

# The Community Speaks

## What Waldorf Schools Can Learn from Their Parents

David Sloan

In collaboration with Connie Stokes, Andrew Starzynski, and Douglas Gerwin

**T**his article is part of book-length report based on an extensive Waldorf parents' survey. The full report, a *Research Institute for Waldorf Education* project, will be published later in this school year and will be made available to Waldorf schools throughout North America, as well as to the general public. The report will include the following:

- Parents' assessment of school programs, including the arts, academics, and "values" education
- Questions of governance and school leadership
- Parents' views on schools' handling of diversity
- The "social gap": How do Waldorf students "fit in" beyond the school?
- Waldorf education's impact on home life
- The issue of tuition
- A decade hence: What should Waldorf schools preserve or change?
- A Summary of selected interviews with parents from several North American Waldorf Schools

### History and Methodology

Long before the advent of COVID-19, the desire to give parents a legitimate platform to voice their views about their children's Waldorf education was the driving force behind the survey that served as the basis for this report, the latest in a series of surveys conducted by the Research Institute for Waldorf Education (RIWE) over the past two decades. Beginning in 2005, under the guidance of then co-directors David Mitchell and Douglas Gerwin, the Institute launched a three-phase study that tracked several hundred North American Waldorf school graduates in their post-high school years, first analyzing their college studies, then appraising the quality of their professional and personal lives.

The results of *Phase I* were limited in scope, focusing mostly on the range of colleges and universities, as well as fields of study, to which Waldorf graduates gravitated. A more extensive *Phase II* study, which included a survey of German Waldorf graduates, culminated in the creation of a statistical profile of a "typical" North American Waldorf graduate. *Phase III* provided further interpretation of the prior survey results, pointedly adding concerns some graduates expressed about

certain shortcomings they experienced during their Waldorf education.

A decade later, RIWE invited North American Waldorf high schools to take part in the most extensive, continental survey to date, with a target group of Waldorf alumni who had graduated between 1990 and 2017. A singular feature of this study was the invaluable collaboration between the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA) and the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS). This partnership enabled RIWE to compare—for the first time ever—responses from Waldorf alumni with graduates from other independent schools. The outcome of this significant research was assiduously compiled in a recent book co-authored by Ilan Safit, Ph.D., and Douglas Gerwin, Ph.D., aided by Connie Stokes, M.S., and Andrew Starzynski, M.S., entitled *Into the World: How Waldorf Graduates Fare after High School* (Waldorf Publications, 2020).

A final prologue to the current report occurred after the initial outbreak of the COVID pandemic in 2020. In the fall of that year, once again RIWE sent a survey out, but this time, instead of addressing alumni, we invited parents of current Waldorf school students to share their perspectives about the effects of the COVID-19 outbreak on family life, as well as about the way Waldorf schools adapted to the challenges created by the pandemic. The results of that survey were summarized in an article by David Sloan in the Spring/Summer 2021 issue of the *Research Bulletin* entitled "Parental Perspectives: Waldorf Families on Schooling during the Pandemic."

The present report offers an in-depth look at RIWE's most recent efforts to provide as complete a portrait as possible of parents' views about their children's Waldorf experience. The survey was sent in January of 2022 to participating Waldorf schools across the United States and Canada, inviting current parents of elementary and high school students enrolled in grades 1-12 to respond to the approximately 50 questions. (We should note that we didn't survey individuals who had left their Waldorf community, mostly due to the difficulty in contacting such parents.) The survey covered a broad range of topics, including:

- what initially drew families to Waldorf education

- parental assessments of various school programs
- what aspects of the education they wanted to see changed (or preserved) ten years hence
- how parents viewed schools' efforts to address questions of inclusion, diversity, equity and access.
- to what extent parents felt the impact of Waldorf education on home life
- further consideration of schools' responses to the COVID pandemic

The survey elicited over 1200 responses from parents representing 39 Waldorf school communities across North America. The average response time was just over 25 minutes, and seven in ten participants who started the survey fully completed it. While the majority of questions provided the basis for purely statistical analysis, a number of questions also invited parents to write clarifying narrative responses. To supplement these statistical and narrative results of the survey, we also conducted a limited number of follow-up, face-to-face and virtual interviews with a cross-section of parents from various geographical regions. So beyond simply providing schools and respondents with raw data, the intent of this report is to share a comprehensive, in-depth examination of those sometimes wildly divergent parental perspectives of their children's (and their own) Waldorf experiences.

