

A Classical Education for Modern Times

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*Doctrina sed vim promovet insitam,
rectique cultus pectora roborant.¹*

Ascent Classical Academy has deliberately taken a classical approach to education. By “classical,” we mean a form of education that could be called classical, civic, and liberal but in the school reform movement these days most often goes by the designation “classical.” Some might call it “conservative,” but we prefer the term “traditional.” That is, we adhere to an ancient view of learning and traditional teaching methods. Such a choice might at first seem paradoxical or even out-of-touch with reality. Why, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, in the age of the internet, in a country that has long been addicted to the revolutionary and the novel, when almost everyone in the world of K-12 education is singing the chorus of “critical thinking skills for a twenty-first-century global economy,” should cutting-edge schools root themselves so deeply in the past? Is not newer always better? What could today’s young people learn from old books? We must answer these questions clearly from the outset.

Classical education has a history of over 2500 years in the West. It began in ancient Greece, was adopted wholesale by the Romans, faltered after the fall of Rome, made a slow but steady recovery during the Middle Ages, and was again brought to perfection in the Italian Renaissance. The classical inheritance passed to England, and from the mother country to America through colonial settlement. At the time of this nation’s founding classical education was still thriving. Jefferson heartily recommended Greek and Latin as the languages of study for early adolescence. One of the Founding Fathers’ favorite books was Plutarch’s *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*. Eighteenth-century Americans venerated and trusted George Washington in large part because he reminded them of the Roman patriot Cincinnatus. So important has classical education been in the history of the West that it would only be a slight exaggeration to say that the march of civilization has paralleled the vibrancy of classical schools. Unlike the old classical schools, today’s classical schools do not make the medium of instruction Latin and Greek (though to be classical they must require the study of Latin at some point).

Nonetheless, the Hillsdale-sponsored charter schools will remain classical by upholding the same standards of teaching, of curriculum, and of discipline found in the schools of old. Indeed, in these schools English will be taught using methods derived from centuries of teaching and learning the classical languages. Hillsdale thus takes stock in the tried and true rather than in the latest fads frothing forth from the schools of

* ¹ “Yet learning increases inborn worth, and righteous ways make strong the heart.”
Horace

education.

Apart from this impressive history, Ascent Classical Academy has embraced classical education as the surest road to school reform for at least four reasons. These reasons constitute a clear break from modern, progressive education and a return to traditional aims and methods. Classical education:

- values knowledge for its own sake
- upholds the standards of correctness, logic, beauty, weightiness, and truth intrinsic to the liberal arts;
- demands moral virtue of its adherents;
- and prepares human beings to assume their places as responsible citizens in the political order.

We shall discuss each of these characteristics of classical education in turn.

Knowledge and Core Knowledge

The classical view of education holds that human beings are thinking creatures. Unlike other living beings, humans live by their intelligence. We want to know things. Specifically, we want to know what the things around us are and how they operate. We want to know who we are, where we come from, and what is expected of us. In short, we want to know the truth. From birth, the curiosity of children is astounding. Children observe everything around them. They pick up language at an astonishing rate. As soon as they begin to speak, they ask the question “What is it?” of everything that catches their attention. Children demonstrate what is true of all people: we are all natural learners. Any plan of education, therefore, should take advantage of young people’s natural curiosity. Schemes that stall children in their learning because “they are not ready for it” or it is not “age appropriate,” or that use various gimmicks that sugar-coat learning as though children regard their books as they do their medicine, are not only unnecessary but counterproductive and insulting to the human mind.

While children are naturally disposed to learning, everything we need to know does not come to us unaided from nature. Children need explicit instruction to understand the world around them, whether in language, the operations of physical nature, or the relations among human beings. As children grow, their questions become increasingly complex and their abilities to assimilate their observations more advanced. At every child’s disposal is a veritable arsenal of mental capacities: memory, reason, imagination, a sense of beauty, a facility for language. Classical education does not simply leave children to their own mental urges and inclinations. Rather, it feeds and directs and strengthens children’s mental capacities in the same way that sports exercise their

physical abilities. The mind, like the body, atrophies when not well-trained. The emphasis on rigorous mental training is an important difference between classical education and modern, progressive education. By stressing childhood “creativity” and “spontaneity,” while at the same time denigrating “mere rote learning” (and therefore human memory itself), without making children do much work or work on anything important, the modern school takes bright young children and puts them on a path to becoming bored adults who do not know very much. It is the old story of the tortoise and the hare. Falling in love with our talents—without making any substantial effort to improve them—causes one to lose the race. In this case, it is the all-important race towards becoming informed, moral, thinking citizens.

So classical education puts young minds to work. It leads young people to understand themselves and the world around them. Students do not learn in the abstract. They must acquire concrete skills and gain knowledge in certain disciplines to participate fully and effectively in human civilization. To this end, Ascent Classical Academy embraces E. D. Hirsch’s idea of “cultural literacy.” For people to communicate effectively, according to Hirsch, they must not only use the same language. To express and understand complex ideas, they must possess a reservoir of common facts, ideas, and references known to all in a given social and political order. Abraham Lincoln is perhaps the best example of a leader who relied on cultural literacy to convey his ideas. Like other Americans on the frontier, he had little formal schooling. Yet he read intensively the works of Shakespeare, the King James’ Bible, the fables of Æsop, Euclid’s geometry, and the documents of the American Founding. Few men in our history have been able to express so forcefully and with such economy the principles of freedom and human dignity:

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Lincoln’s audience at Gettysburg instantly knew that he referred to the “proposition” of the Declaration of Independence. For this reason, the Gettysburg Address is not only one of the greatest speeches in our history; it is the shortest. Lincoln did not have to retell the history of the Revolution. His fellow Americans already knew it.

