# Parental Perspectives on the Pandemic

## *David Sloan*

Just over a hundred years ago, Rudolf Steiner founded the first Waldorf school amid a raging pandemic—the so-called Spanish Flu. The disease was so lethal that it afflicted the entire world, killing over 50 million people. A century later, another worldwide pandemic is sweeping across the globe, once again claiming millions of lives, and still counting.

As with all educational institutions, over the past year, North American Waldorf schools had to contend with the myriad repercussions from Covid-19. While already engaged in preparing a survey of Waldorf families and their perceptions of the education offered their children, the Research Institute for Waldorf Education (RIWE) decided to review the impact of the pandemic on Waldorf school communities across the continent. More particularly, we wanted to hear from Waldorf parents and air their perspectives on the effect of the Covid-19 outbreak  on family life and on the way Waldorf schools have adapted to the challenges brought on by the pandemic.[1]

This survey was the first stage of a more ambitious, comprehensive plan, which aims to track the efficacy of Waldorf education, as a way of preparing for the next 100 years. With this project, initiated in the fall of 2020, RIWE is collecting Waldorf parents' perspectives of Waldorf education as they and their families have experienced it.  Specifically, the larger survey goals include:

- Giving parents a place to voice their experience of Waldorf education: why they chose it and how it has influenced the development of their children.
- Documenting the impact of Waldorf education on parents' home life and their parenting styles.
- Assessing the consequences of the Covid-19 outbreak on their lives and their relationship to their children's education.
- Engaging parents in their views on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI); Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer/Questioning, Asexual (LGBTIQA+);

Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and how they see their Waldorf School addressing these issues.

- Inquiring whether parents would recommend Waldorf education to other family members and to friends.

Covid-19 struck the country as we were preparing for this full-scale survey. The clear impact of the pandemic and the limitations it imposed on schools, students, and families convinced us to postpone the wider survey to October 2021 and focus for the moment on the issues involved with Covid-19. Schools participating in the wider survey will receive, by December 2021, the raw data collected from members of their community who respond to the survey questionnaire. Publication of the full analysis is planned for distribution by the end of the 2021-22 school year.

### *General Profile of the Respondents*

In January 2021, RIWE sent the survey specifically related to the effects of the pandemic to Waldorf schools in the United States and Canada. In response, 43 different Waldorf schools forwarded us completed surveys from 1,108 families; of these schools, 31 returned surveys from ten or more parents. Twenty-seven of the responding schools include a high school program as well as early childhood and elementary grades education. The locations of these schools cover a broad geographical swath, extending from coast to coast, and from Texas to Toronto.
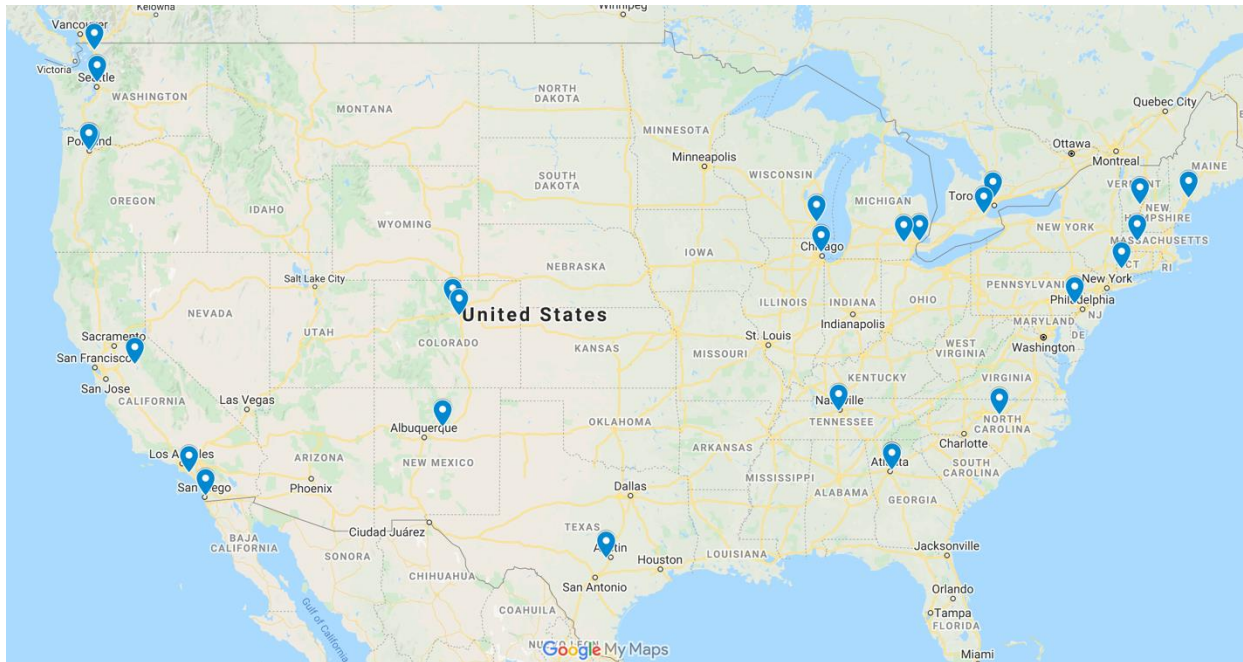
*Locations of the Waldorf schools with 10 or more responses to the survey*