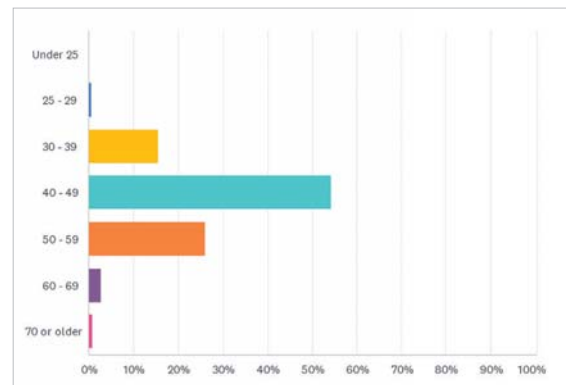
### Who Are These Parents? A Group "Portrait"

Because of Waldorf schools' century-old ethos of offering holistic, experiential education, it was tempting in the past to brand Waldorf parents as counter-cultural, "granola-crunching," Birkenstock-wearing ex-hippies. Indeed, the rapid expansion of Waldorf schools in the last third of the twentieth century was no doubt fueled, in part, by families looking for progressive alternatives to mainstream education. However, as with all independent academic institutions, Waldorf schools are tuition-based (the notable exception being an increasing number of state-funded public Waldorf schools and "Waldorf-inspired" charter initiatives). As the cost of private education has risen sharply in the past few decades, a competing, but also partially misleading stereotype has arisen, portraying Waldorf parents as privileged, affluent, and elitist. While these stereotypes may have contained a "granola" of truth at some point, our survey was more interested in gathering data that painted a "portrait" free of any prejudicial labels.

Not surprisingly, we found that the ages of the vast majority of respondents fell into one of three primary child-rearing stages. 16% identified as being between

30-39, just more than half between 40-49, and another quarter between 50-59, with a tiny percentage (just over 1%) reporting their relationships to their children as non-parental, i.e., either grandparents or legal guardians.

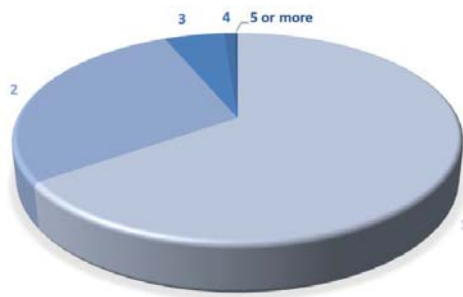
### Ages of Respondents



Given the 30-year-plus span of respondents' ages, it was also predictable to find among parents a broad and proportionately distributed range of years that they had been affiliated with their particular Waldorf school. Nearly half had been members of their school community for between one and five years; another third had kept their children in the school for between six and ten years; the remaining 20% had committed to long-term association with Waldorf education, from 11 to more than 15 years. Nearly two thirds of the respondents had only one child attending the school, and another 28% had two children enrolled.

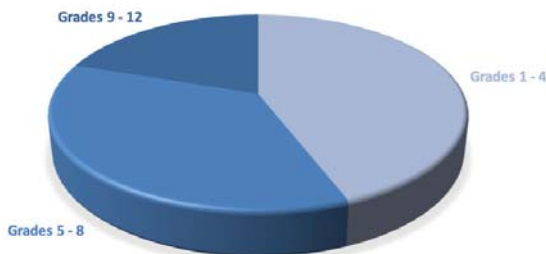


**NUMBER OF CHILDREN CURRENTLY IN A WALDORF SCHOOL**



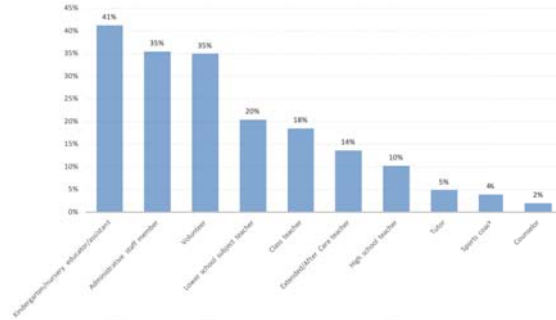
Because seven in ten respondents were under the age of 50, it stands to reason that the majority of respondents would have younger children. Just under half of respondents (45%) stated their oldest was in Grades 1–4 while another third had their oldest in Grades 5–8, leaving about 20% of respondents with a child in high school. It should be noted that the question only asked about current children, so respondents could have children who already graduated.

**HIGHEST GRADE COMPLETED BY OLDEST CHILD CURRENTLY ATTENDING**



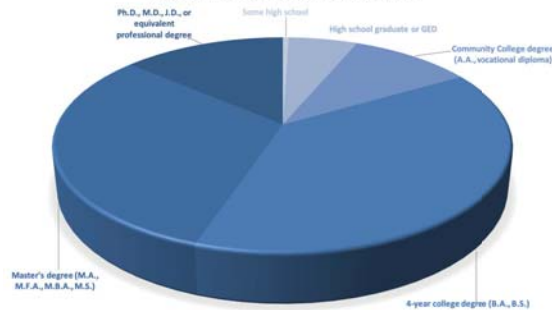
Over 20% of the survey participants answered yes to the question, “Have you ever worked at a Waldorf school?” Their involvement in school life extended well beyond parenting. They engaged in a variety of roles, fairly equally divided between assisting with nursery/ kindergarten/aftercare responsibilities and teaching in one capacity or another, either in the elementary or high school branches. Over a third of those who acknowledged working in their schools held administrative staff positions, and another third signed on as volunteers, helping in a variety of roles, such as building playhouses, serving as Board members, or cleaning the school after hours. Nearly one in ten parents employed by their schools worked as tutors or athletic coaches.

