

Essential characteristics of / guidelines for Waldorf Pedagogy

During its session of May 30, 2025, the International Council for Steiner Waldorf Education – the Hague Circle (HC) – adopted the document *Essential Characteristics of Waldorf Pedagogy* as a binding orientation for the global Waldorf school movement. Even though the characteristics described here have general validity, individual schools can augment them, so they are aligned with their own specific cultural circumstances. The characteristics aim to emphasize and strengthen individual application, openness for development, the diversity of individual schools as well as providing unity in the Waldorf school movement. For early childhood and the preschool phase, the foundational principles adopted by the International Association for Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Education (IASWECE) apply.

Preliminary Remarks

In Rudolf Steiner's conception, the life of the Waldorf school springs from true insight into the nature of human development¹, a source for the teachers to practise the art of education as the children in their care grow, shaping and developing their teaching in accordance with the time, the school's location, and the people involved.

To be recognized as a Steiner Waldorf school, it is necessary to characterize essential elements of Waldorf pedagogy. Once a school has been recognized, it will be added to the worldwide list of Waldorf institutions, for which the International Council for Steiner Waldorf Education - the Hague Circle – is responsible.

The characteristics described here are formulated freely and contain characterizations of what the International Council understands by Waldorf education. This understanding is constantly evolving, so these characteristics will also be added to, or replaced over time. The underlying principles - the fundamentals - of the education remain the same.

¹ Rudolf Steiner's insight into the development of the human being, as outlined in his pedagogical lectures.

This document can serve as an orientation for individuals as well as schools (e.g. for purposes of self-evaluation) and forms an essential basis for the accreditation process of a Steiner Waldorf school.²

Essential characteristics of a Steiner Waldorf school are, among others:

Belonging to a World-wide Movement

The Waldorf movement forms an international network, within which individual Steiner Waldorf schools are autonomous, while being connected locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally.

The work of an individual school is strengthened by an awareness of the whole of the movement, and is nurtured by regular exchanges and interactions within the region and the home country, as well as in international conferences.

This awareness can grow and find expression in partnerships between schools in different countries, as well as in providing assistance for developing schools, or schools in need. Taking part in professional development courses, for teachers, parents and school representatives, will greatly strengthen this work.

Mutual interest and the overall effort to bring local educational practice in alignment with the *Essential characteristics* will strengthen the institution as well as the Waldorf movement as a whole, whereas isolation, provincialism, or even a lack of willingness to work together will weaken the movement as a whole. One way to foster this attitude of mutual interest is to perceive and understand ourselves as an integral part of society as a whole and proclaiming it as such.

School Identity

² Schools in countries where there is a Waldorf Association recognized by the International Council for Steiner Waldorf Education – the Hague Circle (IC) are included in the World School List on the Association's recommendation. If there is no such association, the IC will decide admission on the basis of a recommendation by at least two of its members. This recognition is a prerequisite for the right to bear the name "Waldorf" or "Rudolf Steiner" school, which is regulated in a separate procedure.

Every school is unique. Its identity manifests in all the recognized characteristics, virtues, and potential, which are in its disposal. The school determines these aspects, influenced by its history, location, and geography, as well as the circle of parents and teachers who put their stamp on the school organism.

Above and beyond that, a school bases its identity on its pursuit of the realization of the art of education as initiated by Rudolf Steiner, known as the Waldorf approach. The practical realization of the art of education, as sketched out and described by Rudolf Steiner, will find different forms of expression in each individual school. This has consequences for the way teachers conceive of teaching and learning, the way they handle content and the selection of teaching material, how they give form to the ways they relate to students, how they incorporate the educational principles, and lastly, to what extent their teaching methods are age-appropriate in the light of anthroposophical insights into child development. The way children learn is a significant health factor at each stage. All schools share the ultimate aim: healthy learning.

