

Waldorf has lessons for pandemic learning

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When the coronavirus pandemic struck in March 2020, educational institutions of all kinds had to scramble to adapt to a new set of health-related safety measures and precautions.

There were urgent meetings at public and private schools in Davis, as staff members read over the instructions from the county public health officer and figured out ways to make them work in their school's setting.

The Davis Waldorf School was in a better position than most to quickly adapt to this new (and unprecedented) challenge, which was unlike anything that schools had previously faced in modern times, like the brief school closures due to outbreaks of the swine flu, whooping cough, or the measles.

Davis Waldorf — a K-8 school with a total enrollment of nearly 200 students — has an average class size that is smaller than the typical average class size at a public school. And the leafy, shade-dappled Waldorf campus has several outdoor spaces that were already used periodically during the school year as open-air classrooms. In addition, Waldorf parents tend to be active and involved as volunteers.

And a small, K-8 school with a tad under 200 students can respond to a public health emergency in a more nimble manner than a public-school district with 8,500 students, multiple campuses, high school students, etc.

As a result, Davis Waldorf students were back on the school campus after a comparatively brief interval of weeks doing on-line "distance learning."

And consequently, teachers at Davis Waldorf have logged multiple months of experience with a daily school routine that involves wearing face masks, social distancing, and the other measures that schools are typically now obligated to adopt for safety's sake.

So with students at the Davis public schools scheduled to return to a classroom setting on Monday, April 12, The Enterprise sat down with two Waldorf instructors — seventh-grade teacher Karen Roos, and eighth-grade teacher Cindy Toy — to ask them for a few

observations about the new school routine, and changes to education in general, during the present "age of the pandemic," and maybe offer a few pointers for other teachers and students who are about to "take the plunge," so to speak.

The Enterprise visited teacher Cindy Toy's outdoor classroom on a nippy late-winter morning over a month ago. And Toy acknowledged that during the winter, she's bundled up a bit in order to stay warm teaching in the open air, beneath a waterproof canopy on an overhead framework, with students seated at socially distanced desks arranged in rows on a broad concrete pad.

Toy dresses in layers. From the waist down, she wears "long underwear, another pair of pants or tights, then perhaps a warm skirt or other, rain pants etc. wool socks or smart wool type socks, two pair, liners for colder days, heavy water proof shoes, trail runners, rain boots, heavy duty outerwear for feet."

And on top: "Long sleeves, with a winter underwear topper, then long sleeve t-shirt, then sweater, then light jacket, or heavy down jacket, or rain jacket if needed. Hat and gloves, sometimes half-gloves that you can write with."

Some of those heavier layers are peeled off as the sun moves higher in the sky, and the chilly morning air becomes more balmy during the afternoon.

The daily school routine now includes regularly scheduled temperature checks (to see if any students are running a fever) and hand-washing breaks. There are unexpected moments, too, like the time a hummingbird briefly landed on her hat as she was teaching outdoors.

Toy added "This (has been) a profound year. It required that we all faced the mirror every day and asked the question, every day, 'Can I/we do this, especially in the winter?'"

Watching her fellow teachers as they adapted to the new routine, Toy said she "found a reflection of myself in my colleagues, watching them heft the materials of education .. teaching fully masked ... But we were all so relieved to be at school. The relationship between teacher and students is everything to education. This cannot be built up over the internet, as any teacher will tell you."

Teacher Karen Roos said, "Looking back on (the past year), we know so much more (now) than we did before about what's possible with learning outside ... like the constant flexing and adapting that we've learned to work with." Teaching outdoors sometimes means that a gust of wind will send everybody's papers flying, for instance. "At the end of the day our students are healthy, safe, and loved. They spend their days with peers, learning to be better humans."

And what do the Waldorf students think? Sierra, a seventh-grader, volunteered that "it has, for sure, been an interesting experience ... But it would be nicer to be able to learn inside again. Some subject classes, that don't have too many papers, could stay outside. But the majority would be more productive and easier inside."

And Isaac, another seventh-grader, said, "Every once in a while, an animal or the (school's) garden cat will do something funny that we wouldn't get to see if we had been indoors ... although it is nice to be in the fresh air, and get to see turkeys chasing chickens, I would rather be in a regular classroom to be sheltered from the cold and rain" during the winter."

Students at the Davis public schools will likely be spending more time learning indoors as compared to their age-peers at Waldorf... by and large, the public school campuses don't lend themselves as easily to outdoor learning to the degree that the Waldorf campus does. And with more students on campus, and larger class sizes, the daily routine at the public schools will differ in a number of ways as compared to the routine that Davis Waldorf has developed.

But Davis Waldorf's largely positive experience with educating students under a host of new pandemic-related daily procedures does offer an encouraging indication that good things can happen as public school students return to learning in classrooms at school campuses this week, for the first time in just over a year.

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