**Positions Held in a Waldorf School**



The survey addressed several other key demographic indicators, including highest level of education completed by parents and annual household income. The former question revealed a clear pattern; a large majority of Waldorf parents who responded to the survey were highly educated. Well over a third of the respondents were graduates of four-year colleges, and nearly another third had earned master’s degrees. Furthermore, another 13% had attained either Ph.D., M.D., J.D. or equivalent professional degrees. Thus, over five in six respondents to the survey had at least a four-year college degree.

**HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION COMPLETED**

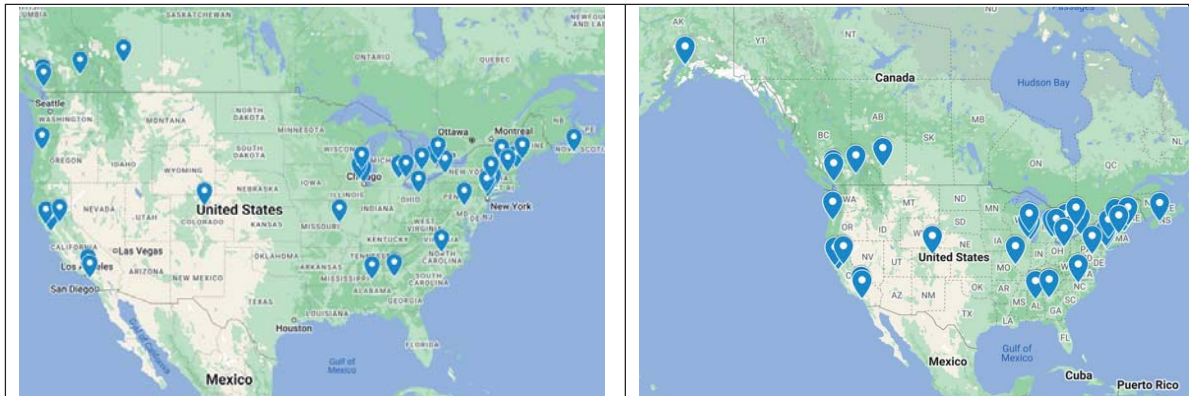


Such a highly educated clientele may account for the nearly 80% of respondents who reported having some prior knowledge of the connection between their school and the basic principles of Waldorf education as espoused by founder Rudolf Steiner.

As for parents’ financial situations, Waldorf families appeared to possess greater ability to pay school tuition than the general population. While a third of respondents stated that their annual household income was less than \$100,000, twice as many American families in the general population fell into that same category in 2020 (Source: *IbisWorld, Statista, according to policyadvice.net*). Slightly smaller discrepancies between Waldorf household earnings and the American public at large occurred at the next two income levels; 38% of Waldorf families reported incomes in the

\$100,000-\$200,000 range, but only a quarter of the general population qualified for that tier in 2019. At the upper end of the scale, about 10% of American families earned over \$200,000, while for the respondents of this survey, 28% claimed to have annual income over \$200,000.

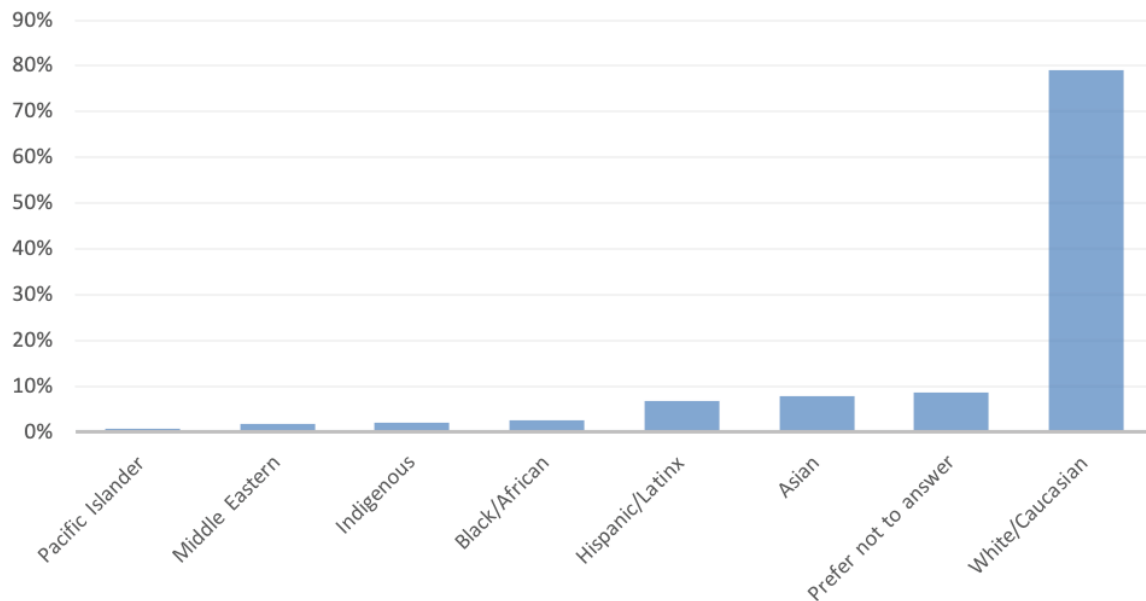
It should be noted that Waldorf Schools are often found in affluent areas, and thus comparing incomes of Waldorf parents to that of the general population does not tell the whole tale. The schools with the greatest number of respondents to this survey can be seen in the following maps (with and without Alaska):