It is, therefore, essential for each school to find creative and responsible solutions in all the areas outlined. Taken together, they form a large part of a school's identity, culminating in what can be perceived as a sense of inner fulfillment, of meaning, in that the people involved feel in line with the ideals put forward. The extent to which the majority of the teachers have accomplished an attitude of openness in their striving for insight and self-education – with the help of anthroposophy – contributes in a major way to the school's identity and builds the spiritual substance out of which future challenges can be mastered by the school community.

The individual character of each school is determined by the quality of professional joy and the striving for anthroposophical insight as a basis for the pedagogy, as well as the cooperation of teachers, staff and parents – these things manifest in what generally is perceived as the school's spirit.

The curriculum and pedagogical creativity

There is no standardized curriculum for Waldorf schools which will work in every situation. But there are detailed indications given by Rudolf Steiner concerning suitable content for each age level, including methodological indications. Both content and method are aimed to optimally meet and support the development of body, soul, and spirit. Taken as a whole, these

curriculum indications are a basic constituent of Waldorf education. They are the backbone of the pedagogy and, in their totality, represent the curriculum. Many of these suggestions are valid for all subjects and are characterized by the fact that they enable meaningful, effective learning progress through repetition, variation and reflection. Over the decades, many colleagues have tried to summarize Rudolf Steiner's suggestions and develop them further in line with the times and the respective cultural context.³

It is essential for a Waldorf school that teachers strive to sharpen their perception of each individual child and to understand the developmental characteristics of children and young people at different ages on the basis of anthroposophical anthropology. Based on this, they will work on the content of the lessons in such a way that the local context, the time, and the situation are appropriately taken into account.

Teachers in a Waldorf school will therefore endeavour to:

- study anthroposophical anthropology and child development;
- work on understanding and applying Rudolf Steiner's suggestions for their subject;
- be aware of the cultural, social, geographical, ecological, historical and religious contexts of their school and the families involved;
- be aware of developments in the current academic discourse in the field of pedagogy;
- take note of state requirements with regard to teaching content and learning objectives and take them into account or integrate them where appropriate or necessary.

On the basis of this study, teachers in a school can individually and collegially develop a curriculum that realizes the intentions of Waldorf education in a specific way. The aim is to create a fruitful rapprochement between the possible and the ideal in order to work creatively and promote the development of the child through the curriculum. It will be necessary to revise this curriculum regularly and adapt it to developments in education and the wider society.

³ There are various curricula and curriculum adaptations for many countries. One of the basic curriculum designs was developed by Tobias Richter and colleagues. Please refer to the information on the following webpage: <https://www.forschung-waldorf.de/lehrplan>

The relationship teacher – child - world

Child development and learning in school are realized in a trust-based relationship between the child, or young person, and the teacher, and in perceiving the surrounding environment and the whole world. Waldorf teachers bear a special responsibility for the vital shaping of this relationship.

The types of relationship children need for healthy development depend, to a large degree, on their age.

- In preschool, teachers cultivate a loving, protective attitude. Practical and artistic activities are of primary importance, building on the children's ability to imitate. Children learn and relate to the world through free play.
- In the first 6 to 8 years of primary and middle school, teachers strive to build authentic relationships with the children, building on their innate need to follow a trusted authority, which enables them to relate to the world through a varied range of learning activities. The emphasis at this age is on getting to know the world by means of rich learning experiences through stories, pictures and characterizations.
- In adolescence, this relationship changes, because now the focus is on encountering and engaging with the world from the perspective of the subject areas and fields of study themselves. Adolescents will need space and encouragement to form their own judgments, as well as to be able to develop empathy and stimulate independent action. The decisive factor here is whether, in addition to their professional aptitude, middle and high school teachers have the ability to meet young people in such a way that the students discover their own aspirations and develop the courage to start shaping their biographies accordingly.
- Education and teaching are successful if further questions and interest in other people and the world are awakened in the children and young people. It is incumbent on schools to find ways to balance outside demands, (such as exams), with the demands of healthy mental and physical development.

