



Our slogan was head, heart, and hands, which really just embraces the aspect of a style of learning that has to engage all of you. It has to engage the whole person, the mind, the empathy, and the actual physical doing of things.

—graduate of Alice Birney Waldorf-Inspired School

**By Diane Friedlaender, Kyle Beckham, Xinhua Zheng,
and Linda Darling-Hammond**

Practices of Waldorf-Inspired Schools

For the full report of SCOPE's *Growing a Waldorf-Inspired Approach in a Public School District*, please visit <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/publications/pubs/1386>.

Growing a *Waldorf-Inspired Approach in a Public School District* documents the practices and outcomes of Alice Birney, a Waldorf-Inspired School in Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD). This study highlights how such a school addresses students' academic, social, emotional, physical, and creative development. The study also examines how a district supports alternative models of education while working to ensure equitable access to a high quality education for all its students. This study provides an opportunity to learn from alternative approaches to schooling to help surface deeply embedded, often unchallenged, assumptions about public education and expand our understanding of the purpose of education and the practices that support the development of the whole child and deep student learning in public schools.

What Can We Learn From an Alternative School in the Public Space?

The country is moving from the era of NCLB (No Child Left Behind), with high-stakes accountability and narrowing of the curriculum into the potentially more expansive era of Common Core. We can make the most of this critical window of transition to broaden our understanding of the purpose and essential components of a well-rounded education to prepare students better to both survive within the world as it is and to improve the worlds in which we live. Although this research focuses on a single school, our careful examination of its practices can help inform these goals. Furthermore, at a time when charter schools and charter management organizations are expanding in many urban centers, our research also enables us to explore the potential of Waldorf and other alternative approaches to serve low-income and students of color in ways that help them thrive within democratically governed public school districts. This research sheds light on the contextual conditions that support the effective implementation of such alternative traditions within democratically governed public school districts.

Grounded in Steiner's theory of child development. At Birney, the Waldorf-inspired approach differs from many other public schools in the extent to which Birney extends its focus beyond providing students with specific knowledge and skills to prepare them for college and career, to also preparing children for meaningful lives in the broadest sense by developing them for physically, socially, artistically, and cognitively meaningful engagement with the world. A second difference is the extent to which Rudolf Steiner's, the founder of Waldorf Schools, theory of child development and goals for nurturing hu-

Stanford Center for
Opportunity Policy
in Education

edpolicy.stanford.edu
@scope_stanford

man development inform every aspect of how children experience school including the curriculum, pedagogy, and structure of school. This research provides an overview and examples of the nature of Waldorf education from kindergarten through eighth grade in the public system.

The power of sustained relationships with teachers. The execution of Steiner’s philosophy through its curriculum, pedagogy, and school structure is strongly supported by the sustained relationships formed between and among teachers, students, and families. Central to this relationship is looping, where teachers ideally commit to staying with their students from first through eighth grade. This sustained relationship fosters deep and lasting ties between teachers and their students and families. The curricular freedom that looping affords its teachers directly impacts the pacing of instruction as well. When teachers have the luxury of time, as well as the primary responsibility for their students’ education, they are not under pressure to prepare students to a certain level of proficiency at an arbitrary point in time in order to hand off to their next teacher. Teachers can be responsive to the students’ needs, readiness for new learning, and skill development in designing their instruction.

Producing Strong Results

The instructional approaches at Birney lead to strong student outcomes. Quantitative analysis of student record data compared to similar students in other district schools reveals that Birney students have low transiency and suspension rates and positive student achievement outcomes on standardized state assessments. While strong for all students, student outcomes are particularly strong for African American, Latino, and socio-economically disadvantaged students. For example:

- African American and Latino students at Birney have a suspension rate that is one tenth of similar students in the district.

- Over five years duration for African American, Latino and socio-economically disadvantaged students the effect of attending Birney was correlated with an increase of 8 percentile ranks (i.e. from 50th percentile to 58th percentile) in ELA.

Within the context of sustained relationships, instruction in the Waldorf-inspired classroom is built from several key ideas:

1. The teacher teaches the child rather than the subject;
2. Every child develops at his or her own pace;
3. Children move through different developmental stages in which they need different learning environments to thrive;
4. Children access learning through multiple learning modalities: art, music, handwork, movement, speech, reading, storytelling, hands-on experimentation, practical life skills, and connection to nature. These modalities are taught both discretely and through an interdisciplinary approach;
5. Teachers monitor and respond to children’s developmental stages and optimal learning modalities by adjusting their instruction, including the needs of special education students and English Language Learners;
6. Long-term relationships with teachers support students’ development.

