Waldorf High School Senior Survey

Waldorf High School Research Project

A Survey of Waldorf Seniors—2003 and 2004

For the last two years, the Waldorf High School Research Project has been polling Waldorf seniors in the months before they graduate in order to discover how they feel about their education. The Research Institute for Waldorf Education, which recently incorporated the High School Research Project, has published the first phase of an extended study examining where Waldorf graduates go after finishing high school.[1] The poll of seniors in effect supplements this study by offering vignettes of life in the North American Waldorf high schools from the perspective of departing 12th graders.

The Planning Group of the Research Project,[2] on behalf of the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA), mailed a survey to all 27 Waldorf high schools with graduating senior classes in 2003 and 2004, inviting the graduates to comment on the strengths and weaknesses of their high school education, both from an academic and social perspective. Their responses were illuminating.

First, some statistical background. The Planning Group received a total of 346 responses—167 in 2003 from 16 schools and 179 in 2004 from 14 schools—representing a little less than half of the Waldorf graduates in each year.[3] Of the total number that responded, roughly 45% listed themselves as "lifers" who had attended 12 or more years of Waldorf pre-school, elementary, and high school. At the other end of the spectrum, about 25% of the respondents said they had attended only 1–4 years at Waldorf, mostly just the high school grades. In other words, the students responding represented a very broad range of experience in Waldorf education, from less than a year in high school to the full experience of early childhood, elementary grades, and high school. One student reported 17 years of continuous attendance at Waldorf!

Most of the questions in the survey were open-ended and encouraged the students to respond out of their experience in narrative form. The survey asked them, for instance, to describe their most positive academic and non-academic experiences at school. Some reached far back into memories of their elementary years for their examples—such as drawing the night sky in sixth grade astronomy, four-needle knitting in fifth grade, tossing bean bags while learning times tables in the fourth grade, or attending the Christmas plays year after year from first grade on—but many focused on their final year of high school. Main lessons and run-through classes in history were mentioned most often, but science and math (especially geometry) were also frequently highlighted, along with senior projects. Students singled out the 11th grade main lesson on Parzival in nearly every school that offered it.

Top five choices for "most positive academic experience"

1. Humanities, especially history, English
2. Sciences, especially biology, chemistry
3. Math, especially geometry
4. Senior project
5. Parzival

Not surprisingly, in non-academic subjects, sports easily accounted for the most positive experiences, followed closely by class trips and foreign exchanges, the arts generally (drama especially), work practica, and just hanging out with peers and teachers beyond the classroom setting. One Mid-Western student compared her classmates to a family that "taught me more as a person than I could have ever learned in any other school."

Top five choices for "most positive non-academic experience"

1. Sports
2. Class trips, foreign exchanges
3. Fine arts, performing arts, crafts
4. Work experience, service learning
5. Friends

In general, it was clear from the responses that the experiences carrying the most value for the seniors—both academic and non-academic—involved *movement*: whether in the form of physical activity, artistic performance, academic exploration (for instance, science field trips or lab research), service learning, or a social change of scene.

Another theme common to the most valuable experiences was that students had *chosen* them—whether they were academic electives or independent senior projects or solo "vision quests" in the desert. Even in the high school, the education of the will resonates in the students to lasting effect.

We asked the students, next, to list those subjects that had most influenced their thinking. Overwhelmingly the responses focused on main lesson classes from the 10th, 11th, and 12th grades—mostly in literature. The Parzival main lesson was mentioned again, along with courses exploring the Bible as literature, epic mythologies, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Goethe's *Faust*, Russian literature, and the American transcendentalists. Social studies main lessons were also at the top of the list, including the history of the arts, symptomatology, economics, and the survey of architecture.

As in previous surveys of Waldorf students, this poll registered student dissatisfaction with their experience of science, though there were some notable exceptions. It was striking that of the courses most cited as having "influenced my thinking," all but two were from the humanities. Outside the humanities, only 11th grade projective geometry and 12th grade zoology/evolution made the top ten. However, many students from several different schools listed as a major influence on their thinking the integration of all of the subjects, especially the inclusion of the arts in the sciences and humanities courses. Math, too, was also noted for bringing, in the words of one student, "an artistic imaginative view of abstract ideas."

Often, though, one could detect in the students' choices of most influential subjects the determining presence of a dynamic teacher. Indeed, one student said outright, "It's not the courses that inspired me, but instead the teachers." Another commented, "All my positive experiences have corresponded to exceptional teachers."