Two other questions in the “profile” section of the survey elicited strong adverse reactions in some quarters to even being asked about ethnic background and gender. The former question revealed that an overwhelming majority – 80% – of respondents identified as Caucasian, nearly 8% as Asian, 7% as Hispanic, upwards of 3% as Black/African and 2% as indigenous. However,

about one in 11 parents preferred not to answer the question at all, and several others pointedly expressed their displeasure in writing. One retorted, “Racist question. I’m a human being. Like you.” Another replied, “You want inclusion. How about just one selection: HUMAN BEING. World problem solved!”

### Which of the following best describes you?



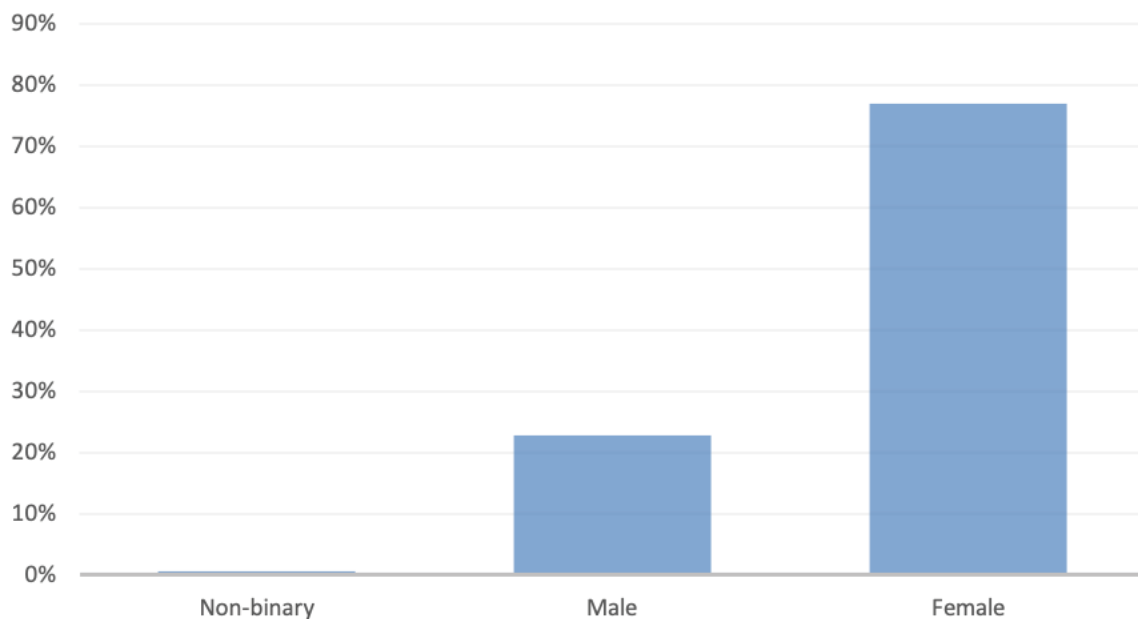
The other question—inquiring about gender identification—drew sharp rebukes from a small but indignant handful of respondents. Reacting to the addition of “non-binary” as one of the choices, one person stated, “B.S. question. What the . . . is non-binary? What utter crap.” Another explained,

The concept of gender fluidity ... falls under the umbrella of “woke-ism” Waldorf schools are well-advised to stay away from. You do not solve the

limitations and experience of being “boxed in” by a category by creating more categories. That is not the path. Telling teenagers during the most confusing time of their lives that they can solve inner tension by changing their exterior is not only not helpful; it’s immoral.

Only a tiny percentage of those surveyed chose to identify as non-binary (.57%), while just over 3/4 of the respondents selected the “female” option.

### How do you identify?



To summarize: A substantial majority of the respondents were in their 30s and 40s, and identified as Caucasian, although 20% identified as people of color. Three times as many women as men took the survey. Many of the parents had attended college, and nearly half had advanced degrees. Most families had one or two children enrolled in their Waldorf school, and the parents had usually been associated with the school for up to a decade. Some had become more involved in the life of the school beyond parenting. One in five had taken on some work—volunteer or paid—within the school. At every income level, Waldorf families reported greater annual earnings as the general populace.

