

W. Sun 2/14/79

Richmond School

Parents Propose

Alternate System

By JIM WESOLOWSKI

RICHMOND — The School Committee is being asked to consider an alternative form of education for the town's school, called the Waldorf proposal.

A group of parents debated the proposal Monday night at the School Committee meeting.

"We want something that is different, we want an essential choice; a different kind of program that provides an in-depth experience — not just a timed experience for our children," said one parent in favor of Waldorf.

According to explanations given Monday, Waldorf is a method of teaching that gears a child's natural learning stages to the order of the curriculum.

As one advocate of the method explained, it involves "a teacher's minute-by-minute interpretation of the student ... coordinating the child's learning development with a concrete progression of school experiences."

An example of the method would be to concentrate on teaching subjects the way they are naturally learned. Instead of offering reading, writing, and speech simultaneously, as traditionally done, advocates of Waldorf suggest teaching speech first, then writing, and finally reading.

At the same time other parents criticized the proposal for its practice of having one teacher stay with the same student for three school years — from first to third grade. They argued that not only is it poor practice to have the same teacher stay with the student for so long, but that child would miss the benefit of having different teachers with different personalities to interact with

from year to year.

Another parent, whose children had been exposed to similar instruction in a neighboring system, argued that a child is left with gaps in learning which must be filled later in the education process.

Advocates pointed out they believe that children taught in the open Waldorf classroom are instilled with a confidence and learning skill that will not disadvantage them in the future. On the contrary, they say, children taught the Waldorf way will be better able to adapt to new and difficult situations.

After more than an hour of intense debate on the subject, School Superintendent Gerald P. Bourgeois asked the School Committee to carefully consider the choices, and remember they have a fundamental decision to make.

This is not a matter of Waldorf, yes or no, explained Bourgeois, but first a question of whether the committee wants to provide alternative education. "Does the committee want to embark on a varied and different education system? The second decision," he added, "is which alternative to provide."

Bourgeois told the committee that when he attends an education conference in Detroit next month, he will visit Mercy College and observe a Waldorf classroom in operation.

He says he will then give the committee a first-hand report on the subject.

Bourgeois stressed that if a commitment is made to offer one class of alternative education per grade level, as some parents requested Monday, it must be kept for at least three years. "If we decide, we'll have to stick to it for the kids' sake," he said.

In order to work, Bourgeois pointed out, a decision would have to come by this April for implementation to be possible for next school year.

The committee made no official comment on the proposal.

Group Wants to Establish Own School To Teach Progressive Waldorf Method

By DAVID SMITH

RICHMOND — After having their proposal rejected by the School Committee after three years of planning, proponents of the Waldorf method of teaching are going their own way.

On July 25, 7:30 p.m. at Richmond School, a newly formed Waldorf School Association will hold a public meeting to discuss the establishment of an independent school in the South County area.

The program will include a film on Waldorf education and a discussion with teachers trained in the Waldorf method.

Association President Anne Marshall said yesterday that the group has already established a curriculum, which was proposed to the School Committee in April.

The group's next move is to establish itself by finding a place to hold classes and then enroll students. Two teachers will be employed to teach kindergarten and first grade.

The action follows denial of the group's request to include the Waldorf method of teaching at Richmond School by the School Committee on April 9, after much debate.

At the following committee meeting in May, a motion to fill a teaching vacancy with a teacher familiar with the Waldorf method also died — this time, without a second.

At that time, Superintendent Gerald Bourgeois said that there was no one interested in teaching the method at the school and he couldn't recommend "a one-year, piecemeal program"

"Our ideal would have been to have this program instituted at the Richmond School. But maybe now we will be better off because now we can do the full program," Mrs. Marshall said yesterday.

"We will probably be better off, because the teachers at Richmond were not enthused about the program and you can't ask someone to teach something they don't want to teach."

The Waldorf method is based on the work of Rudolf Steiner whose first school opened in 1919 in Germany. The first school to open in the United States was in 1928. Today, there are 150 Waldorf Schools throughout the world.

writing and speech simultaneously, as traditionally done, it would offer speech first, then writing, and finally reading.

Richmond School teacher Carolyn DiValerio spoke out against the Waldorf method at the April meeting when the committee voted 4 to 1 against initiating the proposal.

She maintained that bright kids would learn under any system. "I'm just as concerned with the slow to mediocre kids," she said at the meeting. "I'm concerned that whatever alternatives we use be efficient and effective."

Mrs. DiValerio also voiced concern over the lack of means to evaluate the program. "As a professional, I'm afraid of a program that can't be evaluated." The Waldorf method does not provide for a grading system.

Committee Chairman Richard

Millar stressed at the April meeting that it would be a small program for the school. He said it would have been a "major adjustment as well as a long-term commitment."

Mrs. Marshall explained that the school will need a minimum of 12 pupils to start the program, and that the tuition cost per pupil will be based on this number.

Also affecting the amount of tuition is the cost of renting a building to house the school. Currently, Mrs. Marshall said the group has three possibilities in the area, including the possible donation of a building, provided the group pays the utilities.

The group is also hoping for donations and possible grant money to offset the costs.

The group is in the process of incorporating, which will grant them the power to elect officers. Signing the incorporation papers are Mrs. Marshall, Mrs. Lamb,

Janet McDevitt, Heinz Grotzke and Madeline Holder.

The group is now going back to check with the parents of 17 youngsters that signed petitions in favor of having the program instituted at the Richmond school.

"We're re-contacting them to see how committed they are to a private school," Mrs. Marshall explained.

She said that the school will start with kindergarten and the first grade, with following grades added as the program progresses.

"We feel we have enough pupils," she said. Mrs. Marshall emphasized that the school will be accepting pupils outside of the Richmond area including Westerly and Kingston, as well as the remaining two towns in Chariho.

"We would like to keep it in the Richmond area because it is pretty central."

Steiner believed that by strengthening with love and ordinary power of objective thinking, a new and higher capacity for insight could be achieved.

According to the program developed by the Waldorf group, "The method of instruction is based on an ordered and planned program in which skills and experiences are interrelated rather than fragmented and are introduced and built upon previously assimilated experience as the child proceeds to grow."

According to Dee Ann Lamb, the group member who spoke at the School Committee's April meeting, the program stresses the quality of a child's work rather than the quantity or speed. The artistic awareness of a child is stressed along with teaching youngsters how they relate to the world. "We emphasize conceptual thinking," she said.

The group has said that instead of offering reading,