

EDUCATING THE WHOLE CHILD
heart, hands, and head

Orchard Valley Waldorf School



ART. MUSIC. MOVEMENT. Teaching in the oral tradition. “Our teachers must be able to integrate all of these in their daily work,” says Deb Reed, administrator of East Montpelier’s Orchard Valley Waldorf School. The goal, says Reed, is to instill self-confidence and dynamic thinking, and to strengthen the will to persist. On a tour of the school in January, I looked for evidence of these components of the Waldorf education, and it didn’t take long to notice all of them.



Nursery students gather around the table with Early Education Teacher Peggy Roche and assistant Maria Smart. Art and music form key parts of the Orchard Valley Waldorf School curriculum.



WALDORF EDUCATION: A BRIEF HISTORY

1861–1925: The lifetime of Austrian scientist and thinker Rudolf Steiner, founder of the Waldorf school movement.

April 1919: Steiner visits a Waldorf Astoria cigarette factory in Stuttgart, Germany, and stresses the importance of social rebuilding after World War I.

September 1919: The owner of the cigarette factory asks Steiner to establish and lead a school for the children of factory workers.

1928: The first North American Waldorf school opened in New York City.

2014: Worldwide, there are 900 Waldorf schools in 83 countries, including the Orchard Valley School in East Montpelier founded in 2004. Waldorf is the world's largest independent educational movement.

Walking the hallway past classrooms to the main office, I saw artwork on the walls. Before classes began, first through third graders gathered to sing “We Shall Overcome” and other songs of the Civil Rights Movement in preparation for the Martin Luther King Jr. school assembly. Visiting various classrooms, I saw students standing at their desks as they recited parts of Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech together.

Later, despite stinging cold temperatures, students took to the rolling hills that make up their playgrounds behind the buildings for recess. Students were moving, singing, and reciting; these and other tenets of the Waldorf philosophy of education are certainly in evidence at Orchard Valley.

BEGINNINGS IN A BARN

Orchard Valley Waldorf School is the result of a 2004 merger of two schools, Montpelier’s Child’s Garden and Three Rivers School. Child’s Garden was a pre-K program



with aspirations of expanding to become a pre-K through grade 8 Waldorf school. Three Rivers, meanwhile, comprised a group of parents who incorporated as a school, hired a teacher, and enrolled their kids as students. The two groups came together to purchase the current site of Orchard Valley’s main campus on Route 14 in East Montpelier; the school’s Child’s Garden campus in Montpelier continues to offer a pre-K program.

“According to the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America, you should have two strong kindergartens feeding one first grade,” says Reed, who has served as the school’s only administrator since its inception in 2004. In order to build one strong and sustainable

program in a rural area of Vermont, the two school programs joined forces.

One unique aspect of the Orchard Valley Waldorf School is that the property that became the school’s main campus was a Vermont farm. “Important in a Waldorf curriculum are beauty, simplicity, and reverence,” says Reed. These elements are clearly present in the space that has become the program’s main site.

The buildings, including two yurts that were added in 2006 and 2010 to house classes as enrollment grew, are simple, but they get the job done. Classroom walls are not poster-covered, and the sparse decorations prompt an appreciation for the beauty of what the building once was—a function-



Clockwise from upper left: First graders playing their role in the Michaelmas Pageant held each October. Welcoming students back on the first day of school. A nursery student and friend during the Michaelmas Festival. Looking through the gate to the farmhouse which houses the nursery and kindergarten classes. The seasonal festivals include crafts tables, with instruction for younger children.



ing dairy barn. Orchard Valley Waldorf teachers adopt personas that Reed describes as “loving authorities” more befitting teachers of a bygone era.

CHILDHOOD-CENTERED TEACHING

Jane Hill has been a Waldorf teacher for fifteen years, nine of them at Orchard Valley. She has not only served as a teacher but has also been a parent of two Orchard Valley students.

“We chose Vermont to have and raise kids,” she says. “As parents, we chose Orchard Valley because of the energy and spirit of the school. The children are so healthy.”

Waldorf schools, say Reed and Hill, are *childhood-centered* instead of individual child-centered. “The idea is to meet the developmental stage of each child,” says Hill. Her students, therefore, are 12 going on 13. “This is puberty, just before adolescence,” she says. “There are lots of emotions and soul experiences that are coming to the surface. One way to meet these is to bridge them with the outside world, and that bridge is language.”



First graders learn to knit. Teacher Jacqueline Gabe speaking to her class at its eighth grade graduation ceremony in June 2013.

In a Waldorf community, great responsibility falls on teachers. First, with no principal, curriculum and programming are teacher-driven and based on the training and expertise of the teachers. Take, for example, Hill's seventh-grade creative writing block. "This is a standardized curriculum that would be similar to Waldorf schools in Germany, France, or Canada," says Hill. "However, the choices of poems and stories and how I bring them—these are all mine." For Hill, the Waldorf curriculum is scaffolding around which to build learning blocks. "My goal is to help them develop writing skills focusing on choice of language, description, observation, and using sensory experience."

BUILDING A SENSE OF PLACE

In a Waldorf community, where the objective is to develop the whole child, teachers play

a more direct role in the larger community than conventional teachers. "Teachers meet with parents four times a year," says Reed. At these group meetings, teachers share information about childhood development, about the current classroom content, and about how parents can help at home. Parents, in turn, raise issues they face.

Reed remembers these meetings from when her kids were Waldorf students. "We talked about what we could do instead of popping in a 30-minute video for the kids to watch while we cooked dinner," Reed says. The answer: "We gave our kids a cutting board and paring knife, and they helped!"

Looking back, the notion of involving her kids in household tasks seems obvious, but at the time it was eye opening. "There is tremendous support for families," she says. Waldorf schools consciously leave electronics and gadgetry out of the curriculum. There are no calculators or computers in Orchard Valley classrooms or in any Waldorf classroom. "This requires buy-in from

families," says Reed. At the parent meetings with teachers, parents discuss—and come to agreement on—issues like how much screen time to allow their kids at home.

Meanwhile, teachers, families, and students grow together; teachers stay with their classes throughout their school experiences—often from grades one to eight. "We really get to know our teacher," says Talvi Ekis, one of Hill's seventh graders. "And our classmates are like family now." According to Ekis, the Waldorf way encourages students to develop creativity. "At other schools, they give students a workbook," says Ekis. "Here, we make our own workbooks."

To be involved in the Orchard Valley Waldorf School is to experience two parallel influences. The community surrounding the 180 students who attend the school adopts the philosophy of Rudolph Steiner, founder of the first Waldorf school in 1919. And students in a small school in rural Vermont can't help but feel a sense of place each time they step foot in their school building.



“These are kids of parents who are filled with spirits of independence and initiative,” says Hill. “And they typically have an appreciation for what a special place Central Vermont is.”

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