One other telling measure of this group’s involvement in their children’s Waldorf education was the exceedingly high number of respondents (95%) who reported attending at least some school-sponsored parent evenings during the course of the year. While surveys such as this one can afford parents an “anonymous” option

for sharing their views about Waldorf education, parent evenings at individual schools can provide a much more direct forum for parents to ask questions and express concerns, as well as their appreciation, and for faculty members to respond accordingly.

### Warming to Waldorf

#### What Draws Parents to the Schools?

One of the key questions that parents often hear when they first contact admissions offices across the continent is: How did you hear about Waldorf? So often the answer can be traced to some word-of-mouth connection. In the survey, 2/3 of the respondents attributed their initial interest to conversations with friends, or else prior exposure to the education, either directly as alumni themselves, or indirectly through family members who worked in or attended Waldorf schools. One person wrote that “I went to Waldorf school, and it was important to me that my children attend too.” Another

29% claimed to have researched Waldorf education via the internet. One of these respondents wrote: “I did my own research and fell in love with Steiner’s teachings.”

While only a tiny percentage of parents heard or read about Waldorf through radio, print or other media sources (2%), a slightly larger number cited their family’s geographical proximity to the local Waldorf school as a motivating factor. Still others discovered Waldorf education in more incidental ways: through biodynamic gardening, parenting books, farmers’ markets. One parent even declared that a bumper sticker piqued her interest. Finally, several respondents ascribed their introduction to Waldorf education to referrals from therapists. As one parent explained:

Our adoption psychologist suggested we consider the Waldorf model as she believed it would be ideal for our child’s attachment and trauma issues, both because it’s a fundamentally nurturing environment where children have a lot of respect and freedom, and because of the way teachers move with children through the years.

Once parents made the decision to visit the school for a first encounter, we were interested in gathering initial impressions. The overwhelming parental reaction was positive, with many respondents moved to commend the physical setting of the campus. One parent related, “I was drawn to the natural beauty of the school and the surrounding areas. I felt peaceful and as if there was space and time to absorb the beauty.” Others extolled the integration of outdoor and indoor spaces. “I liked the stained glass and homey atmosphere of the classroom and the way that trees and nature were visible through the windows, which let in plenty of natural light. We were drawn to the nature- and art-based curriculum.”

Parents were nearly unanimous in their enthusiasm for the décor and ambience of the classrooms. Repeatedly they described the spaces as “magical,” “welcoming,” and “inviting.” One wrote, “In love! The vintage napkins and birch branches of the nursery captured my imagination. It was like walking into another, imaginary world where children are seen and valued and the past is honored.”

Many respondents noticed how the complementary environs of the younger children’s classrooms and outdoor spaces seemed to encourage lively and harmonious activities. “It left a lasting impression of soft pastel, colorful walls, the welcoming smell of fresh

bread baking, delightful, seasonal displays of felt animals, and the sounds of recorders, jump roping and harmonic singing wafting through the halls.” One parent pinpointed the prevailing mood they found as one of “joy... The children weren’t screaming and running around like crazy, except in the play yard. It was wonderful!” Yet another respondent expressed their takeaway of the visit in more personal terms: “I loved it instantly, everything from the wooded nature campus to the natural light and materials found in the classroom. I wished I had attended a Waldorf school.”

A number of parents shared this parent’s wistfulness about their own missed educational opportunities as children. Some were nearly overcome with emotion when they first visited their future school.

It was like I came home. It was breathtaking. It felt so inspiring... I literally cried watching the children in a math class and the way they were learning in an environment of art and beauty. I felt it a loss that I had never had the opportunity to have that experience as a child.

A significant number of parents described similar experiences during their visits, where their own feelings and almost visceral responses may well have influenced their decision to enroll their children in a Waldorf setting. “I was happy and felt a sweetness in my heart seeing the Waldorf aesthetic.” Another stated emphatically:

It felt that THIS is what education is supposed to be like. I knew that the mainstream way was not right. I could FEEL it. I knew that honoring the young child, their play and creativity was right. I knew that making school academic at a young age was wrong.

Yet another respondent wrote, “When I first walked into Waldorf and took the tour, I found myself in tears because I had found a home for my child and my family.”

The above comment summed up two of the most appealing features that apparently affected parents deeply when first visiting a Waldorf school—“feeling like home” on the one hand, and “community” on the other. When we asked respondents to think of three adjectives that characterized Waldorf education, several of the most popular words evoked this “homey” feeling, among them: “nurturing,” “warm,” and “loving.” The idea of “community” was another top ten choice, which found its way into several narrative comments.

### Two other questions in the “profile” section of the survey elicited strong adverse reactions in some quarters to even being asked about ethnic background and gender.

We have raised many children and have experienced all manner of scholastic environments. The vibe was different. In most schools, you sense an authoritarian barrier of sorts between teachers and parents. At Waldorf you get the sense we're in this together for the best interests of the individual child.

For other respondents, what surprised them was what they *didn't* find in Waldorf classrooms. "This is the kind of school I wish I could have attended. I was impressed with the emphasis on the internalization of concepts via handwork, painting, movement, etc. And I loved that the rooms weren't crowded with noisy messages on the wall like rules, posters, directions, inspiring quotes, etc."