Interviews with graduates reveal that their K–8 experiences support their continued growth and learning orientation through high school and college. In particular graduates report they approached their continued education with the assumption that their voices were worth hearing and sharing, be it with peers or their classroom teachers, even if they were taking a minority or unorthodox position. Driven to pursue personally relevant educational interests, for the purpose of self-improvement and curiosity, they did not fear failure but understood it to be a part of the learning process. Profoundly, many students commented on the social responsibility they felt to engage

It's an education where the teacher strives to find out what is the potential of each child...and not knowing what it is, we need to introduce them to everything that's out there, and we do that through images and through music and through art, visual and performing. We want to find out what is it that each child can be passionate about and then how they can contribute that hopefully later on in life.

—Birney teacher

the world in a meaningful way that makes the world a better place.

What Factors Enable Alternative Models to Flourish?

Alice Birney has succeeded and persisted in retaining fidelity to the Waldorf approach and in serving students well because of multiple factors, including a robust theory of child development, well educated and supported teachers, parent demand, and school and district level policies and practices particularly in the areas of instructional practice and well-trained teachers.

Robust theory of child development shapes instruction and pedagogy.

Waldorf schools differ from other alternative models in the extent to which pedagogy, curriculum, and the structure of school are influenced by Rudolf Steiner's complex and detailed theory of child development. While complex and nuanced, the child development theory provides the teachers with guideposts that give them purpose, intention, and guidance as they develop their curricula and work with students and their families. Although teachers have autonomy and flexibility, they are bound within the frame of Steiner theories of child development. These theories shape everything from what the classroom and space look like, the tone of voice and affect the teacher uses in teaching, as well as the nature of instruction, curriculum, and assessment strategies.

Well prepared and thoughtful teachers.

Teaching in a Waldorf-inspired school requires

a significant commitment. It requires teachers to give of themselves completely into the relationships they form with students and families, to cultivate deep knowledge of Steiner philosophy, Waldorf curriculum and pedagogy, to invest in their own continued learning and growth, to engage collaboratively with colleagues, and to play a leadership role in their school.

Powerful parents. Since Birney's inception, parents' demand for and support of a Waldorf-inspired school have been crucial to Birney's sustainability. Twenty years into its history Birney continues to have one of the longest waitlists in the district. Parents' deep commitment to the school, based on a strong understanding of the Waldorf approach, helps them support the school financially, assist in classrooms, lead community-building school functions, and, when necessary, exert political pressure. Collectively these factors have been critical to Birney's staying power and strength.

School level practices and policies: Gradually over time, Birney cultivated increasing levels of district-sanctioned school-based decision-making over curriculum and assessment, which were critical to developing and sustaining key practices. Although the school taught the Waldorf curriculum since its inception, at times struggle and advocacy were necessary to have the approach officially approved by the district. In turn, the district required Birney to justify its practices and demonstrate its alignment to more mainstream instructional approaches and assess-



ments. This helped the Waldorf educators reflect and deepen their practice and ensure that they were meeting the needs of all their students.

After several years of advocacy Birney earned control over a range of practices to ensure a high level of professional capacity with their staff. These practices include hiring and job security policies that privileges Waldorf training and support for training in Waldorf methods.

District level practices and policies. This study reveals that when alternative schools are given a say over how to support meaningful learning, it enables the schools to come out of the shadows of non-compliance and create more coherence in their instructional models. Schools can channel their energy away from fighting battles around what they are doing to improving their practice. However, the degree of school-based decision-making that is appropriate is highly dependent upon the level of development of the instructional approach, the capacity of the staff, the resources available to support instructional quality, and planning time. These are crucial areas where the district can provide differentiated support to schools.

When the unique training and expertise of alternative models are honored with supportive HR policies, as they were by Sacramento City Unified School District, schools can achieve stability and sustainability and are more likely to produce strong outcomes. Districts need to ensure that the quality of alternative training is adequate to support the alternative model. Furthermore, from an equity perspective, districts need to be mindful of potentially inequitable distributions of highly trained and skilled teachers across their schools and balance the types of resources and training to which all schools have access.

Conclusion

The story of Alice Birney, a public district school of choice, provides a powerful example of the types of alternative educational approaches that are possible within a democrati-

cally governed public system. Often at odds with prevailing norms and assumptions about the nature of schooling, Birney provides a counterbalance for what is possible to nurture the growth of the whole child. Particularly powerful are the examples of the ways the school attends to children's social-emotional, physical, and artistic development and how this focus has profoundly shaped its graduates into the young adults they are today.

It is striking to see such an approach supported and promoted within the context of a school district. Birney was able to achieve fidelity to the Waldorf approach because SCUSD granted them decision-making control, although often hard fought for, over curriculum, assessment and staffing decisions. That fidelity to a cohesive and holistic approach in turn led to high levels of student and parent satisfaction, demand for the school, and strong student outcomes.

These areas of decentralized decision-making permit opportunities in the democratically governed public district space for alternative approaches. Ironically, schools like Birney have the potential to achieve some of the original goals for the charter school movement. By serving as sites for innovation, district schools can learn much from their example about broader ways to conceptualize school and student development.

