

School Forms in Waldorf Education: Enhancing the Learning Partnership

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There is today a crisis in education, particularly in public education. The primary partners in the educational enterprise – teachers, parents, and children – feel isolated, alienated, and powerless. Many good teachers are leaving the system. Many children are not being educated. Many parents want to take their children out of the system, and if they are able, do so. There is an obvious need for radical change, and attempts at reform and restructuring are being made in many parts of the country.

Waldorf Education has something to contribute to the discussion about school reform. Regarding aims and methods, for example, Waldorf Education holds that schooling should serve human freedom and creativity. Education should not aim primarily at creating employable, skilled adults, but rather at helping children to become self-aware, creative, and responsible human beings. In Waldorf Education, there is an effort to educate the whole child, the capacities of thinking, of feeling, and of will. Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Waldorf Education, not only described these three soul faculties in detail but also proposed a curriculum in which each is addressed in a developmentally appropriate manner.

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Waldorf Education can also speak fruitfully about school organization. The organization of a Waldorf school aims to bring to consciousness and foster the right relationships between the partners of the school community. School form can and should help create a healthy school and a healthy sense of partnership.

The partners in a school community are the teachers, children, parents, administrators, and friends (alumni, alumni parents, supporters). In a healthy school form, the basic aims of each of these partners are recognized and furthered. The organization of the Waldorf schools is such a form, enhancing the learning partnership in the school.

After many discussions with people involved in schools, I believe that each of the partners in the educational enterprise has several primary concerns.

Teachers want to be able to meet the children in a free and creative way through offering a curriculum that responds to the children's need for an age-appropriate, stimulating, and holistic education. Because of their experience in education and their love of children, they want freedom in the classroom and, with their colleagues, a voice in determining the content and nature of the education. Also, teachers want a say about who their colleagues will be.

Children want first of all to be "met," to be seen by the teacher, and to be appreciated as the individuals they are and can become. They want

to learn. They want to be encouraged and inspired to learn with enthusiasm.

Parents send their child, that which is most precious to them in life, to school. They hope that their child will be encouraged, inspired, and educated. They want to understand the education their child is receiving and to support it financially and with their time, energy, and knowledge.

Administrators, if they have not been brainwashed by corporate models of education, want to support and nurture the educational process. They want, in their myriad administrative tasks, to be perceived by teachers and parents as equal partners in creating a healthy school.

The alumni, former parents, friends, and supporters of a school also wish to have the possibility of helping, of getting involved, financially and in other ways.

In almost all public schools, the school form does not meet the needs and wants of these partners. Teachers have limited freedom and responsibility. They are controlled by a hierarchic school bureaucracy that tells them what to teach and how and when to teach it.

Children are often being educated toward only two basic ends: to achieve high scores on standardized tests and to become skilled workers in the competitive economic system.

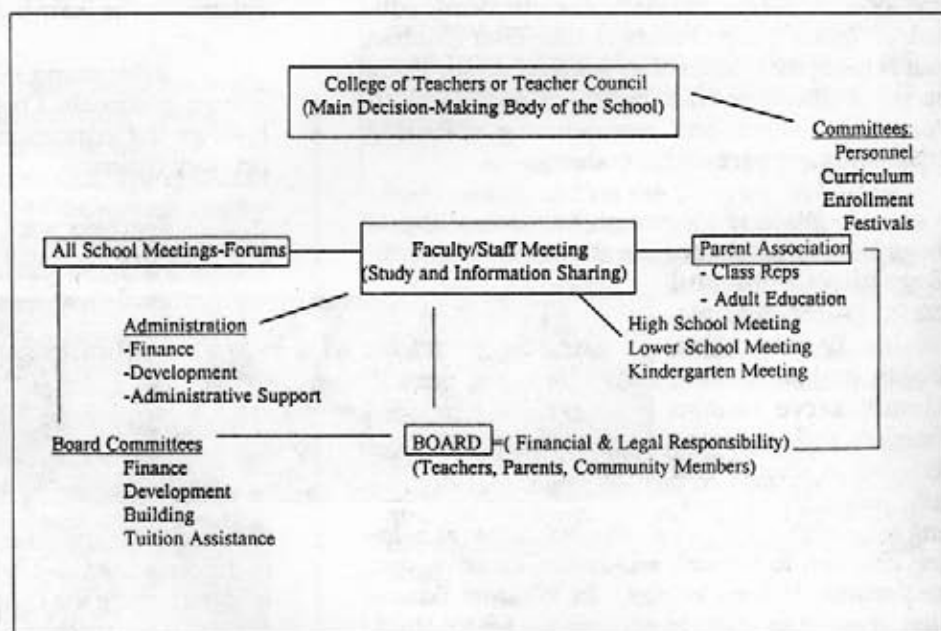
Parents feel left out of the educational process. Often they have no choice about the school or the teacher their child will have.