For parents coming from public schools, the contrast with the Waldorf "aesthetic" was especially stark. "I was amazed at the calm atmosphere—no visual clutter. It felt like a home environment." Yet another parent expressed an even more extreme feeling: "It appears to be a children's utopia. I cried with relief when I dropped off my daughter as we felt like we were refugees from public school."

Not all interested parents came from public school systems. One parent stated that the Waldorf school tour

reminded me of my own childhood when we followed a Classical education model.... I appreciated the lack of technology and the natural materials. Our girls had begun to experience tremendous stress and anxiety in their high performing, high pressure, language immersion school and the space felt peaceful and beautiful to them.

Although most of the respondents described their visits to early childhood or early grades programs, some parents recounted persuasive interactions with older students. One parent was impressed by "eighth graders that looked you in the eye and engaged with you." Another respondent related that the older students were "very impressive; they seemed well-grounded and articulate." Summing up a perception shared by several other parents, one wrote, "I encountered high schoolers outside for the first time, and after spending a few afternoons with them, I thought about how I would want my own children to grow up to be in the world in the same way."

It should be mentioned that not all parents' first impressions of their Waldorf school were favorable. One was "worried it was a little insular, as the school

was so small." Several other respondents commented that they had to overcome a sense that the school felt "Euro-centric; not enough diversity to reflect the changing culture of our society." This view was echoed by another parent, who wrote, "I thought it was a bit of a throwback and somewhat out of step with the current needs of students." Several respondents also shared the perception that the school was "cozy but [had a] hippie feel." One went so far as to describe the school as "cult-like; made me nervous."

Yet we need to note that all respondents who took the time to answer the survey questions ultimately joined

a Waldorf community. So even those with some misgivings after their initial visits must have experienced enough countervailing features to offset their concerns.

Aside from the few critical comments quoted above, the vast majority of parents who sent their child(ren) to a Waldorf school could trace their decisions to their

own positive experiences during those initial visits. Of the nearly one thousand respondents who answered the question, "What made you decide to put your child(ren) in a Waldorf school?" many of their reasons related directly to the age of their child(ren). Parents of younger children repeatedly extolled the sheltering, nurturing environment of the nursery/kindergarten and early grades programs. "They had a safe, in-person option where our daughter could spend most of her day outside, her artistic skills would be fostered, and she'd be in an atmosphere of play-based learning."

A considerable number of parents echoed this strong intention to have their children spend as much time as possible in the outdoors, communing with nature. "It was the relaxed, outdoorsy place I was searching for... The reason I decided to send my daughter there was the setting and the fact they weren't afraid to let the kids explore the stream and climb the hills." Many other respondents reiterated the appeal of "the outdoor focus and learning in accordance with the natural world."

Another related rationale, often cited by parents as a crucial determining factor in choosing Waldorf education, was their school's policy regarding technology. For decades, Waldorf schools have been cautious about employing electronic devices in the classroom, preferring what might today be termed "old-fashioned" pedagogical methods: teaching cursive writing rather than keyboarding in the early grades, using chalkboard drawings rather than screen images to accompany

**Three times as many women as men took the survey. Many of the parents had attended college, and nearly half had advanced degrees.**

storytelling, encouraging older students to engage in spirited discussions and to practice critical inquiry without the intervention of computers.

Since most other educational systems now rely heavily on electronic media, Waldorf parents repeatedly lauded their schools for limiting their children's screen exposure. "Waldorf is no/low media and recognizes that young children need nature, activity and hands-on work, not screen time." One respondent contrasted Waldorf classrooms with "the noise and superficiality prevailing in mainstream schools; children pitted against each other and treated like miniature adults... the oversaturation with media and technology." Another saw the schools' media policies as integral to some of the defining values of Waldorf education. "Waldorf keeps tech at bay. I agree with its emphasis on play, learning in time, being outdoors, attention to each child, following the seasons, tradition in song and dance and craft."

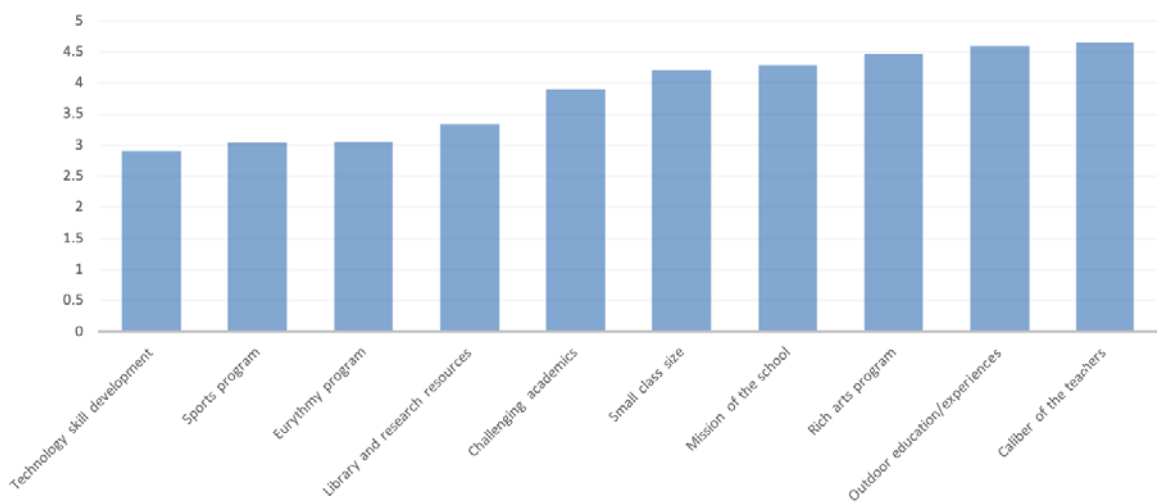
In general, parents seemed to associate the prevalence of computers in schools with added stress, over-emphasis on academics (particularly in the early grades), and an unhealthy acceleration of childhood. They chose

