

The Urban Waldorf School of Milwaukee: A Summary Report

By Ray McDermott (On behalf of the research team)

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For the past few years, the City of Milwaukee has been opening public schools based on models of education that are intended to help children from diverse backgrounds. In September, 1991, the Urban Waldorf School of Milwaukee welcomed 343 children, most of them from the surrounding inner-city neighborhood. In the United States, Waldorf schools mostly have served middle-class students whose families could afford tuition. In Milwaukee, it was hoped, the Waldorf approach could be adapted as an effective model for educating urban children in public schools.

A team of seven researchers who study learning in schools was brought together by the Waldorf Schools Fund to visit and study the Urban Waldorf School. Our team was to ask: Just what is being done in the school? Does it work? Can it be copied? In our full report, we try to describe what is going on, and we offer opinions about whether it works, and, if so, whether it can be duplicated. In this summary, we offer only our conclusions.

We were at the school for a full week. We attended the daily round of school activities, visited classrooms, ate in the cafeteria, and talked to anyone who had time for us. Some team members focused on a single class. Others visited several classes. One team member focused on developments at the district level in the city. We attended a spirited faculty meeting. At the end of our research week in 1994, we made a brief oral report at the school about our observations and some time later submitted a full, written report. After the staff had had a chance to respond, we submitted a second written report.

We have come to some far-reaching conclusions. Although several of us went to the school with reservations about Waldorf Education in general, all members now agree on the following:

- Despite the difficult environment that surrounds the Urban Waldorf School and some of the children in their daily lives, life inside the school is safe, quiet, well-ordered, and in terms of relationships, warm.
- There is little aggression, and misbehavior is reasonably and consistently managed. We noted the negotiation of difficult issues by children among themselves and by children and teachers.
- The school is unusually attractive. This is primarily because it has a strong arts program and the artistic work of the children is everywhere on display.
- In the classrooms we visited, it is generally possible for a child to learn a great deal.
- The school has extraordinary leadership in the principal's office, hard-working and concerned teachers, and a good esprit de corps. The few parents we interviewed also had a positive attitude toward the school.
- We place little stock in traditional measures of school success, but, even by such arbitrary means, the Urban Waldorf School has been performing well. For two of the last three years, the children's performance on the citywide third-grade reading test has improved. In 1992, the school ranked among the lowest in Milwaukee. In 1995, sixty-three percent of the children were above the district's standard for their grade

levels. This has happened despite the fact that the school does not stress the early acquisition of reading skills nor the early development of test taking skills.

-The children and their background and heritage seem to be treated with respect. The school emphasizes not just cognitive learning but also development of character as preparation for taking one's place as an educated citizen. Our sense, although vague, is that this makes a great difference.

These conclusions point to a remarkable achievement.

It was not easy to imagine such success at the start. The Urban Waldorf School faced many obstacles, including the effects of poverty and racism on many of the children and the high rates of crime and drug addiction in the surrounding neighborhood. There was also a big city bureaucracy--complete with teacher certification, pupil evaluation, and union regulations. In addition, most of the teachers had no background in Waldorf Education. They volunteered to dedicate themselves to a vision of schooling that promised both structure and gentleness, and they signed on for an intensive Waldorf teacher training.

How could this educational experiment have turned out so well so quickly? We do not know the answer, and we would doubt anyone who would offer a single, simple answer. We could attribute the success to Waldorf Education and not be wholly wrong. We could just as easily point to the strong principal recruited for the job of organizing the school or to the desire among teachers in America's public schools for an educational approach that promises a caring engagement with children.

Although we can offer no explanations, we can say that Waldorf Education seems to have been a wonderful stimulus for the achievements of the Urban Waldorf School. There are no guarantees that the same success could be achieved in another public school system or on a national scale. We can say, though, that within the Waldorf environment in the Milwaukee public school system, teachers and children have come together, learned to live together, and learned to do well together in school. There is reason for everyone in the school to be proud and for everyone in American education to be hopeful.

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