Administrators have become the managers rather than the supporters of education,

making pedagogical decisions that they may not be qualified to make. The higher one's position in the administrative bureaucracy, the less contact one has with children. Administrators are often perceived by the other partners in education as managers or adversaries rather than as partners.

The principles of Waldorf school organization provide an interesting and useful alternative to the centralized bureaucratic model of public education.

There are over one hundred-twenty Waldorf schools in the United States and Canada. Each school is independent and self-administered and linked to other schools through the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA). There is no one standard school form. Each school is striving to find the structures and relationships that best fit its circumstances. However, most full Waldorf schools (K-12) have the following form.



In Waldorf schools, there are no principals or headmasters. There are chairpersons of the College (or Council) of the Faculty and often of the High School and Lower School. The College of Teachers or the Faculty Council is usually the main decision-making body of the school. It makes curricular and staffing decisions and also

decides on important aspects of the budget and salaries. The College meets weekly and usually sees itself as inwardly and outwardly carrying the main life of the school. Membership in the College usually is open to full-time teachers and to administrators who have been at the school one year or more.

The weekly faculty-staff meeting is a time for study and information sharing. It is often a place where committees report and where schedules are shared. The main faculty committees, reporting either to the College/Council or to the full faculty staff meeting, are usually a curriculum committee, a personnel committee, a festivals committee, and a budget committee.

Most Waldorf schools have a small administrative staff – a bookkeeper, one or two secretaries, a development person, and sometimes a main administrator. The administrative staff of the school reports to both the Board and the College and is seen as serving the educational process. It is the servant of the teachers and the school – not the manager, which today is the case in many schools and colleges. Most teachers are involved in administrative tasks as well, and some teachers spend up to a third of their time in committee or administrative work.

In a full Waldorf school (K-12), there are also separate high school, lower school, and kindergarten faculty meetings.

Waldorf schools have a parent representative for each class. The class representative works with the class teacher (in the lower grades) or with the high school class advisor. Generally, there is also a Parent Council or a Parent Teacher Association which has a variety of functions – from planning adult education work, to running fairs and special events, to raising issues of concern at all-school community meetings.

Parents also are on the school Board of Trustees, often comprising a majority. There they provide the legal, financial, real estate, public relations, and fundraising expertise needed to develop the school. The Board is an active partner in the life of the school, seeing that tuition and donations support the operating budget, and

working hard to provide adequate facilities. Board committees usually include Finance, Development, Building, and Tuition Assistance. These committees, like the Board itself, are composed mostly of parents, former school parents, and friends of the school.

In the typical Waldorf school form, the main decision-making bodies of the school are the College of Teachers and the Board of Trustees. The College carries the main pedagogical, internal responsibility, and the Board, the main financial responsibility. Both these groups and the main committees work with a consensus process of decision-making in which all members have to agree to the decision being made.

Teachers, having the central role in determining the content and form of the education, can fall into the error of not valuing the concerned, and at times critical, parent as a true partner in the process.

Thus, in a Waldorf school, the teachers – the people most intimately involved in the education of the children – have the responsibility of running the school and deciding on curriculum and pedagogy. The children are being taught by individuals who want to nurture them as full, creative human beings. The parents have many opportunities for involvement in the decision-making processes of the school, as Board members, class representatives, and as members of the parent association. Administrators have a supporting role, making possible the functioning of the school. They are not the directors or managers of the school.

Friends and supporters of the school have opportunities to help. One woman I know, a former public school teacher, had not known about Waldorf Education when her children were young. She is now a committed supporter of Waldorf Education and spends countless hours in school Board meetings helping a new Waldorf school to grow in her community.

In Waldorf schools there are, of course, considerable struggles and difficulties. Teachers, having the central role in determining the content and form of the education, can fall into the error of not valuing the concerned, and at times critical, parent as a true partner in the process. Also, since there is no hierarchy, there is the issue of teacher evaluation. Who evaluates whom and on what basis? A clear teacher evaluation policy and program for professional development are important. In some Waldorf schools, this has been implemented. In others, it has not, and parental disenchantment and dwindling enrollment can be the telltale signs of the need.

Usually, though, the Waldorf school creates communities of unusual vitality. Teachers, administrators, children, parents, and friends are actively engaged in and committed to the life of their school. The rapid growth of Waldorf Education on this continent testifies not only to the value of the educational philosophy but also to the validity of its principles of school organization.