Relationships with the pupils and students are deepened by child study. It is a further tool for getting in touch with the developing individuality of a child, allowing her or him to emerge

through observation and description, holding back customary judgements or ready-made solutions.⁴

The relationship between teachers and parents is a crucial part of daily educational practice. The cooperation between parents and teachers is cultivated in the sense of an educational partnership. Mutual interest, appreciation, regular encounters and cooperation create an atmosphere in which pupils and students can develop well. Adults also benefit in this atmosphere and have opportunities to develop their own educational potential. Parents and teachers in Waldorf schools therefore attach particular importance to cultivating relationships and finding creative solutions to overcome misunderstandings and mistrust.

Teachers as artists

Artistic teaching is one of the most important educational tools and may be understood in four ways.

1. The lesson itself is artistic in the sense of originality, imagery, creativity and also, in the sense of healthy breathing; that is to say, teachers need to perceive when it is time to change activity, creating a lively alternation of tasks allowing tension and release. This artistic quality in the design of lessons is an essential element of Waldorf education.
2. Teachers will use a range of traditional arts in appropriate forms in their lessons (painting, drawing, recitation, music, etc.).
3. Teachers themselves cultivate a relationship to an art form, including social art.
4. The teachers endeavour to create an appropriate artistic environment.

Teachers as researchers

The basis of science teaching, especially in the upper grades, takes a phenomenological approach. Apart from the teaching of science as such, a broader scientific attitude comes into play for teachers, extending to their whole approach to teaching and learning. Three aspects stand out:

⁴ Anna Seidl: “Ich bin du”; Christof Wiechert: “Solving the Riddle of the Child – The Art of Child Study”; Sylvia Barth, Angelika Wiehl: “Wahrnehmungsvignetten”.

1. Science as a subject: teachers develop their subjects on the basis of the scientific knowledge of their time, including Goethean research methods.
2. Teachers - within the scope of their possibilities – cultivate a scientific approach, in the sense of practising openness and objectivity; they ‘conduct research’ and reflect on their own teaching.
3. The scientific attitude extends to all dimensions of the human being, and finds expression in the spiritual scientific foundations of their teaching.

Standard forms in Waldorf Schools

In his conception of Steiner Waldorf schools, Rudolf Steiner specified only a few characteristic forms which give schools their identity. What has thus become institutionalized is grounded in deeper insights into human development on the one hand, and on the other hand, by the social task of the schools. These forms are:

For the children:

1. Stable class communities over many years. Classes arranged according to age, not according to standardized performance. No holding pupils back a year.
2. In addition, it is possible to form subject-specific, mixed ability learning groups.
3. The class teacher as a companion over many years (ideally, until the pupils are 14 years old).
4. Main Lesson in the morning, followed by subject lessons later in the day.
5. An early childhood, pre-school level without academic learning objectives.
6. The school is a comprehensive, ‘all-through’ school, from pre-school age to adulthood. The curriculum resonates with this model.
7. Individual guidance of pupils within the class community.
8. Co-education / children learn together.
9. Where conditions permit, eurythmy lessons in all grades.

For the teachers:

1. Each teacher, as a member of a team of colleagues, is responsible for the school as a whole.

2. Teachers stay in touch by meeting together every week, thereby furthering their education and cultivating social bonds and collegial working.
3. As a rule, the school is self-administered. Teachers and parents participate in self-administration.
4. Parents and teachers, from different perspectives, are jointly responsible for the school.
5. Each teacher is responsible for his or her teaching on the basis of anthroposophical anthropology. This pertains to a number of areas: maintenance of professional standards; cultivation of relationships with the pupils; social, professional and specialist skills, and the principles and aspirations of Waldorf education.
6. Teachers take two primary methodological principles into account:
 - The human constitution is threefold: we act, feel and think. Lessons are therefore built up in such a way that content is structured according to three steps or phases: living experience (activity); internalizing, letting the experience or content resonate (feeling); cognitive acuity, reflection and, recognition, (thinking).
 - The rhythmic interchange between day and night consciousness is at the foundation of teaching and learning in blocks. Recognizing the need to allow the different consciousness of the night to play in, Waldorf schools worldwide have instituted the so-called Main Lesson. A subject, or a series of themes and topics are worked on for about two hours at the beginning of the school day for several weeks. In this way, during the night, the day's experiences are incorporated through neural plasticity, and can be followed up the next day to deepen and retain the knowledge acquired.
7. Teachers seek and find ways of furthering the development of quality in their teaching.

