

Waldorf High Schools In The Next Century: The Waldorf High School Research Project

Douglas Gerwin

A New Initiative for Waldorf High Schools

In this decade the number of Waldorf high schools in North America has doubled—from 10 in 1990 to 22 as of this year. A further dozen Waldorf elementary schools are working on starting their own high schools in the next years.

This dramatic growth in the number of high schools highlights the need not only for finding and preparing Waldorf high school teachers but also points to a further question: how are our high schools faring? A group of seven Waldorf teachers with experience in teaching adolescents and administering at the high school level have banded together to initiate research into this question and a host of issues flowing from it.

As a first step, members of this group met over an early morning breakfast during the Kolisko conference in Sacramento last August to form what is now called the “Waldorf High School Research Project.” The full group includes:

Andy Dill, Kimberton, PA
Douglas Gerwin, High Mowing Center for Anthroposophy, NH
Antje Ghaznavi, Toronto/ Pedagogical Section Council, Canada
Hans-Joachim Mattke, Stuttgart, Germany
David Mitchell Boulder, CO/ AWSNA Coordinating Committee
Betty Staley, Sacramento, CA/ Rudolf Steiner College
Connie Starzynski, Chicago/ AWSNA Coordinating Committee

From the beginning it was clear to the group that two major questions face Waldorf high school teachers across the continent:

*A generation of youngsters is entering our high schools with extraordinary capacities but also urgent needs. What are we seeing these days in the physiological, psychological, and spiritual constitutions of our students?

*In response to this new generation, Waldorf high schools in North America are experimenting with innovations in curriculum and social programs. How are these working and how might Waldorf high schools educate adolescents more effectively?

The group agreed to begin tackling these questions while at the same time laying the groundwork for a “colloquium” of high school teachers and other professionals who deal with teenagers (e.g. doctors, therapists, etc.). At this colloquium, which is scheduled to take place in October 2001, invited participants will present the result of their research into recent developments in the life and soul of teenagers, as well as suggestions for renewing the Waldorf high school program.

From Fire to Ice

In follow-up to this initial breakfast session, which took place during the blistering West Coast heat wave of August 1998, the group held its next session on the East Coast at the end of February 1999-the day after a major snow storm. Truly we were experiencing the polar opposites that govern the life of a teenager! Thanks to the generosity (and the central heating) of the Waldorf School of Lexington MA - as well as grants from the Mid-States Region Shared Gifting Group and the Waldorf Schools Fund - the group was able hole up for a weekend of round-table discussion and planning.

The first task was to take up the two overarching questions of the research project; the next to begin formulating more specific topics of research. In addition, the group identified two areas of the curriculum for which Waldorf high schools offer a unique approach: a phenomenological approach to the physical and life sciences, and a symptomatological approach to the social sciences. As a start, the group decided to prepare two working conferences: one focusing on chemistry (to be held on the West Coast at the end of February 2000) and another focusing on history (to be held on the East Coast in mid-March 2000). It is hoped that these working conferences will stimulate new ways of bringing these subjects to students so as to stimulate their powers of thinking, deepen their life of feeling, and stir their will to renew the world for which they are being prepared.

Closing Note

Ultimately, the group is asking: are we being sufficiently effective as high school educators? Are we sufficiently fresh and original in our approach to teaching and counseling? Are we bringing to the youth of today what they need to enter the world of tomorrow? What can we learn from them?

By means of these (and other) questions, the group wishes to stimulate discussion rather than simply supply solutions. Our task, as we see it, is to be provocative, not prescriptive.

We therefore welcome comments and suggestions on any issue relating to adolescents and the life of Waldorf high schools. We warmly invite you to contact any member of the group or write to Douglas Gerwin or Betty Staley, who are serving as co-chairs of this group.

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[Note: The Planning Group of this research project has been designated as an ad hoc committee of the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA)]

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