

Meeting for Nursery Parents
Minutes
7/30/18

Present: Anna Scalera, Dan Shuman, Sylvia Sellers-Garcia, Alton Frabetti, Kierstin and Scott Hazzard, Sheena and Brian Soper, Teri Riddle, Dianne McGaunn, Caroline Horner, Heather Collis-Puro, Kate Hill, James Kennedy, Kati Manning, Heidi Pulkkinen, Karl Pulkkinen, Stephanie Irvine, Zoe Cohen, Ryan Baker, Leah Mawson, Marcela Restrepo

Guidelines for the meeting were set forth by Caroline and then introductions were made around the group.

Not all questions regarding Mari leaving the school can be answered due to confidentiality, legal reasons, and privacy.

There are currently two candidates for the nursery lead position with at least five years experience in Waldorf early childhood. We are currently interviewing several candidates for assistant positions.

Parents: please explain the evaluation process that led to offering Mari the 3-day position. Answer: This was comprised of feedback from colleagues and parents, and an external Waldorf-trained evaluator who came in twice to the class. The teacher also does a self evaluation. There was a lot of feedback from parents and colleagues. We have a systems view which looks at the whole picture: classroom and collegially. We wanted a more comprehensive review process than we have had in the past. FMG (Faculty Management Group) was involved in this process and not everyone in FMG agreed with the decision. Dianne and Caroline made the final decision. The process is meant to be a support for the teacher and to encourage growth. It is not meant to be punitive. We are moving towards honest timely feedback. Mari was made aware of all of the feedback. Faculty members write professional growth plans at the beginning of the year to determine what they need to develop further. Therefore, the desire to improve comes from the teacher first so they can see what they need to work on. If negative feedback is received, then various lengths of time to change are given.

Alton: Need to look within ourselves for self-growth. The teachers should be empowered. There is a hierarchy in 2 people deciding fate of teacher rather than teachers as a group.

Answer: There is formal and informal power, meaning of teacher led school. Steiner was director of school early on and not everybody was involved in making decisions.

Question: What do the parents say to their children? Answer: Mari Sensei will not be at the school next year but there will be someone there who loves the children very much and will take care of them.

Some parents reflected that there was a concern that parents didn't know who the teacher would be at this time last year and the situation is being repeated.

Parent feedback is confidential. The parents who attended this meeting had a positive experience. There will be an all community letter regarding this and other matters. Parents suggested a celebration of Mari's time here.

Parents: We have broader culture concerns: lack of transparency, communication, timing of decision, undermined financial decision, decision appeared disingenuous, how are parents valued when they are recipients of these reactions?

Caroline: We are not trying to deceive anyone or to be disingenuous, but rather we are doing our job within constraints of legality, professionalism and privacy. We apologize for any missteps in communication and will strive to do better in the future.

The letter sent to parents suggested that Mari had decided to leave a full time position rather than she was offered a 3-day position and she did not accept that position. *Clarification not made at the meeting* is that legally we can not share the specifics of any offer made to employees.

How can she afford to teach 3-day and not 5-day? Mari went from being the eurythmy teacher to nursery in 2 months. The most important thing for parents was her ability in the classroom. She worked so deeply. Why was there no support team for her?

Are we getting away from ideals of Waldorf? Where are we going?

Teri: We are a Waldorf school guided by the principles of Waldorf philosophy. There is no question that the school has had bumpy times in leadership, transitions and logistics. We have to strike a better balance between the pedagogical/curriculum rigor and the business side of running our school. We need to clarify/reiterate our vision, mission and values so everyone knows what our school stands for. We need to step back and look at how the school becomes more self-sufficient, and has the best talent possible to serve our children. We need to better declare what this school is and what Waldorf education is. The last couple of years have been difficult with lots of transitions. We need to better articulate the philosophy and present to community.

Parent: Trust is undermined by this decision for this nursery class. There is concern that this may happen again in the grades if the children continue. This is a huge transition year for the school.

Alton: Curriculum should be free from financial side of school. Power structure crushing teachers creativity. Board should not be dealing with teaching.

Karl: This school was founded by parents looking for Waldorf education for their children. We cannot invite a teacher to come to a financially unstable school. The school initially started with kindergarten, but there was not enough enrollment to support the teacher so there was a "false start". The school went through many processes in its development. Eventually it developed a college of teachers and shifted from a board-led school. Teachers got burnt out when they were doing administration as well. The college focused on spiritual nature of school. Board supported teachers. Teachers have rallied behind classes when in need of a teacher in the past. Waldorf school involvement takes faith, knowledge and willingness to learn. Other schools such as Landmark also have an evaluation process for their staff for support and responsibility for class and school.

