TIME OUTDOORS TRANSLAGES TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS AT Kimberton Waldorf School

The fundamental tenets of a Waldorf education include an integrated, experiential approach to learning, which utilizes all the senses. Research confirms what Waldorf educators have known for years: time spent outdoors focusing on nature-based, hands-on learning is essential to healthy cognitive, social, and emotional growth.

BY JULIA KRUMENACKER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY NANCY COE

The American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health recently declared recess a crucial and necessary component of a child’s development, stating that it offers significant cognitive, social, emotional, and physical benefits. The academy further indicated that recess is a complement to, not a substitute for, physical education. These statements were issued on the heels of decisions made by many schools across the country to abandon, or drastically reduce, recess and physical education classes due to the pressure of increasing academic priorities.

Interestingly, a few schools in Texas initiated a program during the 2015-2016 school year that provided four separate recess periods per school day in an effort to bridge academics with the social, emotional, and physical well-being of children. The results were impressive: students in the program showed better focus, increased ability to solve their own problems independently, and decreased need for disciplinary action. School principals were intrigued by the academic and behavioral merits, as well as psychological benefits of more recess time, which included increased emotional resiliency, imagination, and creativity and the development of self-confidence.

Teachers and administrators at Kimberton Waldorf School are not surprised by this information. They not only recognize the science behind prioritizing physical activity and the value of time spent outdoors, but have been successfully incorporating these principles into
their curriculum for almost a century. The fundamental tenets of a Waldorf education include an integrated, experiential approach to learning, which utilizes all the senses. Research confirms what Waldorf educators have known for years: time spent outdoors focusing on nature-based, hands-on learning is essential to healthy cognitive, social, and emotional growth.

Located in the heart of bucolic Chester County, Kimberton Waldorf School serves students from early childhood through grade 12. Rooted in the principles and philosophy of Rudolf Steiner, a Waldorf education addresses the physical, emotional, and intellectual capacities of children with movement, fine and practical arts, together with the study of humanities, science, and math. This approach strives to educate the whole child: head, heart, and hands. As one of the largest and fastest-growing independent school movements in the world, Kimberton Waldorf inspires students to be creative thinkers and doers, cultivating their intellectual, emotional, and physical capacities, and enabling them to become confident, capable adults.

"In the general culture, there's a rediscovery of returning to nature," notes Dean of School Kevin Hughes. "Kimberton Waldorf has always been there. More and more research suggests the importance of play and the positive impact it has on the developing brain. We are also learning more about the positive effects that nature and spending time in the outdoors has on our emotional, as well as our physical, well-being. Although recent pressure to keep up with academic requirements has forced some schools to consider recess an unnecessary extra, we have always embraced it as part of our program. Children cannot be focused intellectually all the time."

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and Farm. In the third grade, in addition to the core curriculum, students learn about farming, engaging in immersive experiences that teach them how to care for animals on the school farm and grow healthful food in the organic garden. The middle school and high school curriculum involves several camping trips and excursions to natural sites where students connect academic work with outdoor experiences.

"We feel it is important that children develop a relationship with, and establish a deep appreciation of, the natural world, not simply a surface appreciation," continues Kevin. "This belief fits with the Waldorf curriculum in that we take a very integrative approach and aim to have students understand how everything is connected. Our students don't simply know about the environment, they fully understand it because they have the benefit of so many authentic outdoor experiences. From an early age, they are engendered with a sense of awe and appreciation for the natural world, and they develop a strong sense of care and responsibility for the environment. Although our students may not grow up to be farmers, they may have an occupation where they will have to create a policy regarding food, or the environment, which makes these experiences invaluable."
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"Spending time outdoors is part of the holistic development of our students," explains Lisa Cordner, Director of Enrollment Management. "When children return from recess, they are more focused and prepared to shift gears. We also don't place an emphasis on large amounts of homework, so our students are able to spend quality time with their families, and get adequate sleep."
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How does this practice make a Kimberton Waldorf education unique? "Kids leave here with the sense that they can accomplish any ambition," notes Lisa. "They are not afraid to engage in new activities because they have a deep sense of confidence about their ability to learn, and continue learning. Our students acquire knowledge through experience as well as through reading and studying." CCL

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