Of the parents' responses received, 96% came from parents who currently have one or two children in a Waldorf school. Of these, just over half came from parents with children in grades 1-5, a quarter in middle school (grades 6-8), and nearly another quarter in high school. (The survey did not contain questions about early childhood programs.) In addition, the pool of responses included a mix of parents new to Waldorf education (10%) and "veteran" families who have been part of a Waldorf school community for 12 or more years (26%).

To ensure respondents' anonymity, we conducted the poll using Survey Monkey, which was sent to schools for further distribution to parents. Of course, the respondents were a self-selecting group: given that they made the willing choice to take the survey, they could not be considered a random sample of the larger Waldorf-parents population. However, given the sheer number of respondents, their range of years connected to Waldorf communities, the variety of younger and more established schools, and the extensive geographical spread of schools, we feel confident that any so-called response bias was minimal. While it is convenient to assume that parents who take the time to fill out such a survey tend to be more supportive of Waldorf education than those who choose not

to respond, we found that most questions elicited a rich spectrum of strongly held views—both laudatory and critical—about the impact of the pandemic on family life and the schools' resulting actions.

## Financial Impacts

Over nine in ten respondents claimed that the pandemic had either somewhat or greatly affected their families. Interestingly, however, over 40% of parents stated that the pandemic had not unduly affected their family's financial situation *yet,* an indication, perhaps, that many Waldorf parents able to afford independent school tuition also have the financial resources to cushion themselves from the economic distress that other parents did report. For example, over 1 in 10 parents shared that either they or their spouse/partner had lost a job, and over 25% had endured salary reductions. Another 13% disclosed that they had taken on debt to make ends meet, and 1 in 5 families stated that savings and/or retirement funds had been tapped. A smaller—but not insignificant—number of respondents (4%) wrote that their family business had either temporarily or permanently closed.
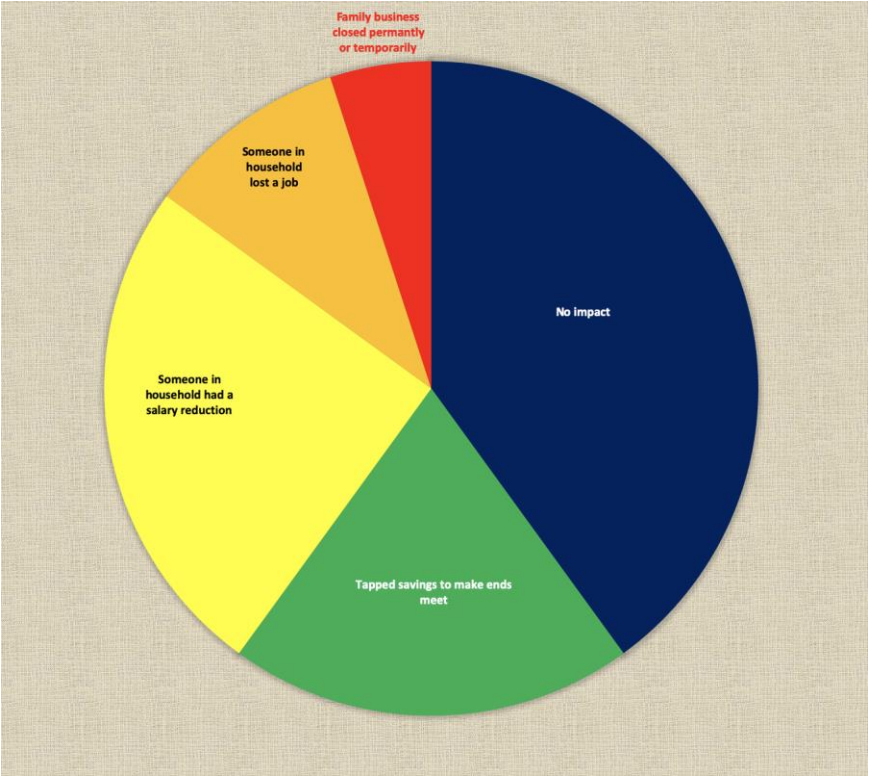
*Pie chart showing distribution of financial impact on Waldorf families*

### The Pivot to Distance Learning

Last March 2020, when the first general lockdown occurred, Waldorf schools—like all other institutions—immediately shut their doors to in-person instruction. For the rest of the school year, teachers and administrators scrambled to create online options that would keep students learning.  For a school system that has pointedly striven to diminish the amount of screen time in the lives of its elementary students, this abrupt switch presented a monumental challenge. Teachers who had never even heard of Zoom platforms or breakout rooms were suddenly required to familiarize themselves with such tools and within days or weeks to implement online lesson plans.

