

To the leadership of Meristem-Rudolph Steiner College,

On behalf of our organization, Divergent Labs, I would like to approach you with a proposal to collaborate with us in creating an alternative for the education of autistic children in North America.

Divergent Labs, Inc. is a nonprofit corporation based in Albuquerque, New Mexico, US – an organization created and run by autistic people. Our purpose is "advancing the economic status, educational status, spiritual growth, human rights, and representation in the public sphere of disabled and disenfranchised people". The Rhizome Program of Divergent Labs is charged with developing new ideas for the economic empowerment and advancement of autistic people. Education, we believe, is central to this effort.

One of our fundamental objectives is to advance an educational model that works to enhance, rather than inhibit the growth and personal development of autistic people. We've come to the conclusion that the Rudolf Steiner approach is consistent with how we all learn, and we seek to promote it.

In the spring of 2014, we approached the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA Leadership Council and The AWSNA Board of Trustees) with a request to collaborate with us in the creation of an alternative educational system for autistic children.

Following a conference with Melanie Reiser, the AWSNA Leader of Programs and Activities, we contacted the Ruskin Mill Trust [UK] with a similar proposal (mailed to the RMT Leadership Council contact, Mr. Charlie Tesloff). Since then we've learned of the changes at RMT, creation of Meristem, and partnership with Rudolph Steiner College.

Quoting from the RSC press, "Meristem is a new organization, heavily influenced by a British organization of world-renown the Ruskin Mill Trust -- proposing through its affiliation with Rudolf Steiner College, to offer high quality services to students with autistic spectrum disorders." - and further - "The most ambitious vision for Meristem is that after its establishment and expansion to and beyond critical mass in Sacramento, the demand for Meristem services will impel the proliferation broadly of Meristem sites".

We believe that the creation of a Meristem-RSC partnership is a monumental step in the right direction and, in fact, represents precisely the development that we were trying to bring about. We greatly welcome and applaud this initiative. We also believe that the conditions for an expansion are present already, and that the demand for Meristem services has grown greatly with time and is approaching its critical mass. We can attest to this, as we seek to help you establish and expand your initiative. Specifically we'd like to ask Meristem-RSC Partnership to collaborate with us in bringing Meristem initiative to the East Coast.

We think, that the backing of the Meristem-RSC initiative by Divergent Labs, an organization representing the movement for economic empowerment of autistic populace would be of value to Meristem-RSC, both politically and practically. The voices of autistic self-advocates are becoming stronger and our support will ease the socio-political atmosphere, leading to the success of this undertaking not only in the economic sphere, but also in the cultural, and the legislative areas.

Quoting from the same source - "Particularly important in the future will be the expansion of Waldorf-influenced education in Americas public schools". This expansion, we believe, will happen first with the expansion and the success of "specialized Waldorf Education" - that we both are trying to create and foster here.

Having said this let me introduce the practical details of our Proposal.

We would like to begin with two initiatives: a specialized Waldorf elementary education program, and a teacher-training program specializing in the education of autistic children, based on Steiner and RMT principles. The elementary education should incorporate the Ruskin Mill expertise, while promoting the Meristem initiative for shared campuses and high quality services for autistic children. It should also foster availability of shared extracurricular activities, and explore various forms of classroom integration.

We have chosen to start with elementary school, as it begins a new stage of development for a child. It is also the time when a great number of parents begin to witness the shortcomings of the official preschool intervention programs, and begin desperately looking for alternatives. It is the stage when the choices are re-examined by 'autistic' parents, and is an opportune juncture to offer a better way.

As a result of consulting with us, the Waldorf School of Garden City is considering proportional inclusion of autistic children [roughly based on statistics for autism prevalence] in the classroom. There are issues to be resolved - "My phone will ring off the hook, with mothers trying to get their children into a program" - said their Director of Admissions after our meeting, expressing her concern. There is an obvious need and demand, by the parents of autistic children, for a larger accommodation, which could be resolved by a specialized program. These parents would create the energized body of support that would enable our effort.

We would like to begin at the Waldorf School of Garden City (formerly Waldorf School at Adelphi University), a school of exceptional standing and achievement, where our ideas have already been presented and, we believe, are under earnest consideration. We would start with 1st and 2nd grade, adding the other grades in the subsequent year. The school's proximity to Adelphi University would open possibilities for a mutually beneficial exchange; research and hands-on training opportunities for Adelphi and support for our program. Also, our organization has a strong presence in this location and can provide much assistance.

In the event that creation of a specialized program at WSGC proves to be unattainable, we will be pursuing creation of a parallel school, based on Waldorf principles, by preferably leasing space at Adelphi University [we believe the university campus is a fertile ground for young autistic students], while trying to maintain close ties with WSGC.

Creation of the Elementary Program necessitates a need for qualified Waldorf teachers with specialized training. We would like to ask the Meristem-RSC organization to introduce this program at the Rudolf Steiner College. We understand that teacher training takes time and that there might be an initial need of expertise and participation from RSC and/or Ruskin Mill educational organizations.

These are the main parts of our proposal but I'd also like to note that we are open to other ideas and areas of collaboration, such as developing innovative strategies and tactical approaches to fundraising, marketing, and communication campaigns.

We have the same constituency and similar goals, and we see our efforts as complementary to the objectives of Meristem-RSC and having a great potential for enhancing and promoting them. The timing of the Meristem initiative, the emphasis of the Meristem-RSC partnership on the autistic education, and the structure of your new boards with distinguished representatives of all the areas of our society, compels me to believe that collaboration between Meristem-RSC and Divergent Labs will be beneficial to our respective organizations and our common cause.

We'd like to ask you to consider this matter and the ways we can collaborate in this endeavor.

Thank you.

Amik Nafte,
Director, Divergent Labs (divergentlabs.org)
olnafte@yahoo.com
516 307 6684