

Educate, Participate, Advocate

Teachers spend most of their time preparing for the classroom; prepping lesson plans, materials, and contemplating the needs of the unique children who stand before us. But how are we prepared to work with the adults in our school community? How do we build firm, mutually respectful relationships with the faculty, administrative staff, board of trustees, and parents of our school? This is often an area that many teachers do not feel prepared for. Healthy relationships in the adult realm of a school community can be one of the biggest factors that lead to long term success and satisfaction for any teacher.

So much of what we do is a heart gesture. It is important to feel that your needs are being met, that you are considered a valued member of the faculty, and that your program is respected.

But how do we build healthy collegial relationships in our school when there is so little time and everyone on campus is so busy?

Sometimes it seems as if each individual on campus is working in their own little bubble. Last weekend in our handwork teacher development program Kelly Brewer shared insights from her many years of experience working in Waldorf schools. Kelly has spent more than 30 years working with over 2 dozen Waldorf schools as an administrator and admin consultant around the country. Here we share some notes and reflections from her presentation.

Educate, Participate, Advocate: Tips for working successfully with colleagues and parents in a Waldorf school

In conversations with subject teachers around the country Kelly has often heard the same questions come up again and again.

How do we successfully communicate the needs of our program so that it is seen as a respected, valued, core part of the curriculum?

How do we help people understand the purpose and value of each subject's curriculum so we can receive adequate funding for the necessary supplies to deliver a high-quality program?

How do we work to ensure we have the best benefits and salary we can?

How can we be seen as equals to class teachers?

Well, first and foremost it takes time. If you are currently paid hourly many of these suggestions will require additional volunteer time. But this investment of time will pay off in the future for you, your students, your program, and your community.

Kelly recommends taking a 3-fold approach of Educate, Participate, and Advocate.



It's so easy to assume that everyone knows how important our work is and jump directly to advocating. If you are a new teacher in a school, it takes a year or 2 of EDUCATING and PARTICIPATING before you can effectively advocate for your needs.

Educate:

Educate the community on what is needed to offer a top-notch handwork program. At first glance many parents may think handwork is just a cute extra to fill the time. But we know it is so much more than just knitting cuddly bunnies! Here are some great ways you can begin to educate your community.

1. Write a monthly handwork paragraph in the school newsletter. Choose one grade a month and write a paragraph about what you are doing and WHY in each grade. How does it connect to the main lesson curriculum? Math? Reading? How does it expand on and enhance what the children are learning in each grade? Include photos of the children working in handwork class. Parents love to see pictures of their children at school, and it will capture their attention to read on. You can reuse these paragraphs each year.
2. Educate the faculty. They may have had very little about the value of handwork in their teacher training. Helping them to get a deeper sense of your program will help them to see you as an equal and valued member of the faculty. Often handwork teachers are not paid to attend faculty meetings but are usually welcome to join on their own time. We recommend you occasionally attend faculty meetings, even if it's only once a month. It is important to invest time in connecting with your colleagues. Ask if you can have 10 minutes on the agenda to share what is happening in your program. What is going really well?
3. Attend grade level parent meetings. Plan to attend one parent meeting in the odd grades every year, 1st, 3rd, 5th, and 7th. That way you can be sure you have attended a parent meeting in every grade once every 2 years. Highlight what you are bringing in the program, show the children's work, bring a small project (maybe something simple like finger knitting) for the parents to try so they get a real sense of what it feels like to work with their hands in this way.
4. Engage with board members. Plan to attend at least 1 board meeting a year. Make sure the board members know you and what is happening in your program. Be clear about what resources and supplies are needed to provide a high-quality handwork program. You may not get approval for everything you are asking for in the first year. But if you make sure it stays on their radar you can slowly build over time. For some suggestions check out our [recommendations for building a healthy and robust handwork program](#).



5. Start a parent handwork circle. Find a time to gather once a week or once a month at drop off time during main lesson. Take time to create community around handwork, teach parents new skills, get to know each other, and help parents experience the value of handwork with their own hands. This is also a wonderful way to find parent volunteers to assist in your handwork classes.

Participate:

Build relationships by participating in your school community.

1. Go to the class plays. If you can't make them all go to the even grade plays every year to balance the odd level grades parent meetings.
2. Participate in school festivals and events, volunteer your time to help. Festivals bring so much joy to the whole community.
3. Host an end of school year handwork showcase. Organize a display of all the handwork projects completed in each grade at the end of the year. Invite parents to walk through and see all the beautiful work their children have done. Invite the class teachers to bring their children too. It is a wonderful opportunity for the children to look ahead to projects they may do in future grades as well as reminisce about projects from years past. It is also a great way for parents to see the full progression of handwork through the grades and see first-hand that we are always either building a foundation or building ON a foundation. This event can build so much warmth and value.

Advocate:

Now that you have put in the time to educate and participate it is time to advocate for yourself and your program.

But how can we approach these conversations without emotions and frustrations running high? Focus on the facts! Do your research before you advocate for your needs. Present the facts in a calm, clear way.

1. Make an appointment with whoever sets your supply budget for the year and meet with them EARLY, a few months before the budgets are set. Do your research ahead of time and bring real numbers for what you need. Show them all the ways you can save money and how carefully you have looked for ways to cut costs. Show them that you are being as responsible as you can with the school's limited resources but be clear on what you really need. Some teachers come up with an average cost per student for the whole handwork program. Others come up with a cost per student for each grade as each grade level uses different materials. Get this meeting done early so those in charge of



the budget have it in mind BEFORE setting the budget. Strive for the very best quality for the very lowest price.

2. Advocate for adequate storage space and a dedicated handwork room with whomever is responsible for long-term building and grounds planning. If it's not on their planning radar, how will they know how important it is for you and your program?
3. Handwork is a very prep intensive program. Are you equally compensated as a teacher compared to other subject and class teachers in your school? Generally, in the U.S., handwork teachers are paid for 16 periods a week plus some amount of prep time. But what does that look like at your school? Are you considered full time? Part time? Would you like to be full time? Find out what the FTE (Full Time Equivalence) is at your school. This can vary widely from school to school. How is it measured at your school? How close are you to full time? Are there additional hours you could pick up to be considered full time? If full time is not an option find out if your salary is equalized in comparison to a full time load.

The NAIS (National Association of Independent Schools) recommends that 20 contact periods per week equal a full-time teaching position. If you are teaching 16 periods, are you being paid equitably at 80% of full time compared to the other teachers at your school? Find out the facts about how salaries are determined.

Empower Yourself:

Handwork is an integral part of the Waldorf curriculum. But unfortunately, in many schools it may be overlooked and undervalued. After a long week of teaching, it may be all too easy to jump straight into fiercely advocating for our programs. Some teachers may go the other direction and say nothing at all.

Through handwork children are developing their will forces, perseverance, logical thinking, problem solving, and fine motor skills, all of which support academic learning. A big part of our work is ensuring that handwork is valued in the community.

We hope the ideas we have shared with you here will empower you to take the extra time to educate, participate, and then advocate for your handwork program. We trust in the end it will be time well spent.

