Why I Send My Children to Waldorf School

by Joy Lapseritis, parent & president WSCC Board of Trustees

Waldorf School class teachers move through the grades with their students.

“You should check out the Waldorf School,” our son’s first childcare provider said to my husband and I as we lamented losing her as a “teacher” when he had grown too old for the infant room at the VNA Childcare Center in Falmouth. We had entrusted this woman with his care since he was just 6 months old, and she had helped us learn to become parents, witnessing the messiness of our first attempts at parenting. She was as much our teacher as his, and we wanted her to continue with him into the young toddler room at the tender age of 18 months.

“There is a type of school where the teachers do move along with the students,” she began, and directed me to the Waldorf School of Cape Cod, then located in Bourne. Within short order I found myself sitting on the floor of a cozy, sunlit room listening to Claire Small conduct a model class and give a puppet show. At first, I was confused by the faceless dolls and strange songs, but I was drawn to learn more, to discover the specific and thoughtful intentions behind each action and object. Shortly thereafter our family moved to the Berkshires, and we had the rare
fortune of choosing from among three local Waldorf schools. Our son, Morgen, spent 4 years in early childhood bliss, and daughter Mathilde and I a year in a parent-child program before we moved back to Cape Cod and joined the Waldorf School of Cape Cod. While we knew the Falmouth public schools were good enough, we actively desired for our children to experience a Waldorf Education.

Our children's teachers are our co-parents. Every day we learn how to parent our two very different children as they present us with new and unique challenges and joys, each needing something different from us – more space, more attention, fewer interventions, new boundaries. This is true for all aspects of their lives, and it is more than reassuring that their class teachers are there to witness and guide them on their educational journeys with a long-term perspective. Waldorf teachers are specially trained to understand human development, and are well prepared for the next set of developmental challenges. Having been Morgen's teacher for five years, Kim Allsup has a deep knowledge of his personal growth over that time, and a view into the challenges he may face. She brings this wisdom into her approach to him in the classroom, and to us as his parents so that we can be a mutually supportive team. Waldorf teachers understand that education is not an event separate from the human development of a person – it is an integration of daily and lifelong experiences, internal and external – and we all educate each other as we move through life. I shudder to think of how disconnected our children would be if they were passed from one teacher to another throughout their formative years. Parenting has made me more reflective on my own childhood, and I have a real sense of distance and separation from my own education in public schools even though I was very successful academically. Keeping a connection with a class teacher, even if only for several years in the event of a change, ameliorates that disconnection and forms a stronger bond between children and the adults who care for them daily.

Maintaining a class teacher from first through eighth grade presents benefits and challenges. Like many personal traits, the potential weaknesses of the class teacher/student relationship are closely tied to the strengths. Human relationships are seldom without conflict, and there can be anxiety around keeping a teacher for eight years. What if there are disagreements? (there will be). What if the teacher isn’t strong in all subjects? (they won’t be). What if my child has a personality conflict or is “incompatible” with their teacher? (they likely will be at some point in the journey from age 7 to 14). One of the gifts of the class teacher is that we are forced to discover and develop conflict resolution skills to cope with each of these eventualities – skills that are useful to everyone in life. Parents, teachers, and children must find ways to resolve disagreements, to reach out for help from someone else, or agree to disagree and find a new path forward. Faculty lean on
each other to fill gaps, share techniques, and teach to the whole curriculum; they demonstrate to children how learning is a lifelong process and how no one knows everything. Teachers must bring their maturity and long-term vision to both embrace and overcome interpersonal conflicts; children must learn tolerance and respect for every type of person. All learn patience in this process.

**Waldorf School graduates know how to learn and are successful in higher education.**

Prior to my current position working for the U.S. Navy (yes, even Navy people send their children to alternative schools!) I was a biology professor at a small and selective liberal arts college in the Berkshires (Bard College at Simon’s Rock). It was there that I first met Waldorf graduates as undergraduate students, and it is fair to say they changed my life. Among the high achieving students in the science courses I taught were several who had spent all or most of their childhoods at Waldorf schools. They were not the students who earned the highest grades in my courses – although high Bs and low As are perfectly respectable – but they were my best students. These Waldorf graduates clearly knew how to learn, they were able to grasp the subtleties and consequences of the concepts I taught, and they made connections to thoughts and subjects outside the scope of the syllabus. They knew how to really make observations, really see each other and the world around them and the world under the microscope. As if that weren’t enough, their participation in the classroom demonstrated their obvious maturity relative to their peers, simultaneously with their humility and compassion for fellow students. At times I grew to realize they were deliberately quiet during some discussions as they were patiently waiting for classmates to figure out what they had already discovered; they were in no rush to “finish,” and fully expected to learn more through observing their peers do the same.

During my career as a scientist, I have experienced a shift driven by rapid technological progress, providing access to massive data sets, and allowing an increasingly microscopic – nanoscopic – view into our world. While those technologies continue to advance at exponential rates, I have also witnessed the increasing need for cross-disciplinary collaboration, analytical skills, and validation of models against experimental data. I share this because I saw the capacity for those skills in the Waldorf students I taught during their undergraduate years – and they didn’t get it from me. They brought those capacities with them, built on the strong foundations of early learning and woven into the very fibers of their selves. They brought this wisdom into the college community and were implicitly loved by their peers for it. Those students gave me a gift: by choosing my courses they allowed me to see the potential future for my own children.
The Waldorf School of Cape Cod community is a family of shared values that supports and protects children and their families.

Finally, community is what brings our whole family to Waldorf Education. I was raised in a Catholic/Protestant family, but rejected those traditions as I became an adolescent. I felt I was a more spiritual individual than most of the people I observed in the religious community I grew up in, that the rituals represented values that were shared but only weakly performed out of habit and obligation. As an adult, I yearned for a community that shared my values and my quest to be a better whole person in my everyday life, but couldn't put my finger on which community that would be. I knew as I became a parent that I would need help shaping and maintaining these values in the face of a harsh and unpredictable world. While I am careful not to describe Waldorf Education as a religion – it isn’t – I do compare my sense of belonging to that of a church community. Waldorf is the place where I find comfort and security. I trust that my children are surrounded by people who share my values and vision for a nurturing and grounded childhood; that this community cares for my children as much as I do, that we share ownership and responsibility for each other. The faculty and staff care for one another as family, too, demonstrating in their actions how we can all accept each other and build upon our strengths, support each other in our weaknesses, and grow together as a unit stronger than any one individual. The Waldorf School of Cape Cod community is the home for my spirit, and for my family.

There are many other reasons why Creighton and I choose to send our children to the Waldorf School of Cape Cod, but the reasons above are the most important. I have criticisms, too, but they pale in comparison to the benefits, and having just reflected on those I can’t even make a short list of faults. The weaknesses can be addressed and managed, but I can’t imagine a future for my children without Waldorf, and I will fight for this program as I would fight for their lives – they are one and the same.