

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL & BEHAVIORAL NEEDS

of a WALDORF COMMUNITY

Research Summary & Response

The Nature of the Issues and Needs:

In a study into the social and discipline needs of Waldorf Schools undertaken by me as a part of my studies at Antioch University, areas of social emotional and behavioral challenge and the effects were explored. The study involved twenty-three Waldorf schools. It was a mixed method quantitative/qualitative study. Forty-five interviews were conducted which lasted between 30-45 minutes each*. The key findings were...

- **Student Attrition:**

Twenty-two of the twenty-three school's placed unresolved social, emotional and behavioral issues either between teacher and student, student to student or between teacher and parent, at the top of the list as being the primary reason for families leaving the school.

- **Faculty Attrition:**

Teachers placed strained relationships with parents as their most difficult issues. There were a number of additional comments that alluded to this being "extremely draining" and the reason they would be unlikely to take another class through or leave their specialty teaching positions. This in turn created a "confidence drain" in the parent community as they observed experienced teachers leaving the school.

- **Enrollment Inquiries:**

In interviewing Enrollment Directors, they identified one of the most important concerns potential families had was that of "safety" for their children.

- **Direct Loss of Revenue:**

The schools estimated that the revenue lost to the school was between \$30,000 (lowest) to \$150,000 (highest) per year as a result of unresolved social issues.

- **Indirect Loss of Revenue:**

Enrollment Directors were clear that this was only the "measurable cost" of direct tuition loss and did not take into account the less than positive "word of mouth" from disgruntled parents that they were sure would deter many friends and acquaintances from considering the school. Anecdotally one Enrollment Director estimated that this figure would be at least double direct loss of tuition payment lost.

- **Effects on the Decision Making Process:**

A common theme was the "wearing thin of the fabric" and the "ongoing crisis mode" that is the result of unresolved social tensions. An experienced Faculty Chairperson commented that, "This placed undue strain on the time available to run the school because we seem to spend so much time reinventing the wheel each time a social issue comes up."

- **Recruitment:**

A clear theme emerged in how increasingly challenging it was to recruit new teachers who were willing to step into a school where there was not good support with working through social issues, particularly in terms of parent – teacher relationships.

- **Finances Not the Underlying Reasons for Leaving:**

Another common theme that emerged was that a number of parents cited financial strain as a big part of their decision to leave the school. However it was also felt that if the social climate had been healthier they would have "gone the extra mile to make it work."

- **Lack of Training:**

It was clearly identified that teachers felt their teacher training programs did not prepare them for the level of skills needed to address social, emotional and behavioral issues between the children and in parent-teacher relationships.

* All schools and individuals taking part did so on the condition of anonymity.

How Does Waldorf Student Support Address These Issues?

The Waldorf Student Support (WSS) process works to identify and clarify the three streams student support, which are the Social Inclusion, Restorative Discipline (SI/RD) and Care/Therapeutic realms. It has wide ranging aims but we have taken careful note of these specific practical concerns raised in the study. We have incorporated strategies that are solution based to address these problematic areas.

- **Student Retention:**

Key to engendering confidence and lessening anxiety for the parent body is the development of a Policy (Head), Process (Heart) and Practice (Hands). Vital is a transparent communication protocol and flow chart as well as a response plan that clearly lays out what the school will do after a parent or child reports being teased or excluded.

- **Faculty Retention:**

When clarity and process are brought to working through social tensions, faculty members have been significantly more likely to re-apply to do another cycle with a class, or to stay on as long term specialty teachers.

- **Enrollment Inquiries:**

Enrollment Directors have reported that when they are able to show potential parents the SI/RD booklet they have a clearly elevated level of interest in enrolling their child/ren as the question of ‘safety’ and the school’s consciousness in this area is made clear. Other schools have made SI/RD a strong part of their out reach material. Some schools have gained regional media interest as a result.

- **Direct Saving of Revenue:**

A practical story (used with permission)... As the Chair of College at the Chicago Waldorf School informed the faculty, the small team had been busy with twelve situations over the last year, all brought to successful outcomes. Of these she has been directly involved in three and each of these were brought to positive outcomes. Afterwards all three families, who had a combined total of seven children attending the school, said that they had been actively in the process of looking at putting their children in other schools. Now as a result of the sound processes the team and the supporting teachers have put in place, all children remain. She said “Of course this is wonderful for the school and the families on many levels but it also means that we saved the loss of well over \$100,000 from our budget and that is counting only three of twelve successful interventions. Potentially, the financial savings directly related to this work is huge, really huge.”

- **Indirect Saving of Revenue:**

It is clear that one of a school’s main sources of outreach is existing parents speaking well of the school to their friends and acquaintances. This is particularly pointed when speaking of issues around school safety. Having a clear and well-publicized HSC is an essential ingredient in achieving this.

- **Effects on the Decision Making Process:**

A number of Faculty Chairperson’s reported that having a Student Support Coordinating Group (the core team of parents and teachers that carry the SI/RD process), allows the meeting more time to discuss and make timely and better considered decisions regarding a wide range of school matters that had previously been bogged down while the previous “crisis mode” was at work. A number of Faculty Chairs have also pointed out the noticeably improved atmosphere and energy levels in the meetings.

- **Recruitment:**

Young teachers and relocating teachers are becoming increasingly aware of what it takes to be successful in the classroom. A vital feature is a clear way of working through social tensions. Many schools are now attracting teachers to their community because of the SI/RD.

- **Training:**

Teachers have expressed relief that the SI/RD is ongoing professional development that is both “embedded” within their daily practice and “not just another program.” Added to this is the positive feedback from parents that the approach also encompasses parent education specifically around building social resiliency for their child.