

A Letter to Our Neighbor,

My name is Ian Mungall and I am a staff member of Chagrin Valley School at Kelly's Working Well Farm. I was the one who spoke in response to your comments about our school at the Bainbridge Board of Zoning Appeals. Thank you for coming and voicing your concerns. I am writing to more thoroughly address your concerns because your opinion is important to us, as well as maintaining a constructive relationship with our neighbors. I hope you will read this letter with an open mind.

I know that it can be easy to pass judgment on something that is out of the ordinary and is not fully understood. We have a very unique operation, and it takes a lot of explaining of what we do and how it works, even for our own school families sometimes, so we understand your concerns. About our program, we invite people from all walks of life to participate in it. They are young and old, believe in different religions, have different economic and family backgrounds, hold different political views, etc. Our mission is to help create a thriving and resilient local community & economy through education (school, camp & workshops), earth care (permaculture practice), and entrepreneurship (our farm store, events & other business ventures). We believe that in today's world, it is more important now than ever that people from all different backgrounds can find some common ground and build up their community together. We offer the community a connection to the natural world, something that most people, especially our children in today's society, are sorely lacking.

We are not a perfect organization but I can tell you we are improving every day. We are in constant evolution and development, responding to the community's needs, feedback and criticism. This is why we value your opinion and those of our other neighbors and community members. We did not get into this line of work to make money, as there is not much money to be made in agriculture or education anyway. We are passionate individuals working together with our community to build a meaningful place that improves people's lives.

One of your main concerns was safety, and as staff members responsible for these children while they are here, safety is our top priority and is not something we take lightly. We are currently working with the Fire Department and other authorities to improve our safety to their satisfaction. All of our staff have at least a bachelor's degree or more qualifications, as well as background checks. Before a child attends our program, their parents must fill out our extensive enrollment paperwork bundle, which is around 25 pages long and consists of our enrollment contract, medical release form for emergency medical treatment, emergency contacts, permission to take unsupervised trips off campus, dismissal authorization, photo/video release form, etc. In order for students to take an unsupervised trip to downtown Chagrin Falls, or the cemetery across the street, or the pond area of South Franklin Circle, their parents must have completed the permission form which explains the procedure students must follow. They must be of a certain age and with a certain number of other students, must notify a staff member, and

must sign out on a form which includes where they are going and their estimated time of arrival back. This is similar to how Chagrin Falls Intermediate school students can be seen walking around town on their own after school, as the area is very safe and has a very low crime rate. The children like to go to buy lunch, or visit the Popcorn shop, Riverside park, the library, etc.

At the hearing I forgot to address your concern about our ponds. There are two small ponds on our property that are not used for swimming but rather are home to a couple of flocks of ducks that we keep. There are fences around both ponds. During the four years of the school's operations, I can affirm that no students have gone swimming in these ponds, they are quite shallow, muddy and murky, and besides doing some periodic wading and frog catching once they have permission to go within the pond fence, I do not believe any of our students have any desire to go in these duck ponds.

I also forgot to address our staff to student ratio in my response at the hearing. Our outdoor preschool program has six children aged 3-5, and there are two adult preschool staff, so a 1:3 student ratio. As for our school, we have 3 full time staff and one part time staff since our attendance fluctuates during the week. We currently have 30 students enrolled in the school from ages 5-17, and with our four staff members, day to day we range from a 1:3.75 to 1:7.5 staff to student ratio, which is an extremely low ratio for this kind of program.

In regards to South Franklin Circle, our neighbors on the other side of the farm, we have a friendly relationship with their staff and residents. Our school students have been invited to join their activities and we have collaborated with them for different events. As you would imagine, the elderly residents enjoy the presence of joyful children, and we frequently have had residents come to visit our farm campus to see the kids and farm animals. On the day of the Zoning Board hearing, we received a letter of support from Rev. Dr. Joan Brown Campbell, who is an internationally renowned peace and social justice activist, and has worked with the likes of Martin Luther King Jr. and President Clinton, and is a resident of South Franklin Circle. In her letter addressed to the Bainbridge Board of Zoning Appeals & Members of the Board of Trustees, she stated the following:

"We are 10 year residents of South Franklin Circle, neighbors to Kelly's Working Well Farm. We offer our full support and affirm the work of Kelly's Working Well Farm.

We admire the Working Well Farm and especially what they offer to young students and their approach to a different experiential learning experience. It is a unique environment that opens the world of learning to many children who have struggled from time to time with education in more traditional ways.

We urge full support for this meaningful work to continue as we believe it is in the very best interest of the special needs of young people, not only in our community, but also the community at large.

Additionally, we support our community in being known for welcoming this creative educational initiative."

- Rev. Dr. Joan Brown Campbell & Rev. Dr. Albert M. Pennybacker

As for the use of composting toilets, which I agree does sound gross at first, they are in fact used in several local Metroparks, and also used by the National Park Service, the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, the City of New York, Green Builders, Parcs Canada, and state and local parks throughout North America and beyond ([clivusmultrum.com](http://clivusmultrum.com)). Composting toilets eliminate water from the waste stream and prevent the nutrients in human waste from becoming a source of pollution. Flush toilets use 1-7 gallons of drinking water per flush and over 25% of household water goes down the toilet. Municipal waste treatment uses harsh bleaches and toxic chemicals, while composting and grey water recycling put nutrients back in the soil instead of being depleted by industrial treatment. We are trying to have a minimal impact on the environment and demonstrate sustainable lifestyle practices.

Our program is not for everyone, but for our students, it means the world to them and their families. We have students who in other schools had severe depression, anxiety, were bullied, etc. and our program has truly changed their lives, and allowed them to be themselves again. I would encourage you to read the letters of support that we have posted on our website ([chagrinvalleyschool.org/support](http://chagrinvalleyschool.org/support)) from our parents, students and community members. Stress, mental health issues, and suicide are growing epidemics in children today, and providing children a space to be themselves empowers them and gives them joy and meaning. It is much easier to tear something down than to build up, and easy to pass judgement on something one doesn't know much about. Please know that decisions like this, pertaining to the operation of our school, deeply affects the lives of our families and children, so please keep an open mind.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you would like to discuss further or if you have any other questions or concerns. We can be reached via email at [chagrinvalleyschool@gmail.com](mailto:chagrinvalleyschool@gmail.com).

Sincerely,  
Ian Mungall, Head Staff Member

Chagrin Valley School at Kelly's Working Well Farm  
[Chagrinvalleyschool.org](http://Chagrinvalleyschool.org)