

# How Waldorf Alumni Fare After Graduating from High School

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**I**n June 1943, the first Waldorf alumni of the North American continent graduated from High Mowing School, a four-year boarding and day school in New Hampshire that had opened its doors the previous September. Since then, some 15,000 students have graduated from Waldorf high schools sprinkled across North America – from Quebec to Georgia along the Atlantic East Coast, from British Columbia to California and Hawaii in the Pacific West, and from sea to shining sea across the continent.

As of this year, out of the roughly 120 Waldorf schools belonging to the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA), some 40—or about a third—include the high school grades. Of these schools, five are free-standing educational institutions; the remaining 35 are linked to an elementary Waldorf school, including one in a Camphill community for the handicapped. In addition, there is a small number of public high schools in California belonging to the Alliance for Public Waldorf Education.

For the purpose of the latest survey, which like the previous one a decade ago was conducted by the Research Institute for Waldorf Education, a “graduate” was defined as a student who had completed 12<sup>th</sup> grade in a Waldorf high school, and the study limited its purview to those who graduated between 1990 and 2017. Nearly half of those who responded to the survey’s online questionnaire were so-called “Waldorf lifers” — i.e., graduates who had attended all 12 years of Waldorf elementary and high school.

Generalizations about education—including this one—are always dangerous, and never more so when describing Waldorf graduates, who by nature represent a very broad spectrum of backgrounds and destinies. That said, RIWE collated their online responses to form a statistical portrait of shared traits suggesting that Waldorf graduates:

- Attend college after high school (98%), of those about a quarter first have a “gap year”

- Feel prepared by their Waldorf high school for college life (95%)
- Complete their initial college degree (92%)
- Earn a bachelor’s degree or higher (88%)
- Say they would recommend Waldorf education to a friend or family member (87%)
- Report that their Waldorf education has influenced their own parenting (85%)
- Study or work in fields of science and technology at similar or higher rates than students from other independent schools
- Feel more strongly, when compared to students from other independent schools, that their education prepared them to:
  - Be open minded
  - Be creative and innovative
  - Empathize with others
  - Think in whole pictures
  - Take leadership roles
  - Develop a meaningful perspective on life

Although Waldorf students have the possibility to pursue unusual post-high-school options related to their education, over 90 percent of Waldorf graduates responding to the survey chose to complete an undergraduate degree, and about half of those who graduated pursued post-graduate studies of some kind.

Overall, more Waldorf graduates major in the sciences, including social sciences, and math (45%) than in the humanities (38%). This statistic dispels the myth that Waldorf alumni shy away from majoring in science and math at the college level. Though some graduates were sharply critical of their math and science skills coming out of high school, a great number of respondents, including the critical ones, reported that their study of science and math in high school stimulated their interest in these subjects; they also often commented that

their Waldorf education prepared them well for taking on the challenge of improving their skills and excelling in these areas. One graduate reported: “I understood science metaphorically. We were given everything we needed to know. Then we had to figure things out for ourselves.”

Another remarked: “I am now taking a biology class and I thought I was going to be terrible at this. I haven’t taken science since high school. Now I am so excited about it. It is just a matter of figuring things out . . . I didn’t like the sciences as much as I liked literature. But now I love science and I am thinking back on my zoology class in high school.”

A trend already apparent in a previous alumni survey ten years ago is confirmed by the latest poll: namely, that more recently graduated Waldorf students are majoring at higher rates in science, technology, engineering, and math—the so-called “STEM” subjects—than earlier Waldorf alumni. The following chart illustrates this trend.

<b>WALDORF SCIENCE MAJORS ON THE RISE</b>	
Percentage of STEM majors (1943-1994)	12%
Percentage of STEM majors (1990-2010)	17%
Percentage of STEM majors (2011-2017)	22%

In short, in recent years, Waldorf graduates take up STEM subjects at virtually the same rate as alumni from other independent schools, of whom 23% major in STEM, according to a recent survey conducted by the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS).

Indeed, Waldorf graduates at home and abroad have received major awards in the sciences; most recently the German neuroscientist Thomas Südhof, a Waldorf graduate and now professor at Stanford University, was awarded the Nobel prize for his work in cellular biology. (For examples of celebrated Waldorf graduates worldwide in many walks of life, readers are invited to visit the website [www.thewaldorfs.waldorf.net](http://www.thewaldorfs.waldorf.net).)

In terms of career, the most popular fields for Waldorf graduates include education (23%), medicine and health care (12%), and various fields of artistic practice (12%). As a whole, 41% of graduates take up professions that are devoted to helping others. These numbers are markedly higher than the percentage of graduates entering such fields from other independent high schools

in the United States, according to the NAIS study. Careers with lower-than-average appeal for Waldorf graduates include finance (about half the national average) and retail (only one-fifth of the national average). Careers involving entrepreneurship draw about the same percentage of Waldorf alumni as graduates from the general population.

