

Milton Hershey School Provides Unique Ag Education Opportunities

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HERSHEY, Pa. — If you're a student at the Milton Hershey School, and if you're having a bad day, you can brighten that day with a visit to the goat barn, where you'll be surrounded by baby goats cavorting at your feet and begging for a cuddle.

What works for students works for staff, too, according to Rachel Teller, the school's associate director of agricultural and environmental education. Teller led a small tour recently of the school's farm market, hydroponic greenhouse and goat barn.

The tour was occasioned by an invitation from Tom Mehoffie to Ag Secretary Russell Redding to come to the school for a visit. Mehoffie is a Republican who represents Pennsylvania's 106th legislative district in the state House of Representatives. The school is located in Mehoffie's district.

The Milton Hershey School was founded in 1910 by Milton and Catherine Hershey, who did not have children of their own. The founders' original vision was to provide a home and school for orphaned boys. That mission has changed over the years, and today 51% of the students are girls. The nonprofit Hershey Trust Co. owns and funds the school and has a controlling interest in the Hershey Co.

MHS students live at the school year-round. They and their families pay no tuition, all their living expenses are paid, and the school pays tuition and other expenses for graduates who go on to college or other postsecondary schools. Most of the students do continue their education beyond high school.

Admission to the school is limited to students from lower-income families. New students range in age from 4 to 15 years old, have no serious behavioral issues, and demonstrate the capacity to benefit from the MHS program.

The deed of trust through which the Hersheys founded the school instructs that all students shall be educated in agriculture or horticulture. Students have a choice of 10 career pathways, one of which is agriculture and natural resources. Others include culinary arts, construction/carpentry, automotive technology and computer science. Through the school's career and technology education program, 100% of MHS graduates earn at least one industry-recognized certification for skills that will enable them to join the workforce right out of high school.

Students in the ag career path can earn an OSHA certification, for example, in farm safety.

Most students graduate with more than one certification. The business career path can produce up to nine college credits before a student even graduates from high school. Some of that business learning can begin in the student-run Project Market, which is where the Mehoffie-led tour began.



Photos by Dick Wanner

That hyper-alert little guy is a Toggenburg/Saanen cross. His stubby-eared friend is a Saanen/LaMancha.



Rep. Tom Mehoffie and his new friend.



Rep. Tom Mehoffie interviews junior Kenneth Casey and senior Amelia Usner for his Tom's Tours YouTube series.



Basil from the school's hydroponic greenhouse is a staple offering of the student-run Project Market retail



Featured in a new Tom's Tours about the Milton Hershey School are, from left, students Amelia Usner and Kenneth Casey, Pennsylvania Secretary of Agriculture Russell Redding, Rep. Tom Mehoffie, and students Ashley Landry and James Brewer.

Project Market is a student-run business which markets produce grown — much of it with student labor — on the school's 1,100 acres of farmland. The market also sells ice cream that is produced on campus, flowers and other horticultural products and a few gift items, including soap made from goat milk produced on the farm.

Project Market is open to the general public and staffed by students. To get a Project Market job, a student must submit an online job application, a resume, a letter explaining why he or she wants the job, and a letter of recommendation. That process, according to Rachael Teller, is designed to prepare students for life after school. And it's a process that's required for any on-campus jobs.

Some of the Project Market products are grown in the state-of-the-art hydroponic greenhouse that sits just behind the store. Tomatoes are grown year-round in the greenhouse, strawberries are in the works and fresh basil is a popular offering.

From the greenhouse, the tour group went to visit the goats, which are housed in a former dairy barn. The school has gradually reduced its dairy operation, although it still maintains a few show cows. There's also a small herd of Herefords and an equine program. But there's nothing quite like the goats, especially for Amelia Usner, a senior who plans to go on to college to major in animal science, working her way to becoming a full-time dairy goat farmer.

Usner was one of two students who Mehoffie interviewed for his YouTube video series, Tom's Tours. His other student interviewee was junior Kenneth Casey, who likes to cuddle the kid goats, but has a special place in his heart for the MHS show cows.

Mehoffie closed out the tour by interviewing Teller and Redding, both of whom were firmly attached to two of the 40 or so kids born in the past few days and weeks. Teller called it a "kid explosion."

Redding said he was impressed by the career and educational opportunities offered by the school.

"We have a wonderful piece of history here with the Milton Hershey School," he said, "and there's also a chance to talk about agriculture and food safety. Students here are getting a wonderful education in traditional agriculture as well exposure to livestock, marketing, conservation and ag science. We need to build Pennsylvania's agricultural workforce, and the Milton Hershey School brings it all together."