

# Working Conditions for Handwork Teachers in Elementary Grades

Recommended Best Practices; key conditions for a successful handwork program

*With this document we support handwork teachers, and offer insight and information gathered from our cumulative experience, as an aid to the decision-making members of each school community to establish or support a robust handwork program.*

**Handwork** is an integral part of the Waldorf curriculum; handwork is not an add-on or an elective. It differs from and is complementary to visual or performing arts. Developing flexible 3D thinking leads to enlivened abstract thinking in later years. Children develop problemsolving skills, geometric, logical thinking, and handwork provides immediate tangible results of their actions. This lays the groundwork for future sound decision-making. In current times, handwork provides a balance for the children who are stressed and anxious. Scientific studies demonstrate that bilateral, rhythmic, repetitive movements raise serotonin levels, reducing the sense of isolation and fear we have recently all been subjected to. Engaging in meaningful, practical work integrates children into a healthy relationship experience of community. Well-supported teachers will be able to offer students the optimum educational experience; they will enjoy far greater job satisfaction, minimizing overwhelm and burnout. Teacher retention will be higher, and the possibility of 'growing your own' teachers increases as assisting or volunteering in handwork is often a gateway to full carrying teaching.

- ❖ **Workload** – we recommend full-time employment whenever possible, so handwork teachers can realize the full benefit and responsibility of being a carrying member of the school community. Full-time equivalent of 18 – 20 contact hours (@45 minutes – 1 hour) per week.
- ❖ **Preparation time** – we recommend 1 hour prep for 1 hour teaching in grades 1-5; 1 hour prep per class in grades 6-8, when double periods (90 minutes) are common. This is based on a class size of 22-26. Note: this is very different from other subject teachers, as the handwork teacher must closely examine and potentially resolve multiple individual mistakes before returning the work to each child in a condition which will ensure student success in the next class. We recommend prep hours be recognized and paid.
- ❖ **Budget** - an average of US \$20 per student per year is recommended. Handwork teachers must maintain inventory, plan ahead, and may need to re-order during the course of the year, depending on the achievement of the students. This is an average over 8 grades; material costs vary, as do equipment and maintenance costs.

❖ Additional in-class help – because of the individual attention required, many teachers find the presence of a skilled assistant essential to serve the children better. In order to meet the needs of a very broad spectrum of skill levels and student dexterity, and to allow appropriate focus to each individual student, an assistant or skilled volunteer is frequently necessary. This in-class support for the students can either be on-going or at particular stages in delivery of the curriculum.

❖ Class size – again, because of the uniquely individual teaching required, we recommend class sizes not exceed 24-28 in grades 1-4, and do not exceed 12– 15 in grades 5-8. For the upper grades, infrastructure and necessary supplies must be in place to assure delivery of an adequate handwork educational experience. There are multiple variables: class size must be reduced as necessary according to the space and supplies available, and potentially according to the experience level of the teacher; supplies and tools such as sewing machines and cutting tables must be provided and maintained. For example, for 8th grade (machine sewing) it is advisable for each student to have their own (standard) sewing machines, with a maximum of 10 students in each handwork section in 8th grade.

❖ Work space – a dedicated handwork room will strengthen the whole program and substantially improve the students' learning experience. This helps the children enter a space of order and beauty (especially important at this stage in their development), modeling a warm and hospitable learning space, and care of materials and environment. A handwork room also facilitates displays of handwork from other classes, encouraging students to visualize their future work, or remember previous projects. The supplies required for each handwork class vary from 2 to 6 large baskets of work and supplies, and include sewing machines in 8th grade. A display space dedicated to student work will also support the immediate visual understanding of cultural diversity and inclusion in your school.

❖ Storage space – adequate and easily accessible storage space is essential for a successful handwork program. Supplies are bulky and odd-shaped; the work of each class must be kept in an orderly and easily identifiable attractive container. Some class teachers make space for supplies in the classroom; some do not. Many teachers are expected to carry or transport bulky and heavy supplies and children's work from one room to another. It is unwise and unsafe to expect teachers to carry these cumbersome items from room to room, up and down stairs, even and perhaps especially with the willing aid of students.

❖ Active and participating member of the faculty – we urge each school to expect and encourage handwork teachers to attend faculty meetings and child studies, and that this is included in their work load, whether full- or part-time. Handwork teachers can offer unique insight and perspective on a child's development, and can contribute substantially to the circle of teachers 'holding' a child or a class.

- ❖ Scheduling – 2 periods per week is recommended per week per grade. Possibly shorter periods at the beginning of first grade, and often a double period from grades 3,4,5 makes the class time more efficient and available for productive work. Many schools restrict the time allotted to practical arts in the schedule in middle school, but we recommend reconsidering the need – and extending the time - for all students to engage in practical, will-developing education at this crucial stage of their development. Teaching in blocks is often an effective option in middle school.
- ❖ Teacher training – schools must support teachers in completing relevant and subject-specific teacher training with direct financial support, an increase in pay, and/or with time release.
- ❖ Effective mentoring - early in the teachers' career and as an ongoing support is a long-term investment for the school in job satisfaction, teacher retention, and of course in the teacher's ability to deliver a full and appropriate Waldorf handwork curriculum to the students, ensuring a successful experience for the student.
- ❖ Parent Handwork Group - this offering can facilitate the understanding in the parent body about the benefits of handwork and the overall curriculum, as well as be a building block for the school community and a stepping stone to more home-grown teachers.

This document was compiled by the Association of Handwork Teachers and supported by leading handwork teachers of Waldorf Handwork Educators ([www.WaldorfHandwork.org](http://www.WaldorfHandwork.org)) and the Fiber Craft Studio (<https://www.fibercraftstudio.org>), recognizing the need to describe and inform colleagues, administrators, and Board members about the unique needs of this core element of the Waldorf curriculum.

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*WHE and FCS are initiating a Handwork Teachers' Association to support and educate handwork teachers and others in order to ensure an optimal educational experience for Waldorf students.*