According to the survey results, those plans met with mixed success. One indication of initial parent support for the schools' adjusted programs was that nearly 80% of respondents dutifully followed the instructions provided by their schools. Because most schools quickly recognized the draining nature of the medium, teachers' distance learning lessons were soon reduced in terms of both frequency and duration.

This meant, of course, that parents—many of whom housebound because of the lockdown—needed to become more involved in their children's education. A number of parents expressed ambivalence about their expanded role, underscoring both the fulfilling and challenging aspects of their increased involvement. One parent wrote:

> We feel a lot more involved. This is positive in some sense; through regular Zoom calls with teacher and parents, we actually feel closer to other parents as we figure this out together. The primary stress has been juggling our full-time work with childcare and home school responsibilities.

The intensified engagement in their children's learning led parents to another significant discovery: their recognition—and appreciation—that they were becoming much more knowledgeable about the Waldorf curriculum. What had been more or less exclusively the domain of trained Waldorf teachers, with its internal cohesiveness and age-appropriate sequencing, began to open like a welcome new vista to attentive parents. One stated: "We actually got a better peek at how wonderful and effective this education can be for the right child." A number of parents also commented on how learning from home had strengthened

family ties. "In many ways, it feels a lot more relaxed, less pressure. We're enjoying the slower days with less to fill out our calendar in regard to school. . ."

On the other hand, the overlapping roles of parent and "educator" often led to increased stress at home. Balancing work responsibilities with hands-on assistance in a child's schooling proved to be a daunting task, notably in households with two full-time wage-earners short on sleep, pedagogical experience, and eventually patience. One parent declared, "Last year was a nightmare; two parents working full time and trying to implement very confusing schedules and online platforms for a child who needed much more support to keep engaged. . . . This has caused a lot of stress." Another described "adults coming home to complete disaster every day that cannot possibly be kept up while children try to learn and adults try to earn a paycheck. Two out of three kids are in counseling, and all five of us should be."

As demanding as the new pandemic reality was for two-parent families, it is clear  that the situation was much more onerous for single-parent households juggling work, childcare, and assisting with online classes. Dozens of respondents fell into this category. Several were justifiably upset that a "single working parent" was not included in the survey as an answer choice. One wrote, "Single full-time working parent. Your survey should be more inclusive, because there are a lot of single parents out there!"

In general, whether parents viewed their added responsibilities as burdens or as opportunities, the pandemic clearly added complications and turmoil to many family relationships. And if we burrow into the center of the questions raised about Covid-19's transformative effects on family life and schooling, we find perhaps the most contentious issue of all: wildly divergent parental views on the use of computers.


### *Technology: Invaluable Connector or Soul Crusher?*
 While a few Waldorf schools simply halted their programs altogether during the lockdown—both in-person and virtual options—online learning became the only viable option for most others wanting to maintain even a vague semblance of an ongoing school year.  We already mentioned the difficulties for teachers unaccustomed to distance instruction. Not only did they have to learn how to employ digital media in the service of

online education; in an atmosphere of high anxiety and uncertainty, teachers and administrators had to design schedules that would thread the needle between being too demanding and too lax. They also had to be sensitive to constantly changing conditions in their local communities based on fluctuating infection rates.

Some schools tried to recreate the full school-day schedule online, a model that usually proved to be too arduous for teachers and students alike. Still, around 50% of respondents said their school offered daily online classes, and approximately another 35% reported virtual learning options during some portion of each week. The remaining 15% of respondents said their school offered no online classes at all. One parent acknowledged the monumental challenges that confronted teachers. "Describing a response to a fundamental shift in educational delivery without preparation, during a pandemic, is not a realistic thread; people were in survival mode."

Last spring, the unanticipated upsurge in computer use proved to be a two-edged sword for most families. Decades before the advent of the internet, Waldorf educators had cautioned against children's premature exposure to media, most notably television and cinema. Since the turn of the century, as digital technology has become ubiquitous in the culture, Waldorf schools have continued to provide a counterpoint to the mainstream's ever-increasing reliance on computers and other electronic media in the classroom. Many families found their way to Waldorf education because of that very stance, so the sudden adoption of computers as a vehicle for imparting lessons to their children came as a shock to some, a betrayal to others. One parent summed up this latter view: "[Technology] opened the Pandora's box of no turning back. That was the absolute worst thing that happened to my family. My child is now obsessed with computers and that is all he wants to do." However, 40% of respondents praised the schools' efforts to establish distance learning as being either "extremely" or "very" effective, and another 38% offered qualified approval: "parts worked, other things did not." One parent commended the school

> for the tremendous effort it has taken, and continues to take, given the circumstances. However, remote learning has been a disaster for my son. He has ADD, and learning in two dimensions from a computer all day has been awful. The school has provided materials and has been as accommodating as they can, but we are really struggling.

