, technology/STEM, music, art, and horticulture learning.
- Provide an education program for parents about Montessori principles.

### Outcomes

- Children are happy, confident, independent, and feel prepared for the world before them.
- Families are knowledgeable about Montessori education.
- Increased retention of students through 8<sup>th</sup> year.

## Connect children and nature on a beautiful campus

Prairie Hill's campus environment defines its identity as a Montessori school providing outdoor experiences for exploration, play, ecological learning, daily immersion in the natural world, care for animals, and outdoor classrooms. Our community cherishes how these opportunities provide a unique learning environment supporting ecological values. Thoughtfully maintaining and enhancing the campus environment supports all activities and learning at Prairie Hill.

### Goals

- Create a facilities maintenance plan and associated fund.
- Explore diversifying children's experiences with animals while increasing support for animal care.
- Continue to emphasize the outdoor classroom and expand outdoor experiences.
- Explore growth areas: land, greenhouse, new structures.
- Ensure space and facility needs are being met for elementary and adolescent communities.
- Evaluate parking layout; drop-off and pick-up system.



### Outcomes

- Environmental stewardship is emphasized across the community—in learning, systems, and engagement.
- Opportunities to engage with nature and outdoor learning are maximized.
- Campus facilities are maintained and improved.

## Care for each other, our community, and the world

Valuing Prairie Hill as a community—students, educators, families, alumni, and community stakeholders—is a key ingredient in the “special sauce” that makes Prairie Hill so beloved. Everyone wants to be, and should, feel valued as part of our community. While pandemic protocols have temporarily changed Prairie Hill’s traditional methods for gathering together and sharing information, there are both opportunities for new engagement methods and a return to in-person gatherings in the near future.

### Goals

- Prioritize transparent and frequent communication to families.
- Increase engagement opportunities between families and between the school and families.
- Create partnerships with other organizations, schools, and businesses.
- Engage alumni to reconnect and use their talents in support of Prairie Hill.
- Engage families in volunteering and social opportunities.
- Expand greater community awareness about Prairie Hill and what it offers.

### Outcomes

- Prairie Hill has a sense of community among children, families, and staff.
- People know about Prairie Hill and the Montessori philosophy.



## Sustainability into the future

Sustaining Prairie Hill for the next 40 years and beyond requires strategic stewardship of our resources—funding, staff, campus, and community—to fulfill our mission. The community wants to see improved operations across the school in areas such as financial stability, planned facility maintenance, stable management structure to support operations, and established processes and procedures.



### Goals

- Ensure Prairie Hill has the funding it needs to be proactive about maintenance and facility needs.
- Diversify annual fundraising efforts.
- Explore scholarships or other ways to increase economic accessibility.
- Establish an endowment fund and corresponding promotion campaign.
- Ensure Prairie Hill has all the staff needed for operational stability, including the administrative structure.
- Create/update clear, streamlined systems and processes to improve accountability.
- Develop/update staff policies and procedures.
- Pay off debts.

### Outcomes

- Improved financial stability.
- Increased funding.
- Appropriate processes are in place to support efficient operations.

## Strategic Planning Process

Over four months in mid-2021, in a series of planning sessions involving numerous stakeholders, Prairie Hill refined a vision for its immediate and longer-term trajectory. A broad climate survey was sent to current families, staff, former families, and camp families. Response rates to the online survey were: 63% for current families, 81% staff, 22% former/alumni families, and 10% summer camp families. In addition, 50 people attended one of the four in-person focus groups for staff, board, and current families that sought to better understand how individuals thought about the future strategy for Prairie Hill.

Thank you to all who shared their feedback and insights to thoughtfully consider Prairie Hill's next 40 years and beyond.



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