Alton: Teachers have responsibility to fire/hire other teachers? Teachers should be empowered to make decision.

The school did talk about the 6 families who are coming back and the impact this would have. Dianne and Caroline were hopeful that Mari would come back to be the 3-day lead nursery teacher.

Parents aware that evaluations were positive and so wondering about colleague feedback.

Anna: we have a wishlist that includes:

- For Mari to come back.
- Faculty governance, college of teachers reformed.
- Change in rule that gives veto rule for hire/fire. Should include FMG too. Better for Dianne/Caroline too.
- Tuition agreements, ability to get out of them if desired by individual families.

Dianne: There is a need for a more intentional introduction to Waldorf philosophy for parents. The school is looking at returning to doing fireside chats with small/large groups. Need conversations with community. We hope this will help us to articulate who we are and the value we provide to families and their children.

Heidi: the school is not perfect; there have been issues along the way. At times it has been difficult, but children, rhythm and structure, safety in structure of rhythm is what Waldorf is to Fiona and Heidi. Fiona's experience was "holy". Would not change any of it. Even with the anxiety and questions of what comes next during teacher changes. This community comes together and figures it out and supports each other. The experience is still there in the end and the growth is still there. There is a whole picture to look at with Mari. Your viewpoint on Mari is not a universal one.

Alton: concerns about how Mari's departure was handled and how parents were treated especially regarding the letter sent. Concerns about how it was communicated. Request tuition back so that families can make their own decisions regarding whether to send their children to school or not. Want to see responsibility taken by leadership.

Kate: life is hard and bumpy and beautiful. Now it is about the children. The teachers here are working on behalf of the children to give them a joyful experience. Caution to parents about shielding the children from these strong emotions as the emotions go straight into the children. We are working now to find a new teacher.

Ryan, question to Heidi: When there was a teacher change – how did that work out, how was it communicated etc.?

Heidi – process differed depending on the situation. There was a letter in nursery and end of first and 4th grade and parent meetings. There was a time for parents to voice their concerns. The feeling of parents regarding a teacher leaving was split; some had had a good experience and some not. There was a feeling of us vs. them. Want more support and communication.

Caroline: her child had 2 teacher changes and mixed feelings as to teacher leaving. Focus was her child and the emotions she was going through. Now thoroughly enjoying teacher.

Mari deserves the honor of being recognized as being 'gold' in the classroom.

Dianne: a teacher change happened to her family too. The thing that carried her through was that so many teachers love and cared about her children, and all of you will find the same here, regardless of who the teacher will be.

Alton: teachers should have power over own curriculum. *Clarification not shared at the meeting*--teachers do have authority over the curriculum/pedagogy.

Anna: evaluation process not done with full integrity. Place of distrust. Was enough time and feedback given?
Answer: Feedback was given.

Kiersten: Rumors of donor who gave money in exchange for some governance of the school were mentioned. Concerns about the new look of the school; not so homey. Concern of core values of school. Want to make sure that the school doesn't lose its soul with the money coming.

Teri: responding to rumors of single donor: Our school is grappling with an imbalance between relying on contributed income (e.g., donor support, fundraising) and earned income (e.g., tuition). A couple of years ago it became clear that school was dependent on a few donors, with one of them being a significant benefactor. This is not a good position for our school to be in given that most donors have strong views of what areas they want their contributions to support. Many of our donors are specific about what they want their money to fund. Rumors started 1.5 years ago at the All Community because a significant benefactor agreed to fund a substantial number of programs/costs and not others. The school couldn't afford to do some of the items that were not supported through donor contributions. It is very disconcerting for the board and for our school to not be as financially healthy and self-sufficient as we want to be, and our board is committed to reducing this dependence--to decouple the reliance on one donor. It is really important that we don't make decisions based on money. But let me be clear that this donor was not responsible for the action the school's leaders took regarding Mari. We have to have deep integrity around these kinds of things, which has been discussed by our board. New blood coming into board with new views. The anchors of why Waldorf is important have been better understood by interviewing alumni to see what was important to them.

Next steps:

1. Figure out plan for next year's teachers as soon as possible and communicate with families
2. Begin the process of returning tuition to respective families by August 7th
3. Meet with the faculty and staff over the next two weeks to allow space for this discussion
4. Follow-up on the wishlist that was presented on behalf of all Buttercup families
5. Revisit communication methods given some of the feedback received
6. Get an all community newsletter out as soon as possible reflecting all school updates
7. Embark upon a strategic renewal process in the fall that fully engages our community