In fact, the close relation between students and their teachers was credited as one of the strongest and most influential hallmarks of Waldorf education in general. In response to the question, "Which aspects of your education most strongly represent for you the Waldorf educational approach?" the teachers' attention to individual students was listed in all but two schools as a signature of Waldorf education. In the words of one student, "Waldorf teachers show that they care." Another defining feature of Waldorf schools was the focus on training students how—but not what—to think, especially by the emphasis on open discussion and the creation of main lesson books. "In Waldorf school we learn to think, thinking about thinking," one student observed. Eurythmy, an art form not always appreciated by high school students,

was nonetheless singled out for its curative as well as artistic merit. In the words of one student, "Eurythmy allows my body to feel free." Said another, "It brings focus into my physical movement."

Waldorf high school students are renowned for their strong opinions and for their willingness to share them. Talk to the students at the Harvard Graduate Law School who have regularly welcomed Waldorf teenagers to the annual "mock trials" in Cambridge, Massachusetts. They will tell you that Waldorf teenagers, who take the role of jurors in these sample trial cases, have a reputation not only for being open-minded and fair during the trial but afterwards for being keenly observant critics of the law students' performances as prosecutor or defense counsel. The Waldorf adolescents—practiced in the skills of observing accurately, asking questions, and evaluating truth—have come to be appreciated for their candor and keen insights.

Christine Hether made a similar discovery when she interviewed Waldorf seniors some years back in connection with her Ph.D. research into the moral development of different student populations. Not only did she find that Waldorf seniors tested at the same level of moral maturity as students in graduate school. She also noticed that of the many groups of seniors she tested with the Defining Issues Test (DIT), a quantitative measure of moral reasoning, the Waldorf students were the only group to offer unsolicited commentary at the bottom of their test sheets. About a third of them, she reported in her Ph.D. thesis, "took time to spontaneously write comments on the personal information sheet. Some suggested ways in which the DIT could be improved, and criticized the fact that not all possibilities for resolution to the dilemmas had been presented."[4]

When asked to describe how they would change or strengthen their schools, the seniors were characteristically blunt yet fair, on the whole. Their most repeated plea was for greater diversity among the student body—but also among the faculty. "We need younger teachers who actually act their age, and not fifty," one student ventured. More choices in electives and stronger offerings in science were also common themes, along with a call for teachers more thoroughly versed in the Waldorf approach and administrative structures more transparent and better organized. "The more organized a teacher or a school is," said one senior, "the more cooperation you'll get." Some students even suggested a more hierarchical governance was needed in the high school, with a single person in charge of day-to-day decisions. Others criticized their teachers for fighting among themselves or engaging in gossip.

Top suggestions for changing or improving Waldorf high schools

1. More diversity (socio-economic, ethnic)
2. More faculty fully trained in the Waldorf approach
3. More choices, academic and extra-curricular electives
4. More rigorous, varied courses in science
5. More organized, efficient, transparent school administration

A few students felt their teachers could be stricter and more demanding, especially with those students who are disruptive. Said one impatient student of his noisy peers, "Punish the idiots!" Though some students longed for a larger student body, many praised the small class size as being socially and academically advantageous to learning. Of the facilities most desired, the top contenders were a gym just for the high schoolers and a lounge just for students. One senior insisted there should be "physical exercise every day!"

As one might imagine from a student body of such divergent backgrounds, there was criticism from overtly conservative students of the perceived liberal bias of their

teachers and from self-proclaimed liberal students of the perceived conservative leanings of their teachers. Said one frustrated Southerner, "Tell the teachers to be consistent and fair, to teach with their hearts and keep an open mind. If they are conservative, tell them to keep it to themselves!"

Despite the occasional voice of disgruntlement, the surveys were remarkable for their even-handedness and their general appreciation of the education, even with its perceived shortcomings. The seniors were asked a further open-ended question: What advice would you offer to those responsible for strengthening the high schools? The seniors' responses, many heartfelt and appreciative, focused on six instructions:

Six pieces of advice from Waldorf seniors

1. Insist on a Waldorf-trained faculty [this was by far the most common and passionately argued response]
2. Listen!
3. Keep up to date, especially with technology
4. Be flexible but consistent
5. Set deadlines—and stick to them
6. Lighten up, occasionally

Beyond these instructions, the students were effusive in their encouragement—and in their sympathy for their teachers. "Math and science teachers have a difficult task of teaching artistic, creative Waldorf students how to think logically," one senior remarked. "I would say they need a special kind of training." Ultimately, said another senior, the task of any teacher is to "motivate students to aspire to things they never imagined they could attain."