Another respondent summed up the monumental task of meeting the needs of neurodiverse students. "Waldorf education does not translate well to online learning. It is particularly challenging for children with attention challenges and learning differences. Waldorf education needs to rise in its approach to working with children with sensory processing difficulties and learning differences."

Dozens of parents whose children did not identify as special needs students concluded that their school had done a creditable job of transitioning to online education, while acknowledging the drawbacks of the less-than-ideal circumstances. One parent characterized distance learning as "a way to keep education going; however, with a tremendous negative impact on my child's well-being." According to some respondents, these adverse effects manifested physically in their children.

> We have been maintaining a somewhat minimal digital environment at home and because of the current situation, it's all digital now. Kids are already showing problems related to computers for prolonged durations (eye fatigue, tired, complaining of headaches, etc.).

Equally concerning to some respondents were their children's psychological and emotional struggles to adjust to the new reality of distance learning. "Computer time has made my son's mental health much more challenging. He gets anxious and depressed more easily and he is exhausted more often."

Studies have long established that such exhaustion is due in some measure to the inherent heightened stress levels induced by prolonged online exposure. However, a few parents expressed concern that this stress was exacerbated by teachers' inability to adjust to the new conditions.

> I am more appreciative of teachers in general, but I am extremely disappointed at the horrible job Waldorf has done with the online teaching. They are still using the in-person approach for online teaching. They have proven again that they are not proactive, flexible, or adaptive to change.

The experience of most parents, however, ran counter to this perception: in general, they lauded teachers who were committed to creating as much of an online Waldorf "community" as the medium would allow. One effusive parent affirmed that "I always knew

how amazing [the teachers] are, but they are [now] going above and beyond and are absolute heroes and angels. Incredible what they're doing for our children."

Nevertheless, a vast majority of parents agreed that the most grievous toll exacted by the move to online education was the months-long absence of in-person interaction. Waldorf teachers are committed to cultivating hands-on, experiential lessons rich in human connections and fostered by a child-centered education; however, for the entirety of last spring, the only schooling possible was virtual. As a consequence, the everyday handshakes, hugs, and warm interpersonal contacts between teachers and students abruptly ended. As one parent lamented,

> Seeing what this did to children and what it is still doing to them in schools where they are not allowed back is saddening. It is really difficult both for parents' mental health and child mental health to be away from people, friends, teachers they love, who still try to teach them and inspire them.
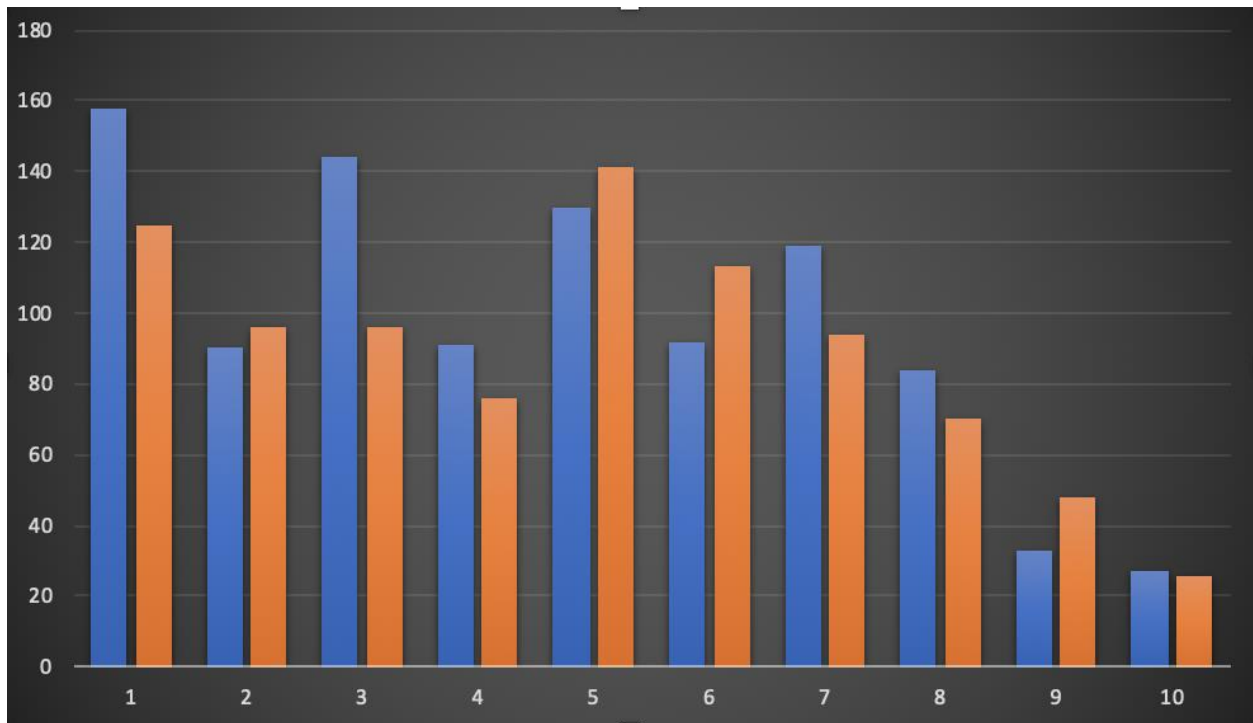