Waldorf education because they recognized "the commitment to working with a child at the appropriate stage and cultivating a long-term view of education, not rushing the development." Another respondent explained that they

wanted an environment for our children to spend as much time outside and in nature as possible. We wanted their school environment to foster an appreciation for the seasons, and to move at a slow enough pace to absorb each day, week, and month and all that time encompasses.

This viewpoint was reinforced by parent responses to another question asking them to rank the most important factors in "making your decision to choose a Waldorf school (5 being very important, 1 being not important at all)." Of ten possible considerations—including challenging academics and rich arts and sports programs—technological skill development earned the lowest rating (2.9 out of 5 weighted average), while the caliber of teacher (4.64), outdoor education/experiences (4.59) arts curriculum (4.46) and the "mission of the school" (4.29) all drew the highest ratings.

The value of any independent school education comprises academics, the arts, and school experiences. Please rate the following in level of importance to you in making your decision to choose a Waldorf school (5 being very important; 1 being not important)





One parent summed up sentiments of many respondents by connecting several related factors in opting for a Waldorf school:

Lack of technology in the early years; sense of peace and calm; rhythm to the day/week/year. Kids seemed calm and happy and creative . . . Lots of outdoor time in any weather. No rote memorization, no boring worksheets. Holistic education.

This last point about “holistic education” was another widely shared reason that many parents chose to send their child(ren) to a Waldorf school and a clear acknowledgement of Waldorf schools’ most widely promulgated mission. Nearly a century before the phrase “Head, Heart, and Hands,” or some variant of it, became a slogan adopted by a number of mainstream schools, Rudolf Steiner had emphasized a fundamental threefold approach to child development, educating the feeling and the will in equal measure to the thinking. A respondent wrote: “The focus on the whole child in a Waldorf school is what keeps us coming back.” Another respondent expressed a similar, but more expansive view:

I decided to put my son in a Waldorf school because the approach to child development and learning was holistic and follows my values as a parent. I love that there are foundational skills taught in a unique way, which is the focus in early childhood instead of traditional academics. I wanted a place where my child felt inspired to learn, not pressured to learn.

This parental emphasis on a child’s positive relationship to learning was widely shared by other respondents. “The examples of children who came from Waldorf education showed such kindness and critical thinking. They were not bored at school, and genuinely loved learning.” Another applauded this aspect of Waldorf “education that spoke to children’s hearts, not just their minds; that encouraged thoughtfulness and care, that prized beauty and creativity, art and music, movement and delight as necessary elements of learning.” Yet another parent touted the transformation their child had experienced since shifting educational settings.

We started in a public school, which seemed lovely. The Waldorf school was my first choice, but the distance and cost were perceived barriers. But when my child came home after weeks of crying that he hated learning, we went to Waldorf. Within a

Others discovered Waldorf education in more incidental ways: through biodynamic gardening, parenting books, farmers’ markets. One parent even declared that a bumper sticker piqued her interest.

week he said the world was so beautiful . . . I went on to study child development . . . and learned he was not neurologically ready for the demands of the [public] curriculum. He has thrived in Waldorf and its multimodal, multi-sensory approach that has retained his sense of wonder and passion for learning.

Since their inception over a century ago, Waldorf schools have promoted an experiential and balanced program, with art, crafts, music, and movement classes integral to the academic curriculum. Parents appreciated not only the hands-on aspect of the arts and crafts, but also the concomitant fostering of imaginative capacities associated with such activities. “I’ve seen children change, becoming less creative over the years... I wanted my children to keep the spark of creativity

as long as possible.” Another respondent reflected the viewpoint of many parents: “I wanted my children to have an educational experience that incorporated arts and music throughout the curriculum and gave them confidence to be creative and innovative in their lives.” Parents of children with artistic sensibilities seemed particularly drawn to Waldorf education:

Our child was always quiet, introverted, sensitive and creative; we wanted to help cultivate her passions and confidence and not have her close up. We visited our Waldorf school and didn’t want to leave—so engaging and peaceful and colorful. We loved their thoughtful and artistic/musical approach and hands-on activities. As a former public school teacher, I was impressed.

