

State Funds for Waldorf Schools in England

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The British government has published its first major study on Waldorf education, including suggestions on how the state could collaborate with Waldorf schools in England. The 200-page study, commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), was led by Professor Philip Woods of the University of West of England, Bristol and included 21 of the 23 Waldorf schools in England.

The aims of the study were five:

- to form a comprehensive “map” of Waldorf education as practiced in England
- to research and report on “best practices” in these schools
- to uncover differences and similarities between Waldorf and government-funded schools
- to explore how these different schools could collaborate
- to articulate the obstacles Waldorf schools would face if they were to forge closer links with state education

In general the report speaks favorably of Waldorf (often called “Steiner”) schools in England, which at present do not receive government funding. “Overall we found areas of good practice such as the early introduction and approach to modern foreign languages, development of speaking and listening through oral work and the combination of class and subject teaching for younger children,” says Professor Woods. “We also found that the emphasis given to teachers’ reflective activity and heightened awareness as well as the non-hierarchical, collegial form of running schools, offers a contrast to current practice in the maintained [the British term for state-run] sector and may prove relevant for main-

stream schools.”

On one hand, the study found that Waldorf schools offer all of the recognized subjects mandated by Britain’s “National Curriculum” as well as subjects unique to Waldorf education, such as eurythmy and an early attention to foreign languages. In this sense, there would be no need to modify the Waldorf curriculum to bring it in line with nationally required courses.

On the other hand, the study notes that the government’s approach to standardized tests in the lower grades would not be an appropriate way of evaluating the success of Waldorf pupils, and alternative forms of assessment would have to be explored. The report urges the government to accept “alternative ways by which pupils leaving Steiner schools can demonstrate capability for further study and employment, building on current practice.”

Published in June 2005, the report also examines the life of Waldorf teachers, noting that most of them “work for lower pay and in less favorable conditions” than teachers in state-funded schools. It urges Waldorf teachers to become better acquainted with “theory, research, policies and practices in mainstream education.” According to Professor Woods, “We see a great potential benefit from mutual dialogue and professional interaction between Steiner and mainstream educators. As well as the good practices we have identified from Steiner schools, there are also areas in which Steiner schools could benefit from maintained sector practices such as management skills, organizational and administrative efficiency, classroom management, working with older secondary school children and record keeping and assessment.”

However, the report warns that “transferring practices between schools of differing philosophies is neither straightforward nor in all cases appropriate and may not achieve the expected consequences because they are removed from the supportive school context in which they originate.”

The report concludes with a call for further study to explore “equivalence of qualifications” among teachers in Waldorf and state-run schools.

The results of this report raise the possibility of state funds flowing for the first time to English Waldorf schools. Plans are already underway to convert the Hereford Waldorf School, which is currently housed in a converted barn, into an “Academy” of about 300 pupils aged 5 to 16. The school, located in the tiny village of Much Dewchurch in the rolling hills of western England, would be sponsored by the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship (the British equivalent of the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America, or AWSNA) and financed with government money, with about 10 per cent of funding still coming from the private sector in the form of gifts. But obstacles remain in determining alternative forms of assessment and accountability before the plan can be implemented.

While state-funded Waldorf schools are not new on the European continent, the Hereford academy would be the first state-supported Waldorf school in England. In this sense the Hereford school could be seen as a test case for the collaboration between government and Waldorf education. And it would be tempting to draw this case into the discussion raging on the American continent about the future of U.S. charter schools, a growing number of which are drawing upon Waldorf curriculum and practices. It would be misleading, however, to equate the British experiment with the American charter schools, since all English pupils—in both state and independently funded schools—are

already required to take government-mandated tests during their upper school and high school years if they intend to move on to higher education. These tests already have significant impact on the curriculum in the upper school years. This is not the case in the United States, where even the national SAT or ACT tests are not mandated as part of the high school curriculum, and indeed not all universities require them of their applicants.

References

“Steiner Schools in England,” Research Brief No. RB645, by Philip Woods, Martin Ashley, and Glenys Woods. Copies of the full report (RR645) available from DfES Publications, P.O. Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ, Great Britain. Copies of the research brief (RB 645) are available online at: www.dfes.gov.uk/research/

“Steiner schools: Learning from experience”
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/em/fr/-/1/hi/education/4633601.stm>

available from JanniSteinerEY@aol.com