*The left-hand bar in each pair indicates students' experience of at-home learning (1 being the least, 10 the most desirable); right-hand bars show parents' experience of at-home learning.*

It is noteworthy that this parent was mourning a lack of social interaction not only for her children, but for herself as well. Many parents remarked that it took the pandemic—

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and the resulting dwindling of their school-based relationships in the move to virtual learning—for them to recognize just how much they depended upon such interactions to enrich their own lives. A representative respondent wrote that he felt "less connection to the community aspect of the school. Without the opportunity to be in person for school celebrations, festivals, athletics, it's hard to keep or build connections."

Parents felt a related, significant loss for their children in the domain of the arts and crafts curricula. Not surprisingly, parents wrote that most schools simply could not find creative ways to virtually maintain the immediacy and robustness that students experience in well-taught handwork, music, and drawing classes. "Kids need more art, more ways to express their feelings/thoughts/perceptions. Social media is about sameness. We need to offer them creativity." Another parent concurred, missing "the things that make it Waldorf, such as eurythmy, handwork, art, movement-based learning, theater, connecting with teachers, staff, and children."

A small but forceful minority of parents applauded both the schools' embrace of technology and their relatively smooth adjustment to online learning. One declared, "The school did a phenomenal job of keeping students engaged and learning. My child struggles a lot with the virtual learning and schedule, but I don't consider this a fault of the school." Another felt that their children actually benefited from home-based virtual learning, citing the blessing of fewer in-school distractions. Yet another respondent saw the shift to technology in education as an inevitability, even after the pandemic ends.

> It's the modern world. Online learning is going to be part of it. . . . Waldorf needs to pivot in order to survive. . . . Teachers are what make the difference, not the medium. Learning to teach and engage children, whether in person or remotely, will be the new gravitas. I hope Waldorf can evolve with the same values and the same methodology, [while] assuming some new technology. . .

### A Vital Factor: Transparency

How successfully Waldorf schools "evolved" and adapted during the pandemic often depended on how well they communicated with parents.  Repeatedly, respondents raised the issue of communication as critical to their experience of feeling either welcomed as co-educators or treated as outsiders.  Because the pandemic upended familiar and stabilizing norms both in the home and at school, two-way

communication became crucial for both parents and teachers to feel mutually supported. As has been noted, many parents expressed regret that the pandemic eroded the sense of community so central to Waldorf education. Instead of redoubling their efforts to reach out to families—thus preserving a semblance of community life—some schools simply could not overcome the constraints imposed by the pandemic. When asked what they wished schools would have done differently during the pandemic, one parent expressed a view shared by many:

> [Schools could have] communicated better, faster, and decisively. They waited far too long to address the community. There should have been weekly updates. We went months without hearing really anything. I wish the school had done more to keep families from leaving. . . and made efforts to keep community alive.

Other parents underscored their displeasure at the lack of transparency in schools' decision-making. "The school could have better engaged the community. . . . During our recent parent evening, the teacher did not mention one challenging thing. . . . We know this is not the full picture. More authentic and transparent engagement seems like a healthier approach."

Another area of concern that nettled some respondents was often divergent communications from different teachers. In the initial staging of online learning, many parents experienced wildly inconsistent messaging from the school. "At the start some teachers used different online assignment platforms and that was very stressful for my daughter, who had never navigated those types of programs." Another parent wished that there had been "more communication between subsections of the faculty and more consistency regarding quarantine protocols on campus." Respondents cited mixed messages from administrators, lack of faculty uniformity with online approaches, and shifting schedules that caught families off guard as examples of inadequate efforts to communicate clearly and in a timely manner with parents.

However, when schools made communication a priority—alongside safety protocols, effective distance learning, and clearly delineated plans to return to in-person schooling as soon as possible—parents responded positively. "The school

functioned according to the immediate present circumstances. There are not only no complaints; we would say it was/is a model of a dynamic education during a crisis." Another parent captured the sentiments of hundreds of respondents, writing, "I honestly don't know what else they could have done. They were responsive, made changes when necessary, kept the parent body informed, and did the best they could in an unprecedented situation."

