

Building A Waldorf Community

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From one point of view, parents are the founders of Waldorf schools all over the globe. It is the parents who put their faith and their money into the teachers who would realize the goals of Waldorf education on behalf of their children.

We can ask: To what degree are parents called, like Waldorf teachers, to the co-creation of Waldorf schools? Do schools acknowledge sufficiently that the origin, unfolding, and success of the Waldorf school movement is equally in the hands of parents?

Can we recognize that parents too are “called” into Waldorf communities and that the Waldorf schools can only exist effectively when parents answer that “call”? That their answer to that call may lead not only their child, but their talents, expertise, and insight into the life of the school?

Waldorf schools are communities characterized by parents and teachers united together on behalf of their children – with each person contributing their time, energy, creativity, and resources to meet the needs of the entire community.

Parents are, among other things, a protective membrane around the school organism. Through parents the school has a place in the larger civic community. “Parent education” is a worthy and important activity that the teachers can use to create a deeper understanding of the values and intentions of Waldorf education. But the board, teachers, and administration also need to be educated by the parents: *what they bring into our midst can be no less vital to the unfolding destiny of the school.*

In every Waldorf community recognized or unrecognized examples abound of parents making Waldorf education possible. Parents’ social will, in large and small ways, enables the school to grow – in the legal, civic, political, social, and economic realities where it would take root. Some parents become involved in the parent council, committees, or the board, while others remain on the periphery, contributing independently.

All parents who support Waldorf education are “visionaries” in our contemporary culture. Perhaps a better description for them, as a Shining Mountain Waldorf School (Boulder, CO) parent once shared with me, would be “patrons” – patrons of the “art of education”. It is my experience that the parents recognize the creative abilities and intentions of the teachers. They gather together in groups called “classes” to support the work of the teachers of their children. Without their patronage, the “art of education” would not be funded, and our teachers would be starving artists.

Parents can be very demanding patrons indeed! They often have very high expectations and they often identify problems in the work-in-progress, which is very

annoying to the artist. Teachers tell them, “Come back in a few weeks, and you’ll see how it will develop”. And when things don’t seem to be developing, the parents ask difficult questions and their concerns point to developments that are problematic, even aspects of the school that are painful to face. Who would not admit that much which is problematic in our schools is identified and confronted because of the perception of the parents?

Parents are indeed, among other things, a significant organ of perception within and around our schools. To overlook their view of matters that concern the school is to misuse a vital resource. They have important perceptions to share on almost every aspect of the school’s life – students, classes, and the effectiveness of the teachers, administration, and board. To undervalue parent input in the organization of our schools, to fail to support this significant dialogue in the community in explicit ways, is to undermine the very fabric of our lives.

Can our Waldorf schools be true partnerships between the faculty, board, and parents? What stands in the way? Dialogue with a person is easier than dialogue with an “organization”. Unless parents are willing to “get to know the school” through becoming active, there will be many opportunities for misunderstanding. Overworked teachers, administration, and board, combined with insufficient resources of time and money, don’t allow for many frills. More meetings to this end can be defeating.

What’s the solution? Encouraging parents to become part of the solution through volunteering time, energy, and support to areas where the school *needs* support. Conversely, the board and faculty need to actively support a strong and vigorous parent association or parent council through a clearly mandated role in the school *and* through *their own* active participation in such a parent group.

The more we are able to integrate parents, inwardly and outwardly, into the life of our schools, the more our schools will have the warmth, life, and light, as well as the strength, to grow in vigorous and healthy ways.

In a young school, it is apparent that the school actually consists of one-to-one interpersonal relationships. As a school grows, it becomes more and more difficult for it not to be perceived as an organization. Remembering that organizations are the sum total of relationships between the participants, we can ask: “*How can we keep the form of the school, its organization, transparent to the relationships that are at every moment creating and sustaining it?*”

We need to be clear as a school evolves that each constituency maintains, out of itself and in association with the others, its vital sphere of activity. The various bodies need to encourage, support, and *thank* each other. *Gratitude is the best medicine for the illnesses of our community life. We must never be too busy to find ways to give and receive gratitude.*

When one lives in community, one senses more and more what it means to live on the threshold of the spiritual world. What does this mean, to live on the threshold? It means to experience ever more consciously that we are being “seen”. We are being seen by our colleagues and thereby we see ourselves in a new light. We come to know ourselves as like the others, wrestling with our shortcomings and with our insufficiencies, trying to live up to ideals that are just beyond our grasp. This is the self-knowledge we need to be able to work effectively with students, parents, and our colleagues. Without this sober self-knowledge, we are not yet cognizant that our communities only exist because we are carrying others and, in turn, being carried by others.

With the challenge we face at this critical time in our school movement, it is time to share, as parents, teachers, and board members, how the inner life can support the healthy development of our communities. Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Waldorf education, has given us a verse for cultivating the healthy social life:

The healthy social life is found when,
In the mirror of each human soul
The whole community finds its reflection
And when, in the community,
The virtue of each one is living.

We can use this verse as a touchstone for the intentions of our lives as adults in community. This verse comes alive when it is joined to an inner meditative activity where we learn to picture the others we work with in community.

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This inner picturing of one another can serve to strengthen our communities, creating an atmosphere of warmth and appreciation that will support the uniqueness of each individual in our school community. Active meditative picturing can weave fresh forces of understanding and recognition between soul and soul.

I am not suggesting that this will make our lives or our work on behalf of the students easier or less challenging: this is not our goal. Our goal is to find ways to work together with the help of the spiritual world so that our efforts will be fruitful in the life of each student.

The Waldorf education movement is flowering at this significant time, as we approach the end of the century. And we can see that flowering is not an end in itself. “Bees” are attracted to our Waldorf school “flower”. Our flowering carries with it a cultural deed. It

has been noticed, and will change the lives of our schools and communities. It will bring new challenges and activity.

How well have we integrated our schools into the larger community? Are we too cloistered? Are we known? Are we valued? Have we valued sufficiently our brothers and sisters in private education? Have we become a school that contributes to and benefits the larger community in which we live?

The more we are able to integrate parents, inwardly and outwardly, into the life of our schools, the more our schools will have the warmth, life, and light, as well as the strength, to grow in a healthy way into the next century.



During the 2007-2008 school year, the faculty of Heart To Hand School incorporated the following verse into their weekly business meeting.

A School Verse

Used at Cedar Springs Waldorf School (Placerville, CA)

May we strive together with good will
To form a community
Where the gifts of each one are acknowledged
And where each one does one's best,
That the highest spiritual powers
May help us bring forth a school
Worthy of all children –
That they may learn to live and breathe
In spirit awareness,
Blessing the World with their deeds.