Learning objectives, assessment, evaluation tools

The school must describe and document both the development and achievement of the students and pupils in an appropriate manner. This is done in the form of annual school reports. These contain a fulsome and accurate picture of each pupil and a record their achievements in a way that relates to the pupils' abilities. The students are not measured against fixed standards. The reports characterize how the student has grown, developed and learnt.

Waldorf education is designed for a school period of twelve years and aims to prepare students for the next step, be it further education, higher education, or professional training. Schools must offer the qualifications required for this and, where needed, certify them in the form prescribed by the state.

The school community: working together

The basis for Steiner Waldorf schools is the school community and the human interaction between parents, teachers, pupils and staff. All working together is guided by human ideals and human dignity. Communally, all those involved are invited to develop significant non-hierarchical forms of cooperation. Transparency and accountability (instead of personal and institutional power) are sought in all school management processes and decisions. These are the basis for the engagement of the individual in the community and help to determine the school's image. Various activities and committees facilitate meetings between teachers and parents (parent evenings, consultation hours, discussions by and with students). When a school is perceived as making such an effort, it will gain a reputation for being an institution which is conscious of its social responsibility.

School management

Leading a Steiner Waldorf school means keeping the task and mission of the Waldorf school clearly in mind and working on it diligently. This is only possible through the joint study of the anthroposophical foundations of the education. School leadership is therefore based on the unifying spirit of the Waldorf school.

The forms of leadership needed will correspond to the art of education and the needs of the pupils. In schools that have been in existence for several decades, it is worthwhile reviewing the structures, decision-making processes, and management principles regularly. The following viewpoints are essential for the management of Waldorf schools and kindergartens:

- Steiner Waldorf schools are generally self-governing (i.e., not state-administered) organizations. Teachers and parents manage the school and create appropriate and purposeful committees. On this basis, the school's structure, organization, finances and administration can be carried out in a wide variety of ways. At present, takes the form of delegating tasks and responsibilities. Ideally, these matters are

discussed and agreed by consensus and the tasks carried out in accordance with the school's mission by those entrusted with them.

- The weekly meeting of teachers as a forum for regular professional development and research is indispensable. The pedagogical meeting is essential to achieve coherence and establishing a learning community in an education that focuses on pedagogical creativity and whose further development is not hierarchically determined. The focus of the faculty meeting is the study of anthroposophical anthropology, child study and the exchange of pedagogical questions and experiences among individual teachers, as well as providing a source of mutual help and advice. It is crucial that the results of this cooperation flow into the management and direction of the school as a whole.

Corporate health (budget and finances)

The size of an institution will determine the organizational structure in such a way that it can function properly, while staying healthy and addressing the educational and social tasks of a school.

Since in most countries Steiner Waldorf schools are not state-funded, many schools are dependent on donations in addition to parental contributions. With regard to parental contributions and salaries, the school community strives for solidarity and solutions that are geared as far as possible to the economic and social needs and possibilities of the people involved.

Realistic budget planning is important for the social atmosphere and also contributes to the quality of educational work. A middle way must be found between excessive thriftiness and overestimating the possibilities of finding new sources of income.

The pursuit of profit and profit maximization are incompatible with the idea of the Waldorf school. As a rule, Waldorf schools and kindergartens are supported by non-profit associations. Where this is not possible, it must be ensured that the shareholders make 100% of the profits available to the school community.

Evaluation and self-evaluation

The pedagogical and administrative independence of Steiner Waldorf schools require efficient forms of evaluation and self-evaluation to ensure the quality of teaching and the well-being of the child, and to enable the school's leadership and management to react quickly and effectively at any time, whenever needed.

The International Council for Steiner Waldorf Education – the Hague Circle – adopted the revised versions on May 17, 2015, in Vienna/Austria, on May 7, 2016, in Arles/France, and on May 30, 2025, in Budapest/Hungary.