***The Shift Back to In-Person Learning***

In the aftermath of Waldorf schools' scramble to introduce distance learning during the lockdown, respondents left no doubt about their wish for the future. As tirelessly and conscientiously as teachers had worked, a vast majority of parents longed for a return to in-person learning as soon as humanly possible. Scores of parents expressed some version of the following two responses: "I can't wait until the kids can all go back to school to be immersed in their social and academic rhythms that make Waldorf so unique and truly a blessing." "Online was the best solution given the circumstances, but definitely not something we want. Our kids need personal interaction."
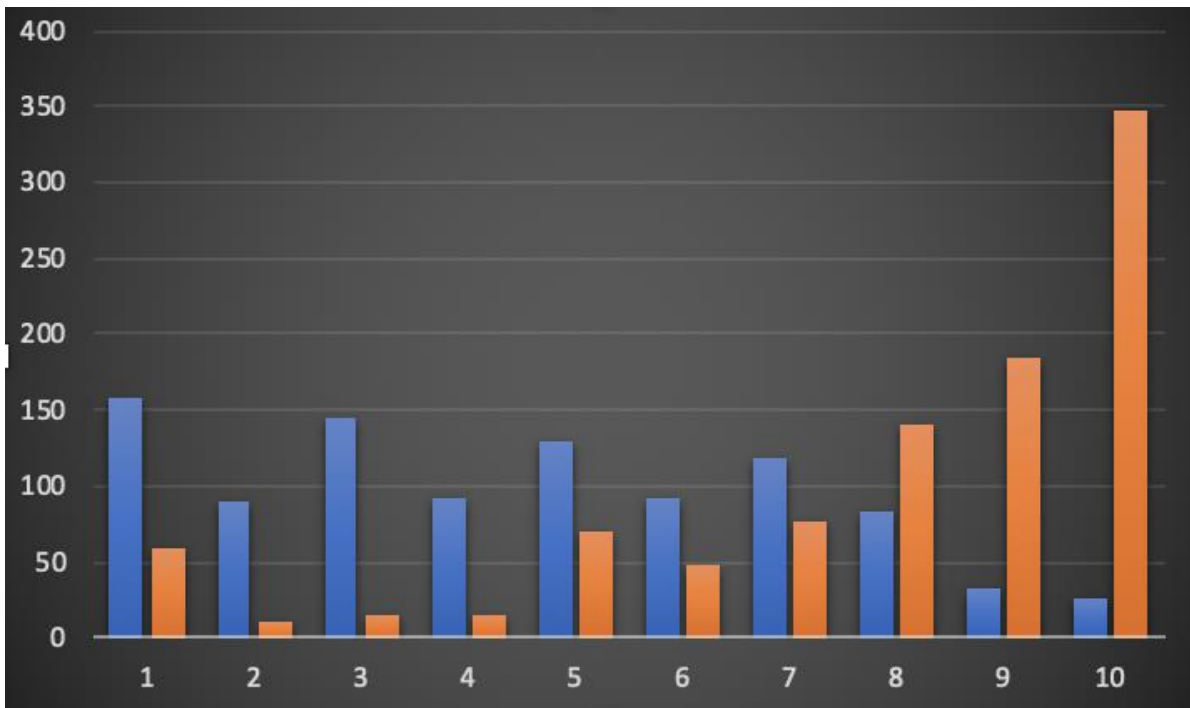
By way of contrast, a just-published national survey conducted by NPR/Ipsos reveals that nearly a third of parents polled said "they were likely to stick with remote learning indefinitely" for their children.[2] The survey did not make clear whether these parents favored the online option out of an abundance of caution for their children's health, because of the convenience associated with remote learning, or because they believed that virtual teaching was more effective than in-person schooling.

Waldorf parents expressed no such reluctance to return children to in-person education. School administrators and faculty had the summer to explore, and then implement, creative strategies for reestablishing in-person instruction. We asked parents to characterize any differences between schools' handling of the pandemic during the lockdown—from March to June 2020—and since the beginning of the 2020-21 school year. Their responses were crystal clear about the dramatic improvement from the spring response to the fall. On a scale of 1 to 10 rating parents' satisfaction with distance learning, the average rating was just under 5, as opposed to an average of nearly 8 that parents gave to schools that had returned to in-person learning in the fall. One respondent turned to a familiar analogy: "When the children returned to in-person learning, they were like plants that had just been watered."

We identified two obvious reasons behind parents' nearly universal praise for schools that restored in-person schooling: Most obvious was the great relief parents felt at not having to continue dividing their attentions between parenting and "assistant teaching" in their homes. "Remote learning has not been easy with two working parents and an only child who has had limited contact with others. ... Our child thrives in social and educational settings, so our school having in-person learning from Sept-Dec 2020 was wonderful." Another obvious reason had to do with the clear-cut benefits of in-person learning over online alternatives already described, including the joy of seeing children reunited with teachers and classmates, and the restoration of at least some art, music, movement, and crafts activities so central to the Waldorf experience.

Two other significant rationales emerged that made in-person education much more desirable than distance learning. One had to do with the creative ways faculty and staff transformed some campuses into outdoor classrooms. Whether they employed tents or built temporary shelters, many schools utilized these spaces for as long as weather permitted. These efforts did not go unnoticed by parents: "I am very impressed and proud of how the school has managed and adapted. The outdoor classrooms are amazing. Cold as hell, but safe and so very healthy for the children to be out in nature and together as a group."

