

WECAN Regional Rep/Board Retreat

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The inaugural meeting of WECAN representatives from the North American regions took place at the Lake Champlain Waldorf School in Shelbourne, Vermont, August 16–19. This gathering was funded by grants from the Waldorf Schools Fund and Waldorf Educational Foundation. Representatives were graciously and efficiently supported in all ways by the organization of Sueanne Campbell of the Lake Champlain Waldorf School, and housed in bed-and-breakfasts in the beautiful New England landscape. This gave refreshment to the long days of study and intense discussion of regional issues. The group also reviewed the new tasks WECAN has assumed, in collaboration with AWSNA, to become the oversight body for all Waldorf early childhood programs, even for AWSNA member schools. The first year of this process has shown areas needing attention and revision for the WECAN membership process to be supportive and as easy as possible for members. The diversity of early childhood programs – home, stand-alone preschool/kindergarten, birth-to-three, as well as full school classrooms – calls for flexibility to embrace each one fairly and appropriately.

WECAN also has a unique origin. It began as an association of individuals rather than programs. This special, noninstitutional character is one WECAN wants to honor and preserve as well. WECAN is striving to become more active

on regional levels to be aware and supportive of the unique character and needs of the different geographic areas. A fundamental question now arising within this impulse is how WECAN's members can have more participation in the forming and shaping of programs, policies, and activities. All these questions created a very full agenda for the group of thirteen participants.

Time was taken to “take the pulse” of the movement. Common observations and concerns were echoed by this group as were made in the spring WECAN Board meeting last April, and throughout meetings this last spring in the various regions. Regarding the children, teachers remark:

- *The children are more sensitive, more individualized at earlier ages, perhaps more intellectually awake but less secure in the foundational senses than in years past.*
- *More children are entering the programs with diagnoses or demonstrate behaviors suggesting something in the remedial spectrum.*
- *Children are overstimulated by everything in their environment, even without media. With media influence, it is more severe.*
- *Children are less able to play and lack imagination.*
- *The social “we” of the group is harder to create.*
- *Children hunger for and respond positively to “real” work and activities in the kindergarten environment.*

The children respond well in Waldorf programs when their hunger for authentic life is fed.

Regarding parents, it was observed:

- *Parents are longing for direction and support, but the day of the teacher as “authority” toward the parents has passed. The gesture of “parents as partners” is what is now appropriate.*
- *Parents are fearful for their children’s safety. They used to be concerned that their Waldorf children were being too protected from the “real” world. Now the fear of physical, social, or psychological injury or challenge is dominant.*
- *Tuitions grow higher and higher. Our consumer society views even Waldorf education as a “product.” Parents can be demanding in their expectations.*
- *Effective communication with parents is essential and not easy to achieve. Helping parents to understand and experience the premises and practices of Waldorf early childhood is paramount.*
- *Through the parent-and-tot programs, parents are literally entering the classrooms in a new way. This behooves teachers of traditional early childhood classes to find ways to involve and engage the parents in a satisfying way at these levels as well.*

Looking to ourselves as teachers:

- *Teachers are asking for new tools and insights to help meet the “new” children entering our classrooms.*
- *Teachers are feeling pressure from parents to do things with visible results or to include many activities in each morning. This can cause the teacher to feel stressed and rushed. The leisure of the morning and full opportunity for free play is sometimes sacrificed or compromised.*
- *Financial issues too often influence enrollment numbers in schools. Teachers across the continent observe that smaller groups seem healthier for today’s children. But economic concerns often insist that a teacher accept a group larger than what he or she feels is healthy.*
- *Licensing and legal regulations are extending their influence and requirements further and further into what we are able to do with the children.*
- *Individual teachers report conflicts and strain with colleagues. The social question appears to be our big challenge.*
- *Teacher fatigue remains a concern. Some teachers are leaving schools to create smaller programs where*

the institutional demands are less. Being teacher, record keeper, committee member, and counselor/social worker with families asks for a great deal.

Within the care and education of the child from birth to seven, we now see many approaches — Birth-to-three (RIE/Pikler included in Waldorf programs), LifeWays, home programs, parent-tot classes, nursery/preschool/kindergarten classes within one school, mixed-age kindergarten classes, daycare, and extended care, to name some. A question standing behind all of the above-listed observations is how can all of these be integrated to create a continuously woven fabric for the child’s experience, not a series of fragmented bits?

A great deal of discussion time was also devoted to looking to the WECAN membership categories and processes for attaining membership. Each early childhood program, even those in full-member AWSNA schools, needs to now complete a self-study and have a site visit to affirm full member status. This has seemed redundant for schools that have already undergone an AWSNA accreditation. It has also created a financial and practical hardship for small and home programs. Streamlining of forms and elimination of redundant questions was a practical result of the meeting. A checklist was also devised to make clear the steps for membership application and the order in which these should occur. These should make the application process much easier to step through.

Higher levels of dues for membership categories have proved a hardship for smaller and home programs. Recommendation for dues adjustment was formulated and approved by the WECAN Board. Ways to make site visits financially possible and practical for all programs will also be put into place. Specific details will come in WECAN mailings. For schools, AWSNA visiting teams are asked to include an early childhood representative to satisfy site visit requirements in an efficient and economical way.

In the midst of recognizing problems, it was also gratifying to see a most positive result of regional activity this past year, the regional meetings. These are a consciously designated time for meeting, study, discussion, and sharing among teachers in each regional area. These meetings seemed to satisfy a hunger for contact, and each region has affirmed

that such meetings will happen once, if not twice, each school year. Several are already on the calendar. Where there are large distances separating programs, there is discussion about having subregional gatherings rather than only one central one, to shorten travel distances and make attending more feasible.

Each morning of the retreat began with study of the College of Teachers' Imagination. This imagination helps us to picture our relationship with the spiritual hierarchies and how our interaction with them can help us form a social/spiritual vessel for our work. The participants experienced that this imagination is appropriate for any group, no matter how small, that wants to strengthen its relationship with the spiritual sources of guidance and renewal of Waldorf education. The importance of cultivating a meditative component in this work was deeply experienced by all present. The booklet *Spiritual Insights*, one of the WECAN "Little Series," offers additional verses and meditations from Rudolf Steiner that

can be a rich source for cultivating this part of our teaching practice. This compilation was created as a gift to early childhood educators by Dr. Helmut von Kugelgen, a great friend to Waldorf early childhood education.

The retreat ended with this imagination as well. The participants left feeling renewed and invigorated for the regional work, each affirming her commitment to continue for the next year. The group, hopefully with all regional representatives and board members able to attend, plans to meet again after the International Conference next August in Wilton, New Hampshire.

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