The principles that underlie Waldorf school forms go back to the origin of Waldorf Education in 1919. In the chaos of post-World War I Europe, Rudolf Steiner suggested an alternative approach to social organization, which he called the Threefold Social Order.

Steiner held that society has three distinct spheres – cultural, political, and economic. Each of these spheres has its own concerns. Each is governed by its own law which, if followed, maximizes the effectiveness of activity in that sphere. In the cultural sphere, the principle is freedom. In the political or rights domain, the principle is equality; in the economic life, fraternity and cooperation. According to Steiner, each sphere should function independently of the others. It is especially important that the cultural/spiritual sphere should not be controlled by the political sphere, or state.

Education is part of the cultural sphere. Therefore, in Waldorf Education, the freedom of the teachers and of the school from the state is held to be very important, as is the freedom of parents to choose a school for their children.

The school, like every social institution, has itself a threefold division. The teachers play the dominant role in the cultural/ spiritual life of the school. They have substantial freedom in the classroom, exercised within an agreed-upon philosophy and curriculum of education. The teachers make all pedagogical decisions together and also most personnel decisions, usually in consultation with other members of the school community. The teachers help parents and the other members of the school community to understand the education and its underlying view of child development. Here, leadership is individual. The teacher teaches in his or her classroom, using his or her individual capacities and judgment. And the teachers together make decisions on all pedagogical matters.

The rights sphere of a school concerns questions such as moving the school, disciplinary procedures, dress code, salary and tuition policies, structure and principles of school governance, long-term planning, and the school schedule. These are all areas that affect the members of the school community more or less equally. On these issues, all the adult partners – teachers, administrative staff, parents, and friends – should have a voice. Issues are discussed by all, and decisions are reached by consultation and consensus. In Waldorf schools, this area of rights and responsibilities, of agreements between partners, is often the aspect of school life of which people are least conscious.

The economic sphere involves budget, tuition, and salary decisions. The Faculty and school Board confer and work together to produce a viable financial policy. If, in the cultural life of the school, the teachers help the parents understand the education, so in the economic sphere, the parents – with their tuition and their expertise – help the teachers by making the education possible. The principle of fraternity is evident in tuition aid to needy families and, in some schools, a salary system that takes into account individual circumstances (for example, the number of children in a teacher's family). In the economic sphere, leadership is "republican," being based on competence and delegated to individuals who carry out the work on behalf of the whole.

The threefold organization of the school can be shown in a chart as follows:

Threefold Social Order	Principle	School	Principle of Leadership
Cultural Life(Spirit)	Freedom	Teachers/College or Council	Individual
Rights Life (Soul)	Equality	Everyone/Faculty/ PTA/Forum	Democratic
Economic Life (Body)	Fraternity	Board/Dialogue with faculty (Committee System) Task Divisions	Republican

education is controlled by a political and economic process. Teachers have limited freedom in the classroom and little voice in the discussion of the mission and purpose of their schools. There is no partnership among teachers, parents, and administrators in arriving at agreements on rights and responsibilities. Hence, relations are often adversarial, and agreements are often not honored.

When these principles are consciously worked with and implemented (as they are in most Waldorf schools), an unusual vitality results, with all partners in the school community involved and dedicated to the life of the school. This is because the body, soul, and spirit of the institution and of the individuals involved are being nourished.

Another important principle of Waldorf schools is that of collegiality, of non-hierarchical forms. Behind this is the idea that hierarchical forms block the proper meeting between individuals and do not allow people to be effective partners on the path of mutual development. In the struggle to arrive at consensus, as equals, in faculty meetings or on the Board, we are encouraged to understand and value each other's thoughts and to bring to consciousness our own one-sidedness. We are encouraged, coaxed, and sometimes pushed to meet each other at deeper levels. For Steiner, modern Western consciousness is increasingly isolated, self-conscious, and cut off from others and the world. Thus, the search for social forms that encourage people to meet at deeper levels is an essential aspect of social reform.

In most institutions of public education, the reverse of these principles is in effect. Public

There is also an unconscious economic relationship, since public education is tax-funded. The result is limited creativity, adversarial relationships, and pronounced individual or group egotism in the schools. People are prevented from truly meeting. Education suffers. Everyone suffers, especially the children. We in Waldorf Education need to consciously study, work with, and experiment with the social forms suggested by Rudolf Steiner and with his underlying sociological perspective. Steiner sought forms that bring to consciousness the right relationships and the right attitudes between the partners in any commonly willed activity. Along with the rich curriculum of Waldorf Education, he provided appropriate principles for building effective school partnerships. We need to understand those principles and to share them with those seeking educational reform today.

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