Of course, the move outdoors was a big part of yet another reason why parents celebrated the return to in-person learning. Most respondents praised the many safety protocols schools instituted—including masking, sanitization, air filters, and physically distanced classroom spacing. "We are grateful more than ever for our school and the amazing flexibility and persistence they have shown during this time. We appreciate their diligence in following health and safety guidelines."

***Widespread Appreciation***

This theme of gratitude surfaced repeatedly in parents' responses. While a large number of parents echoed appreciation for schools' safety precautions, respondents also reiterated their thankfulness for their school's adaptability in the face of so much uncertainty and constantly shifting circumstances. "We were totally amazed at how quickly and thoroughly the school adapted and met the needs of the students in this strange world and kept the curriculum going." A large contingent of parents applauded teachers' "creativity in meeting the children's educational needs and maintaining the values of Waldorf education."

Because of their resourcefulness and timely, innovative adjustments, several schools began to enthuse those public-school families that had switched to Waldorf education only because of the in-person option. One parent shared, "We chose Steiner due to their dedication to in-person schooling, which has been the absolute best thing for our child, who cried every day after online public school from Mar.-Sept., when we finally had had enough." Another new Waldorf parent disclosed, "I'm

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still not totally sold on the Waldorf approach, but I've really appreciated the use of the outdoors, the compassion, the flexibility toward curriculum, and awareness of children's needs, given the constraints associated with the pandemic."

Based on survey responses, parents were grateful not only for the lessons teachers provided, but for sharing an empathetic sense that everyone—parents and teachers alike—was facing this unforeseen crisis in community. Furthermore, while families looked to the schools for stability and direction during the pandemic, parents especially appreciated teachers' sharing their own vulnerabilities. A number of parents were thankful

> for all the hard work and dedication shown from the teachers and staff. This was hard and we never for a moment felt abandoned. They were open and honest about their struggles and gave us room to share ours. They worked tirelessly through sadness, confusion, and disappointment alongside us.

We cite here one other intriguing reason for the gratitude expressed by a small contingent of parents. Several respondents credited Waldorf education itself for their children's positive experiences during the pandemic. "Twelve rich years of Waldorf education prepared my child for this unexpected spell of quiet, contemplative time. Despite the sadness from missing a normal senior year, she has remained, balanced, creative, productive, and generous."

Another parent even extended an appreciation for the impact Waldorf had on the entire family:

> I have pondered the ideals of Waldorf as this situation globally continues. It is encouraging to see that for all our talk of adaptation and flexibility and the ability to meet life as it comes to us, we are actually walking the talk. . . . I am so glad that my child and my family have been in Waldorf education for so long, so that we were ready for this moment.

It might hearten Waldorf educators to hear that children's—and parents'—long-term experience of the curriculum has served as a type of therapeutic, enabling them to navigate the uncharted waters of this pandemic with an uncommon sense of purposefulness and equanimity.

***Unmasking a Dispute***

During the pandemic, the issue of whether to wear masks or not has been one of our country's most politicized and divisive issues. Fistfights have broken out in grocery stores between those who vehemently champion social responsibility and those defending personal liberties. Members of Congress have accused one another of infecting fellow legislators or of suppressing one's freedom of expression. Waldorf communities have not been spared this ongoing controversy, although the survey revealed strong support of schools' mask mandates. Of the 885 responses, virtually 90% of parents voiced either grudging support ("It's a necessary inconvenience") or impassioned endorsement of schools' enforcement of mask-wearing ("I think it is a vital safety protocol to stop the virus from spreading. The short-term challenge is facial recognition/social cues that can be missed with a mask, but this seems small in comparison to the good that a mask does").

Besides the safety factor, several respondents pointed to a larger social issue as "a perfect teachable moment to learn and model respect and demonstrate what it means to be considerate, instead of the contemporary 'me me me first' culture that the media . . . tends to promote." Several parents went so far as to say that *without* mask mandates, they would not send their children back to school. Among that vast majority of parents approving of masks, one qualifier surfaced as a secondary pattern: a number wished that the children, especially the younger ones, didn't need to wear masks outdoors.

Of the 10% who were critical of school masking policies, objections ranged from adverse physical effects to disdain for the "fear-mongering" they saw as the result of "overblown" medical and governmental concerns about the virus. One parent was "extremely worried about the consequences and lack of oxygen to the brain." Another parent believed masks "give a false sense of protection and create a barrier between people emotionally and psychologically." One of the most pointed responses blasted masking protocols as

> the exact opposite of Waldorf philosophy and Steiner's teaching. To say that Waldorf aims to remove the constrictions to a child developing as a free person and then require that they cover their face, removing their self-

expression … is completely inauthentic. …  We believe this is extremely damaging to them and we will not tolerate it for much longer.