In addition to the most prominent, aforementioned reasons for choosing Waldorf, parents repeatedly listed these grounds for their decision:

- the sheltering gesture of the early childhood years
- emphasis on outdoor activities and appreciation of nature
- low- or no-technology policies
- slower, age-appropriate pace of learning
- holistic approach integrating arts, crafts, music, and movement
- the fostering of imagination and creative capacities

Parents cited several other significant determining factors for choosing Waldorf schools. They included the following:

- **Smaller class size** than mainstream institutions.
- **Emphasis on movement:** “I wanted my child to be able to move and to learn without having to sit in a class all day with creative pent-up energy”
- **Caring, devoted teachers:** “We wanted a place that addressed the children as individuals and that honored childhood.”  
“One of the biggest pieces was the respect the teachers showed to the children; not just love or enjoyment of them, but true respect and belief in them and their abilities.”
- **Health-promoting lifestyle:** One parent candidly admitted, “Honestly, it was the food! I was mortified at the idea of sending my son into a school setting where the children were being fed Kool-Aid and animal crackers for snack.”

Two final inducements attracting parents to Waldorf schools deserve mention; both had to do with less expressly academic, or even artistic, considerations. The first focused on the “character building” element of the education, and the second affirmed the “spiritual” basis of Waldorf education.

Implicit in the “head, heart, hands” catchphrase that Waldorf schools promote as central to their mission is the idea that soul qualities are as important to cultivate as intellectual capacities. As early as the nursery-kindergarten the children are learning the values of sharing when they play, of patience when they must wait for the bread that they have helped to knead to bake in the oven, of goodness and kindness when they experience archetypal puppet shows such as *Queen Bee*. Indeed, storytelling becomes a primary vehicle for the “schooling of the soul,” from the fairy tales, fables, Bible stories and Norse myths related in the elementary school to the more adult “fairy tales” that high school students study.

The values embedded in these epics and contemporary stories students read can have a character-shaping influence. The self-restraint that Odysseus must develop in the face of his many trials, the authenticity that Hamlet is desperate to realize in the face of pervasive treachery, the transformation Malcolm X experiences as his world-view becomes more inclusive and accepting toward the end of his life—these qualities can all work deeply into young people’s souls.

**“The consumerism, media, over-stimulated culture of other children and parents drove me away from other schools, while the enlightened, meditative approach to learning, with such love and joy, drew me to Waldorf education.”**

Parents responding to the survey repeatedly recognized this essential character-building feature of Waldorf education:

- “We wanted our child to have a moral education with strong social ties and less media influences.”
- “This method of learning helps children become compassionate human beings.”
- “It’s important to me that my child develop not just academically/intellectually, but as a human being in society. Soft skills required for the future workforce include emotional intelligence, collaboration, exceptional communication skills.”
- We want children who learn to be kind above all else. We want well-rounded children who can think critically, have love and empathy, and who learn a variety of real world, practical skills (e.g. gardening, handwork, music, languages, love and respect of nature, baking cooking, etc.) We also want children who love to learn.
- “I heard about an ethics study that found that people who scored the highest in ethical decision-making all attended a Waldorf school.”

The second, more esoteric reason drawing parents to Waldorf schools underscored the spiritual underpinnings of the education. Several years ago, leaders of the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA) identified and adopted seven core principles that “articulate the most important values that inform the policies and practices of Waldorf schools in North America.” The very first of these principles states: “*The image of the human being as a spiritual being informs every aspect of the school.*”

Numerous respondents alluded to this foundational tenet in their surveys. One wrote: “The spiritual aspect of Waldorf is aligned with our family’s spirituality in a way I have not found in other schools.” A former Montessori teacher wrote, “I learned about the Steiner way and knew it had to be the choice, as it has so much basis in spiritual/inner development for the child, and that is a huge priority for us.”

Perhaps the comment summarizing the various rationales for sending children to Waldorf school should go to a self-identified college professor who wrote:

I am increasingly horrified by the anxiety and generally poor preparation of my students for life,

to say nothing of their stance toward learning, education, and community. Waldorf students (and teachers and parents) are impressive; they are engaging and creative, thoughtful and kind. The consumerism, media, over-stimulated culture of other children and parents drove me away from other schools, while the enlightened, meditative approach to learning, with such love and joy, drew me to Waldorf education.

Ultimately, parents who chose to send their children to Waldorf schools appeared to support Waldorf teachers' mission to take up with the utmost earnestness Steiner's vision of "lifelong" education. While respondents appreciated the preparation their children received to meet life's near-term endeavors, parents also honored the vision of those strivings extending far beyond college and the workplace. They expected their children to learn the requisite academic skills as necessary building blocks for future education. However, Waldorf parents also looked to the schools to deepen and refine their child's or children's character, in the hope that such guidance might give meaning and direction to their entire lives, strengthening the inner resources essential for coping with the frustration, disappointment, and challenges that life inevitably presents.

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