

What is a Waldorf High School?

The Waldorf high school builds upon the rich foundation laid down in the Waldorf Lower School. The education of the whole person continues, but development of clear, independent thought is the focus of the high school. Infused at every step with the arts, the curriculum offers rigorous challenges in literature, the science, and the humanities. Students are introduced to greatest and best of cultural achievement. They study the great ideas that shaped civilization, experience the beauty of mathematics, feel the transformative power of the arts, and explore the wonder of the natural world in science classes. Waldorf education is a rebirth of Renaissance ideals in modern form. Students are encouraged to be well-rounded; to become reflective thinkers; to be able to work in a variety of disciplines; to unlock their imaginations; to cultivate creativity; and to pursue their original individual vision.

Founded on the educational insights of the Austrian philosopher, visionary, and educator, Rudolf Steiner, the Waldorf approach is hands-on and interdisciplinary. Teachers are encouraged to collaborate with one another, and students spend considerable time translating classroom-based concepts into real-world applications. When studying trigonometry, for example, students survey the campus and surrounding area; in physics they build the circuitry that allows a computer to add two numbers; in geometry, they draft architectural drawings; in ecology they restore native ecosystems; and in English they are asked to write and add their own original scenes to famous plays. This approach keeps the students highly engaged and allows them to make the material their own. They are encouraged to learn for learning's sake and to value the joy of learning.

In the Waldorf high school, subjects are studied in concert, not in isolation. Teachers endeavour to demonstrate the interconnectedness of the disciplines, to show, for example, how history and civics have had profound influence on the development of the arts and sciences. Cutting across disciplines and approaching a subject from a variety of perspectives provides students with a multi-faceted understanding of complex issues and a more global approach to learning and thinking. Students are encouraged to study primary sources; they write and illustrate their own textbooks, which become a personal record of individual achievement.

The Morning Lesson is a special feature of the High School curriculum. Here students delve into a subject for a double period each day for a three week block of time with a specialist morning lesson teacher. This concentrated period of time allows for the subject material to be studied very deeply without distractions without growing stale and for a wide breath of material to be studied every year. Typical morning lessons are the physics of bridges, the periodic table of the elements, art history from Egypt to modern art, the legend of Parsifal, Russian literature, and the poetry of the Romantics.

While in the Lower School students spend most of the day with their class teacher, the rigor and depth of study in the High School requires a high level of expertise in each subject. Therefore Waldorf high school teachers are masters in their area of study and teach out of their in-depth knowledge, enthusiasm, and passion for their discipline. Morning lessons are complemented by year-long skills classes in math, the sciences, English, and history.

In a Waldorf high school learning is not about multiple choice tests and memorizing facts but understanding, interpreting, and making knowledge dynamic and applicable in a real-world situations and contexts. The curriculum changes from grade to grade as the student develops. Ninth grade is a time for finding balance between polarities; tenth grade is the time to develop the tools of language, aesthetics, and reason; eleventh grade is a time to ponder philosophical riddles, ask the deepest questions, and train the power of analysis; and twelfth grade is a time to synthesize and find meaning.

Waldorf high school students are urged to pursue a wide range of extra-curricular activities such as drama, sports, community service, writing the yearbook, exploring technology, and pursuing environmental concerns. Students are encouraged to form their own clubs and pursue their personal interest in athletics. Teamwork and fundamental skills are stressed in sports over and against individual achievement.

The intimate size of the school allows for students to develop meaningful, long-lasting relationships with both peers and teachers. Small classes allow for students to receive individual attention. No student is overlooked. Learning occurs in a cooperative environment and students learn to value diversity. Waldorf high school students are challenged to consider the ethical components of their studies and life in our School community. International students are welcomed and students are encouraged to study abroad. The goal of a Waldorf high school is graduate balanced, well-rounded, compassionate individuals who are “upstanders” not “bystanders” who are ready to make a difference in the world. The Waldorf motto is that education that does not inspire and transform, or does not provide a basis upon which to live one’s life, is not worth pursuing.

The emphasis on individual pursuit of learning, in-depth thinking, emphasis on writing, and constant practice of writing prepares Waldorf graduates for college. Professors often remark how Waldorf students want to why in addition to what, ask the deepest questions, and have a mysterious enthusiasm for learning that is not motivated by a grade.

“Waldorf education addresses the child as no other education does. Learning, whether in chemistry, mathematics, history or geography, is imbued with life and so with joy, which is the only true basis for later study. The textures and colors of nature, the accomplishments and struggles of humankind fill the Waldorf students’ imaginations and the pages of their beautiful books. Education grows into a union with life that serves them for decades. By the time they reach us at the college and university level, these students are grounded broadly and deeply and have a remarkable enthusiasm for learning. Such students possess the eye of the discoverer, and the compassionate heart of the reformer which, when joined to a task, can change the planet.”

- Arthur Zajonc, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Physics, Amherst College