### **Alumni Outreach and the Need for Better Communication**

The clearest statistical difference between the Waldorf and NAIS groups concerns alumni philanthropy. A third of longtime graduates from NAIS schools say they contribute to their school’s annual fund, while only half of that portion—15.6%—among longtime Waldorf alumni say the same. And while it is understandable that recent, college-aged graduates are not in a position to make financial contributions, which explains to a certain extent why only 5.7% of recent Waldorf alumni say they contribute to their school’s annual fund, nearly four times as many NAIS alumni, 19.5%, of the same age are already making monetary gifts to their former school.

Given the general gratitude and fondness to their school expressed by most Waldorf graduates participating in the survey, it does not seem that the dramatically lower number of Waldorf alumni making contributions to their school is explained by lack of appreciation or unwillingness to donate. And while dozens of alumni write that they currently have absolutely no financial capacity to make any donations, it seems that there are additional grounds for the difference between NAIS and Waldorf alumni giving. These appear to include an established culture of alumni giving systematically cultivated by NAIS schools through regular outreach and ongoing communication, a practice that appears to be the norm in other independent schools in a way that it is not in Waldorf schools.

Several sets of responses collected in the survey support this impression. Most clearly, when asked when they were last asked to give money to their school, a quarter of the Waldorf alumni said they could not recall, while 14% believed they had never been asked. And while 54% said they had been asked to make a donation within the past year, the number was 76% among NAIS post-college alumni, only 2.2% of whom believed they had never been asked for money.

Furthermore, it is not that Waldorf alumni are averse to making philanthropic contributions, or that none of them is able to afford doing so (though many respondents confess to the latter), but rather that some

appear simply to be uninformed of their school needs and the destination of their potential gifts. One alum wrote, “I have not been asked to donate, and honestly am not sure what the process is for my Waldorf school.” A second added, “I continually have asked where I can help and am almost *never* gotten back to (now on three different development directors), so I assume money is not an issue!” While a third observed, “It is difficult to justify giving to something that already has so much, and charges so much, when others are far more needy.”

Such responses clearly suggest that schools could improve their communication with their former students. One written comment spells out the problem:

The school is not very effective in maintaining a relationship with me, therefore giving to the school does not make it on my radar. I would give what I can (as I do with my college), if I was asked, and if I was kept informed of developments, values and such.

In the context of making donations, only a quarter of alumni said they were “very well” or “well” informed about where their philanthropic gifts go, while three-quarters of them said it was “important” or even “very important” for them to know how their contributions were used. Based on survey responses (see box below), we know now that the majority of Waldorf alumni would like their gifts to support students with financial needs, with a second priority of attracting and retaining the best faculty, followed by making Waldorf education affordable for Waldorf alumni who are not able to pay full tuition.

**TOP FIVE PRIORITIES FOR ALLOCATING DONATIONS (POST-COLLEGE WALDORF ALUMNI)**

Creating opportunities for students with financial need (64.9%)

Attracting and retaining the best faculty (61.2%)

Making school financially accessible to those who are Waldorf-educated and yet are not able to afford Waldorf school education for their children (40.5%)

Improving academics (24.5%)

Assisting students to be college-ready when they graduate (24.5%)

Waldorf alumni, 50% of NAIS respondents feel “very well” or “well” informed about the use of their gifts and 68% say the same in regards to their school’s fundraising priorities in general. The top priorities for NAIS alumni in the use of their gifts are nearly identical to the Waldorf ones, only in a different order of importance—seeing the retention of the best faculty as more important than supporting students with financial needs, which comes in second place. Assisting students to be college-ready by graduation is third on the NAIS alumni list and improving the level of academics is fourth.

The need for schools to improve their alumni outreach is indicated by another decisive figure: a majority of respondents, ranging between 51% and 81%, wrote “not applicable” next to 12 out of 14 alumni services they were asked to evaluate. This suggests that these alumni services—including job boards, online auctions, volunteer opportunities at the school, and alumni lectures at the school or online—are either not offered by the schools or they are not offered in a way that the alumni are aware of them. The only services that receive some recognition were publications, about which 22% of the respondents said they were satisfied with the online alumni newsletters and publications, while 19% said they were satisfied with print publications. While still quite modest, the most positive response to any given alumni service was to the online community, about which 25% of respondents said they were “somewhat satisfied,” which is the middle option between “very satisfied” and “very dissatisfied.”

In short, while alumni tend to maintain personal contacts with former classmates and teachers, they appear to expect that the school will take charge of maintaining a community-wide school–alumni relationship. Being adequately informed about changes and needs in the current school community appears to hold the key to alumni attitudes towards supporting their school.