Finally, the survey posed two yes-or-no questions. The first was: Would you consider becoming a Waldorf teacher? A resounding 55% answered "No"—some emphatically, often because they did not see themselves as teachers (especially if one of their parents was a Waldorf teacher) or because of the prospect of low salaries. "Definitely not," said one California senior, "I plan to be comfortably rich!" However, some of these same respondents conceded that if they were ever to change their mind about teaching, Waldorf would be the only teaching career they would consider. A significant and enthusiastic minority (20%) replied that they were already committed to this career path. "Teaching is a noble thing to do, and I believe becoming a Waldorf teacher is a possibility," said one New Englander. Another student answered, perhaps with a sigh of resignation, "I have a sinking feeling I might."

The other question was: Would you consider sending your children to a Waldorf school? Here a strong majority (75%) replied with a definite "yes," though some qualified their answer with questions about the cost of the education or their commitment to a full 12 years or more in a Waldorf school. Even some of the students who had been quite critical of aspects of their years at Waldorf voiced a clear intention to send their own children to Waldorf someday. Only 7% of the respondents answered this question with an outright "no." "It is the best education a child can receive," said one East Coaster. "I want well-rounded children who think about things on a deeper level." "Of course," said one far-seeing senior, "but I would have to talk with my wife."

References

1. Faith Baldwin, Douglas Gerwin, and David Mitchell, "Research on Waldorf Graduates," Phase I (March 2005). Available online at www.waldorfresearchinstitute.org.

2. Members of the Planning Group of the Waldorf High School Research Project: Andy Dill

(Kimberton PA), Douglas Gerwin (Amherst MA), David Mitchell (Boulder CO), Leonore Russell (Garden City NY), Betty Staley (Fair Oaks CA).

3. See Appendix at www.waldorfresearchinstitute.org.

4. Christine Hether, "Moral Reasoning of High School Seniors from Diverse Educational Settings," p. 66.

Submitted by Douglas Gerwin on behalf of the Waldorf High School Research Project at the Research Institute for Waldorf Education. For the questionaire used see the full report available on the website of the Research Institute:

www.waldorfresearchinstitute.org

High Schools Participating	Respondents 2003	Respondents 2004	Total
Austin Waldorf School	20	14	34
Chicago Waldorf School	2	15	17
East Bay Waldorf School	—	6	6
Hawthorne Valley School	—	12	12
Hazel Wolf High School	2	—	2
High Mowing School	21	3	24
Honolulu Waldorf School	—	21	21
Kimberton Waldorf School	19	—	19
Rudolf Steiner School (NY)	11	19	30
Rudolf Steiner School of Ann Arbor	3	—	3
Sacramento Waldorf School	11	19	30
San Francisco Waldorf School	23	—	23
Shining Mountain Waldorf School	16	12	28
Toronto Waldorf School	5	9	14
Vancouver Waldorf School	7	7	14
Waldorf School of Garden City	11	15	26
Waldorf School of Massachusetts Bay	—	8	8
Watershed High School	2	—	2
Washington Waldorf School	11	19	30
Youth Initiative High School	3	—	3
Total Senior Respondents	**167**	**179**	**346**

Rigor Asked for in High Schools

Stephen Keith Sagarin

Editor's note: In the following article from *The New York Times* it is once again illuminated that happiness can be experienced in work and striving, that youth continues to be generally idealistic and diligent, and that good teachers will challenge students. Teens are malleable; they will rise to challenges.

WASHINGTON (AP) – The campaign to make high school more demanding seems to be picking up support from the people who have the biggest stake in the matter: the students themselves.

Almost nine in ten students say they would work harder if their high school expected more of them, a survey finds. Less than one-third of students say their school sets high academic expectations, and most students favor ideas that might add some hassle to their life, such as more rigorous graduation standards and additional high-stakes testing.

"The good old times in high schools are being replaced by good old hard work," said Peter Hart, whose Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., conducted the survey for the "State of Our Nation's Youth Report" released Tuesday. "There's a recognition among students that they have to be more ready to compete."

The nonprofit Horatio Alger Association, which provides college scholarships and mentoring to needy students, issued the annual report on youth attitudes. The findings are based on a phone survey of 1,005 students in high school last May.