### *A Question of Leadership*

The masking controversy seemed linked to another one of the most discordant issues that emerged in the survey: parents' conflicting opinions of Waldorf schools' public stances regarding the pandemic. Most respondents strongly supported those schools that closely adhered to safety protocol guidelines set by medical experts and local authorities. Representing the sizable majority, one parent lauded the school's "leadership team.  . . . We have been really impressed with the communication daily. . . . The school's commitment to keeping health and safety front and center with COVID has been astonishing."

However, a vocal minority criticized schools' pandemic policies on two primary counts: 1) for practices that engendered a "culture of fear", and 2) for what they perceived as craven capitulation to official mandates. One parent wrote:

> Have common sense. . . . Have empathy toward the kids when they are on campus and don't treat them like prisoners. . . . Show kids a positive mind set instead of scaring the crap out of them. I heard many kids say, 'Don't get close to me or you will give me Covid and my parents will die.'

Several other respondents saw the masking debate as symbolic of a deeper problem with the schools.

> We are so disappointed in the Waldorf school. We joined Waldorf because you were different, mavericks in a world of boring submission to the norm. Waldorf's lockstep submission to the narrative and implementation of draconian policies, including outdoor classrooms in the winter and masking for children has been nothing short of heartbreaking. We are actively looking for alternatives to Waldorf as it is apparent that you are no longer following the core tenets that you were founded on.

Ultimately, these divergent views debating whether schools upheld or abandoned their core Waldorf values lead back to a broader question deepening the current rift in American society: Do people advocate measures that promote public welfare over personal liberties, or vice versa? More specific to this survey, *do Waldorf schools not*

*only teach, but actively foster, social responsibility, or do they stand for the*
*safeguarding of individual freedoms?*

Unfortunately, anyone who looks at the question through a political lens could see the answer as a zero-sum outcome. Waldorf educators might argue for a more nuanced approach. In fact, they might point to one of Rudolf Steiner's most often repeated verses in Waldorf circles, which underscores the mutuality imbedded in the relationship between the individual and the larger society: "The healthy social life is found when, in the mirror of each soul, the whole community finds its reflection, and when, in the whole community, the virtue of each one is living."[3]

### *Lessons from the Pandemic: Shaping the Future*

Having lived through the pandemic during the past year, most people must have experienced an altered sense of time at one point or another. Like Bill Murray's character in the movie *Groundhog Day*, many of us have felt trapped in an endlessly repetitive, undifferentiated "present," while simultaneously imagining life in a post-pandemic future, free from masks, social restrictions, and daily postings about horrific death rates. While most survey respondents focused on the events of the past year, some parents were thinking of the future – specifically, how Waldorf faculties could learn from the pandemic as they look toward the next school year and beyond. All of the respondents envisioning the future were in agreement that Waldorf educators could no longer depend upon the familiar methods and curricula of the past.

> We feel this pandemic has opened our eyes to new and different ways to do things. We feel the old models we followed for schooling and work are not healthy. . . . We hope that the schools will take this opportunity to create healthier and more nourishing ways to educate our children and move away from the go go go, non-stop mentality.

In helping schools prepare for this new reality, another parent offered a more specific suggestion: "I hope all schools take time to reflect on what is truly needed for students. … This could be outdoor education, a commitment to supporting diverse learning needs . . . and recognizing students have social-emotional needs as important as academic ones."

Finally, parents expressed a fervent hope that Waldorf teachers and staff will "take the pandemic as a wake-up call on every level. . . . We need to take a hard look at where the innovations in Waldorf can be; it cannot be a rehashing of what some people think that Steiner said or meant." Ironically but fittingly, perhaps it is helpful to remind everyone associated with the Waldorf movement of a statement made by Rudolf Steiner that resurfaced at the time of the centennial anniversary celebrating the founding of the first Waldorf school in 1919. Steiner remarked that as a movement or institution ages—up to 100 years—it either dies or needs re-founding on a new basis.[4] If Waldorf schools can use the lessons learned from the pandemic to truly meet the needs of twenty-first century families, the Waldorf movement may be able to not only revitalize their own schools, but "inspirit" education everywhere.

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[1] This survey, made possible by a grant from the Waldorf Educational Foundation (WEF), was conducted by a quartet of four Waldorf teachers—David Sloan (author), Andrew Starzynski (statistics), Connie Stokes (survey manager), and Douglas Gerwin (RIWE Executive Director)—with assistance in the design of the survey from Patrice Maynard (RIWE's Director of Publications and Development).

[2] Anya Kamanetz and Edna Uzunlar, "NPR/Ipsos Poll: Nearly One-Third of Parents May Stick With Remote Learning," March 5, 2021, www.NPR.com.

[3] Rudolf Steiner, "Anthroposophy and the Social Question" (1919), in *Understanding the Human Being: Selected Writings of Rudolf Steiner*, ed. Richard Seddon (Bristol, UK: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1993). Also published in *Anthroposophy* (1927), Vol. II, No. 3..

[4] Torin Finser, "The Future of Waldorf Education: Beyond 100," a speech given at the Center for Anthroposophy in New Hampshire, June 2019.