

## Waldorf Education in an Inner City Public School System: A Research Report

On September 3, 1991, the Milwaukee Urban Waldorf School opened as a choice school within the Milwaukee Public School System. Although the Milwaukee Urban Waldorf School was one among a number of magnet schools, each of them representing different philosophies and approaches to education, its founding was, nevertheless, important and unique. In the first place, it represented a response to a search by the Milwaukee Superintendent of Schools, at the time Robert Peterkin, and his staff, along with the Milwaukee Board of Education, for a healing education that could meet the special needs of children in educationally underserved areas of the city. The opening of the school, furthermore, was the result of an unusual and many sided collaboration among public school leaders, Waldorf educators, public school teachers and academic scholars of education. The Milwaukee School Superintendent's office and Board of Education, volunteer Waldorf teachers from member schools across the country of the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA), the education faculty, headed by Professor Belden Paulsen, of the University of Wisconsin and a group of Milwaukee public school teachers, themselves attracted to the prospect of participating in a new approach to education--all worked together to make the founding of the school possible.

The undertaking was also unique in that it pioneered, under the direction of Ann Pratt, an experienced Waldorf teacher, the development of an intensive teacher education program for public school teachers. Finally, the school was special in that it brought for the first time the integrated artistic, intellectual and development oriented, Waldorf-based curriculum and pedagogy directly to the children in the heart of an American city. The school opened with 350 students, more than 90% of them African American, enrolled in grades one through five, with two classes in each grade.

Three years later, the Research Steering Group, with the financial support of the Waldorf Schools Fund, undertook to arrange for an independent study and documentation of the school in order to better determine both the successes and problems of the school, as well as central issues of continuing importance bearing on possible future Waldorf public school initiatives. The Steering Group deemed it important to have such a study at this time and to have it carried out by professional evaluators without direct connection with the Waldorf movement. Accordingly, the Steering Group asked Professor Ray McDermott of the Stanford University School of Education to put together and head a research team of ethnographers and educators to visit and evaluate the Milwaukee Urban Waldorf School. The research team comprised, besides Professor McDermott, Mary E. Henry, Assistant Professor of Education, Washington State University; Cynthia Dillard, Assistant Professor of Education, Ohio State University; Paul Byers, Associate Professor of Education (retired), Teachers College, Columbia University; Ida Oberman, Graduate Student, Stanford University; Freda Easton, Graduate Student at Teachers College, Columbia University; and Bruce Uhrmacher, Assistant Professor of Education, University of Denver. The team visited the school for a full week in the spring of 1994, participating in the full life of the school during that week. A year later some members of the team returned to the school for a follow-up discussion of the team's report with teachers in the school.

The team approached their visit to the school with many questions, the main one being, simply, "Can Waldorf education work in an inner-city school?" The most general conclusion of the team's study was that the school is clearly a place where children and their parents are respected and loved, where children themselves have a place they love, and in which they feel safe and cared for, and where, even by conventional measurements, the school is "working": Reading scores have improved dramatically since the opening of the school; attendance has stabilized between 91 % and 92%; and parental involvement has increased impressively. At the same time, however, the team found itself having to raise more complex

and difficult questions, and in the process challenged the Waldorf educational community itself to engage these in a concerted and sustained way.

In the first place, the team raised basic questions about the meaning of conventional concepts that have shaped much of the thinking both inside and outside Waldorf circles about education for educationally underserved children in our country, the same conventional concepts with which the team began, namely, “What really is the essence of Waldorf education in our particular time and context, some seventy-five years after its founding in another time and culture?” “What really is the ‘inner city,’ and does this expression itself carry conventional images and assumptions that in fact hinder rather than help further understanding of what is actually the reality and the educational tasks involved?” “What does it really mean for the school to ‘work’? For a school to work in the Waldorf sense, and that means in the interests of the children, must it not maintain and strengthen the radical orientation that has characterized Waldorf education from the beginning in its efforts to protect children from the damaging influences that mark much of mainstream culture, while also preparing children themselves to be able to move with confidence and clarity in, and when necessary also against, the larger culture?”

The team also challenged the Waldorf educational community to look carefully at what is required for an authentic, respectful and genuinely understanding response to the real racial and ethnic identities of minority cultures and their children. Most pointedly, the team has challenged the Waldorf community to examine ruthlessly any traces of racism from the wider culture, or even from the culture of its own origins, that Waldorf education may unconsciously carry and perpetuate. Other issues for Waldorf education also arise from a reading of the Report. These issues have to do with such questions as, “How can Waldorf best listen to and learn from the needs and experiences of those it hopes to serve? What are the opportunities and perils of moving into the public sector? What is the essence of the Waldorf curriculum and pedagogy, especially in relation to other current educational reform efforts? What should be the future relation of Waldorf education to the public sector? How can the unique vision of a new political, economic and cultural social order, from which Waldorf originates, and from which it receives its major defining purposes, be sharpened and made increasingly a reality, rather than succumbing to all the contemporary forces that would seek to have it compromised and eroded?” Readers will come away from the Report with other critical questions of their own.

We are publishing in this issue of the *Research Bulletin* an abridged version of the research team’s report. A more extensive version of the Report will appear in a forthcoming issue of *The Urban Review*. A complete version of the Report is being published separately by the Research Institute through the support of the Waldorf Schools Fund. Copies are available at \$5.00 each through the Sunbridge College Bookstore, 260 Hungry Hollow Road, Spring Valley, NY 10977, or through Parker Courtney Press, 307 Hungry Hollow Road, Chestnut Ridge, NY 10977 or by using the enclosed order form.