

Global Waldorf: A Universal Promise Of Social Renewal

From the founding of the first Waldorf school in Germany in 1919, the intention for Waldorf education has always been that it should be a worldwide force for social renewal. Emil Molt, the director of a German cigarette factory and a student of Rudolf Steiner, approached Steiner seeking a new kind of education for the children of his factory workers—one that would serve as an antidote to the despair gripping Central Europe in the aftermath of World War I. Steiner responded by opening a school, six months later, for those children.

By 1928 Molt's factory school grew to become the largest non-denominational school in Germany, serving as a model for other Waldorf schools in Germany, Holland, Switzerland, England, and the United States. Molt's school was revolutionary for its time—it was co-educational and open to children from all social, religious, racial, and economic backgrounds. It was also revolutionary because its purpose wasn't to indoctrinate in children a particular viewpoint or ideology, but to make them so strong, healthy and inwardly free that they would become a kind of tonic for society as a whole. For all of these reasons, the Nazis closed every Waldorf school in Germany during World War II. But after the war, they were the first private schools to be reopened.

Today there are more than 900 Waldorf schools and 1,600 Waldorf early childhood programs on five continents. Nepal, Norway, Palestine, Israel, India, the Philippines, South Africa—these countries, as diverse as they are, are all home to Waldorf schools and other organizations inspired by the work of Rudolf Steiner, including teacher training institutes, biodynamic farms, and intergenerational communities.

In *Waldorf Education Worldwide*, published in 1994, Hans-Joachim Mattke wrote, “One often hears people assert that the parents of Waldorf school students belong to an elite section of the community... But it is interesting to know that there is today an increasing number of Waldorf schools in places where other systems have capitulated or, at best, reverted to the status quo. We must here mention the initiatives in the Favelas of Sao Paulo, the Street Kids Project Lar Benjamin, also in that city, the Parzival Initiative in Santiago, Chile, the school in Zagreb, founded during the chaos of the Balkan war, the school for handicapped children in Bishkek, the work with children in the Palestinian camp of Shait in the Gaza Strip, the project in Milwaukee, and other initiatives.”

While every Waldorf school shares a commitment to Steiner's educational philosophy, each is independently operated. Moreover, each is firmly rooted in its local culture and context. At the Tashi Waldorf School (www.childrenofnepal.org) on the outskirts of Kathmandu, for example, the principles of Waldorf education are integrated with the diverse cultures and traditions of the Himalayas. Nepal is home to a wide variety of ethnic and tribal groups and the Tashi school reflects this diversity. Lessons are given in Nepalese, but Tibetan is also spoken at the school. The curriculum is rich with traditional arts and crafts and culturally relevant stories, songs, games and festivals.

China's first Waldorf school opened its doors on the grounds of an abandoned country resort in the summer of 2004. The Chengdu Waldorf School (www.waldorfchina.org) began with a nursery/kindergarten and now offers classes for the early grades. The school is also home to a thriving biodynamic garden and has become a hub for adult education, offering parenting courses, training new Waldorf teachers, and teaching organic and biodynamic methods to area farmers.

In Egypt, the Sekem Waldorf School serves Muslim and Christian children alike, encouraging them to respect each other's religious practices and live harmoniously. Founded in 1989 as a kindergarten, the Sekem School now serves more than 260 children in grades K-12, weaving traditional Egyptian crafts, stories, and songs into the Waldorf curriculum. The school is located in the intentional community of Sekem. An oasis in the desert northeast of Cairo, Sekem was founded in 1977 by the Egyptian pharmacologist Ibrahim Abouleish to bring about social renewal in his homeland. Dr Abouleish's vision was to build a new type of community—one that is sustainable culturally, economically and ecologically. What began as a small medicinal herb farm on a hard-scrabble patch of Egyptian desert is now home to a thriving network of biodynamic farms, community organizations and businesses.

In Norway, a country with a population of 4 million, there are 40 Waldorf schools. Jens Stoltenberg, the Prime Minister of Norway, was schooled in the Waldorf system and is the father of two Waldorf students. For him, he says, Waldorf education "encouraged me to always strive to become a better human being."

Willy Brandt, former Chancellor of West Germany and 1971 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, says: "The advent of the Waldorf schools was in my opinion the greatest contribution to world peace and understanding of the century."

Will the independent Waldorf school movement continue to grow, adapt, and thrive in various cultural settings? Will lessons learned in one cultural context translate to others? Will the Waldorf curriculum change and adapt over time as a result of its globalization? Will Waldorf influence, or be influenced by other independent school movements and educational approaches? By new research? Will the Waldorf model inspire reform in public policy and the curriculum of state-funded public schools? Stay tuned...

Learn More:

Directory of Waldorf Schools Worldwide:

<http://www.waldorfschule.info/index.71.0.3.html>

Directory of Teacher Training Centers Worldwide:

<http://waldorfschule.info/index.52.0.3.html>