**In Their Own Voices**

As part of the RIWE survey, Waldorf graduates were asked to name their greatest gifts, joys, and challenges. Their responses underscored the significance that Waldorf graduates attach to the cultivation of community. Most common responses to the first two categories—gifts and joys—included family, friendships, and community activities. Many graduates explicitly listed their Waldorf education under these headings. Challenges, as one might expect, centered around financial constraints, problems of health, and, for some, a lack of direction in life or career path.

NAIS alumni, by contrast, seem to enjoy better communications with their former schools. In contrast to

In response to open-ended questions, which invited more expansive narrative replies, an emphasis on

valuing community was repeatedly expressed. In the words of one respondent, “Everything about the way the education is structured influences the capacity to create healthy, balanced relationships.”

Another theme emerging from the RIWE survey was an appreciation by alumni of a certain flexibility in thinking that they attributed to their Waldorf education. Said one graduate: “The multi-disciplinary approach to training your mind to look at something from all sides is extremely valuable. It lends itself to flexibility in thinking, creativity, and confidence and being able to teach yourself something.”

In a similar vein, a post-college Waldorf graduate added: “In my college classes, I found myself asking all of the questions that no one else thought to ask . . . I thought for myself and I like to think that I still do. I thank my Waldorf education for that.”

“It makes you a really well-rounded person,” a further respondent noted. “I had all the regular English, math, science classes and then I also did woodworking and blacksmithing. I learned my times-tables with bean bag games, so I talk about turning theory into practice and how we went to Hermit Island and we had the opportunity to learn *in* the ocean what we were learning *about* the ocean. It is very interactive learning.”

In summing up experience in a Waldorf high school, another post-college graduate concluded:

The level of teaching was largely comparable to college at an Ivy League school. And in addition to excellent teaching, we learned many useful skills – carpentry and so forth . . . that have saved me thousands of dollars in home maintenance costs!

In addition to surveying graduates, the RIWE researchers also solicited reflections from some 75 Waldorf high school teachers. Leed Jackson, a practical arts teacher at the Toronto Waldorf School, wrote:

One of my students, a fourth-year engineer who still knits, was repeatedly given responsibility in a nuclear steam engineering company even before she graduated because she could not only see the overview of the theory but also the practical blue prints and paper layouts. She could see the need for spaces within the technical designs for fork lifts or people to navigate around all of the heavy machinery,

as just one example. She could think and perceive whole to parts.

As in the previous survey, graduates were again asked to describe aspects of their Waldorf education they may have viewed critically as high school students but now perceived differently. By far the most common response was “Eurythmy!” One respondent reported: “I play ice hockey with many people who have had several concussions. I have never had a concussion and am very skilled at avoiding collisions. I attribute this partly to eurythmy and also to outdoor play in lower school.”

Others admitted they had revised their attitudes about Waldorf schools’ restricted use of electronic media, especially during the elementary grades. “I work in videogames,” one respondent noted, “and my limited exposure to media as a child helps me bring new ideas and perspectives to my work.”

When asked whether they would send their own children to a Waldorf school, 56% responded in the affirmative, though quite a few expressed reservations regarding cost and distance to the nearest school, as well as (in some cases) a perceived lack of racial and socio-economic diversity. Among those alumni who are now parents, a resounding 85% said they would recommend Waldorf education to a friend or family member, adding that their Waldorf schooling was influencing the way they were raising their own children — specifically in limiting their children’s exposure to television and digital media, maximizing their time in nature, enriching their lives with the practice of the arts, reading to them at bedtimes, creating regular rhythms in their day, encouraging free play, and focusing on creativity and wonder. In the words of one Waldorf alumni parent: “Waldorf education is the education of the future. It has been my biggest privilege, and I would want my children to experience the same.”

Henry Barnes, that venerable leader of the Waldorf school movement, was fond of saying: “Waldorf education prepares you especially for the second half of life!” In that sense, Waldorf teachers bestow on their children hidden gifts that take many years to mature. Put differently, Waldorf education may require years to show its full worth in the lives of its graduates. Or, in the words of a thoughtful respondent to the alumni survey, “There were so many seeds planted within me that are even now just beginning to break the soil. So many things that teachers told me that I didn’t understand at the time, but now feel that I do.”

The full survey will be published later this year by the Research Institute for Waldorf Education with the title (taken from the opening phrase of the Morning Verse recited by Waldorf students at the start of each day): *Into the World: How Waldorf Graduates Fare After High School*. A PowerPoint summary of this survey has been posted on the websites of the Research Institute ([www.waldorfresearchinstitute.org](http://www.waldorfresearchinstitute.org)) and the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America ([www.waldorfeducation.org](http://www.waldorfeducation.org)).

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