Improving high schools has become an urgent topic in education, as mounting research shows many students aren't ready for college or work after graduation—if they get that far. The call for change has come from President Bush, governors, employers, and college faculty.

Now students are saying it, too.

Julie Hetcko, 16, of Lincoln, Nebraska, who will be a senior in the fall, has taken three Advanced Placement courses and is looking for other ways to prepare for college. High schools that don't offer some type of advanced coursework, she said, are holding students back.

"Times are changing," she said. "I don't think people realize how much students are trying to excel, trying to get into college. It's important that adults and parents know that it's not just a walk in the park. We want to work for our grades."

When given options for improving high schools, 95 percent of students agreed that more real-world opportunities, such as internships, would help at least somewhat. More than 90 percent also favored two other ideas: earlier counseling in high school about how to prepare for college, and more opportunities to take college-level courses for free.

Majorities of students said other changes would help, too, including increasing the availability of after-school and summer school, requiring students to pass math and English exams to graduate, and requiring four years of math and courses in biology, chemistry, and physics.

The students' call for more rigor comes as 41 percent of them said the pressure to get good grades is a major problem for them, about the same level as the last two years. One-third of students said getting good grades is very important when it comes to fitting in with their friends—a factor cited more often than having a car or being involved in sports.

More than three in four students plan to go to a four-year university. A total of 83 percent said high school is preparing them "adequately" for college, although a smaller number, 71 percent, said high school, is getting them sufficiently ready for the work world.

Most of the students surveyed were enrolled in public schools, with the rest attending private school, home school or another type of school. Students aged 13 to 19 took part.

The survey has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

Among other findings:

- More than two in five students say at least half the students they know cheat on tests.
- More than six in ten students say they have a cell phone.
- Nine in ten students say they have at least one family member in whom they can confide.
- About half of students say they eat a meal with their family every day.
- Almost three in four students say they would admire a professional athlete less if they found out the athlete had taken illegal steroids.

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About the Research Institute for Waldorf Education

The Research Institute for Waldorf Education is an initiative working on behalf of the Waldorf school movement. It receives support and guidance from the Pedagogical Section of the School of Spiritual Science and financial support through the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA), the Midwest Shared Gifting Group, the Waldorf Schools Fund, the Waldorf Curriculum Fund, and private donors.

The Research Institute was founded in 1996 in order to deepen and enhance the quality of Waldorf education, to engage in serious and sustained dialogue with the wider educational-cultural community, and to support research that would serve educators in all types of schools in their work with children and adolescents.

The Research Institute has responded to the call for research as a top priority of the Waldorf school movement by becoming a supporting organization of AWSNA and by co-sponsoring research projects with the Association and with the Pedagogical Section.

We support research projects that deal with essential contemporary educational issues such as attention-related disorders, trends in adolescent development and innovations in the high school curriculum, learning expectations and assessment, computers in education, the role of art in education, and new ways to identify and address different learning styles. The Research Institute has sponsored colloquia and conferences that have brought together educators, psychologists, doctors, and social scientists. We have published a *Research Bulletin* twice a year for the last ten years, and we are developing and distributing educational resources to help teachers in all aspects of their work.

We sponsor the Online Waldorf Library: www.waldorflibrary.org, whose mission is to make available contemporary writings on Waldorf education, and we host our own site: www.waldorfresearchinstitute.org, where up-to-date research is posted.

The Research Institute is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization and gratefully accepts donations.

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Art in Human Development
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Learning Expectations and Assessment Project
Mathematics – Phobias and Remediation
Reading, Writing, and Reading Comprehension
Survey of Waldorf Seniors
Waldorf High School Research Projects
Waldorf Graduates Survey Phase I
Waldorf Graduates Survey Phase II

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Towards Wholeness in Learning, 1996
Pathways of Healthy Child Development, 1998
Andover Proceedings: Tapping the Wellsprings of Health in Adolescence, 2001
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Subject-Specific Colloquia, 2000-2004

- Chemistry
- Mathematics
- United States History
- English
- Computer and Information Technology
- Life Science and Environmental Studies
- World History – Symptomatology

Resource Development

Computers in Education, handbook for teachers
Being on Earth, a book for scientists and teachers
Online Waldorf Library, a website of resources for Waldorf education
Themes in Waldorf Education, compilation of Rudolf Steiner's indications on teaching language arts and mathematics

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