One of the great dangers we presently face as a nation is that, in the words of Hirsch, “many young people today strikingly lack the information that writers of American books and newspapers have traditionally taken for granted among their readers from all generations.” The same observation applies to the realm of politics, the financial and industrial world, and all other facets of American life. Employers are constantly amazed at what their employees do not know and therefore cannot do. In politics, the poignant allusions of a Lincoln would fall upon deaf ears. Indeed, most citizens and most elected officials are alarmingly ignorant of the basic facts of American history and constitutional

government. Make no mistake. Cultural literacy is not merely ornamental trivia. Our purpose is not to make *Jeopardy* champions. Rather, cultural literacy is essential to a nation and its citizens. A culturally illiterate America cannot live up to the demands placed upon us by history and the present condition of the world. A culturally illiterate individual cannot comprehend and navigate the vast areas of human knowledge essential to his political, economic, and moral well-being.

By endorsing the idea of cultural literacy (and civic literacy), Ascent Classical Academy has resolved to break out of the cycle of ignorance that modern culture and modern educational theories and practices perpetuate. The students of our school will study the traditional liberal arts—language and literature, history and government, mathematics and the sciences, music and art—in a coherent and orderly program. Each curriculum will run from the rudiments of basic literacy and math skills to the higher orders of thought and expression. All students will be required to complete this classical curriculum. Admittedly, different children have different talents. Some students “catch on” more quickly than others. We shall always seek to challenge every student all the time. Yet Hillsdale regards any system of tracking that relegates certain students to an inferior curriculum as nefarious. Not all students will learn at the same speed, but all will complete the course.

Upholding Standards

In addition to requiring students to know certain things, a classical education also teaches young people judgment according to certain standards. To be “classical” means to uphold a standard of excellence. The classical works of Greece and Rome are not great simply because they are old. They are great because they employ harmonious language to depict remarkable human events and to explain the transcendent ideals of human existence. Each of the liberal arts has its own standard of correctness, logic, beauty, weightiness, and truth. The study of a language offers perhaps the best example, especially since human beings live by communicating. Everyone can talk, and most people can read and write on a “functional” level. A classical education requires more than functional literacy, however. It teaches students from an early age high standards of grammar, precision in word choice, and an eloquence that can emanate only from a love of the language. Throughout his education, the student will be exposed to the highest examples of eloquence attained by the greatest writers and speakers of the language.

“. . . I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.” Shakespeare

“There is a tide in the affairs of men . . .” Shakespeare

“We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.” Shakespeare

“These are the times that try men’s souls.” Paine

“Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.” Churchill

These sentences are entirely grammatical. They could just as easily be used to teach grammar as “I come to help Jane, not to hurt her.” By preferring Shakespeare to an anonymous “See Jane” sentence (usually not well written) we teach three things rather than one. We teach grammar. We teach cultural literacy. We also teach beauty. Our purpose is to introduce young people to the masters of the language so they themselves learn to employ the force and the beauty of the spoken and written word.

Young people today are particularly in need of standards of thought and of real beauty. Their speech ranges from the sloppy to the vulgar. The person whose only expressions of approval and disapproval are “that’s cool” and “that sucks” lacks not only a copious vocabulary but also the ability to judge events according to their nature and gravity. Teachers at Hillsdale schools will not fail to teach students the standards that lift them out of the formless dross of the culture. Music is another area in which students are in dire need of high standards. The logical thinking that comes from mathematics and the sciences is no less important. Upholding standards is a principle of exclusion as much as of inclusion. Hillsdale does not pretend that all writing is equally good, that all human endeavors are equally important or beneficial to human life, or that all scientific theories are equally true. In choosing the elements of the curriculum—works of literature and art, events in history—our motto is that of Churchill: “I shall be satisfied with the very best.”

Moral Virtue

Education is a moral enterprise. Young people are put into moral situations constantly. “Should I tell Mom that I broke her favorite vase or pretend like nothing happened?” “Should I copy the answers of the person sitting next to me?” “Should I smoke the cigarette and drink the beer my friend just gave me?” “Should my boyfriend and I have sex since we love each other?” These are the timeless moral questions youth face today and have always faced. Anyone who thinks they are new should read the *Confessions* of St. Augustine. This patriarch of the church stole apples as a child and as a teenager impregnated a woman to whom he was not married. His knowledge of sin came from his own inner struggle. Schools can approach the moral lives of children and youth in three ways. They can try to ignore moral issues altogether. They can open up moral questions for students to explore in a “non-judgmental” and noncommittal environment. Or they can teach classical views of self-command using traditional teaching methods.

The first approach is simply impossible. All schools must maintain an atmosphere of order and decorum for learning to take place. Schools that try to ignore the character of their students either end up with major discipline problems or teach some forms of character without claiming to do so. As soon as a school says “this is right” and “this is wrong” it is teaching character in some form. The second approach might seem the most worthy of reasonable people. “Let us talk about morality in a non-judgmental way and let

students come up with their own answers,” say the advocates of moral reasoning and values clarification. They even make moral discussion a part of the curriculum. What happens in these discussions is that teachers open up pre-marital sex, drug use, and other illicit activities as plausible “life choices” so long as students can explain those choices in terms of “their own values.” Predictably, research has indicated that students who are exposed to open-ended discussions of moral issues are far more likely to engage in vice. (See William Kilpatrick, *Why Johnny Can’t Tell Right from Wrong*, ch. 4).

In contrast to the first two approaches, Hillsdale advocates the teaching of the classical virtues using traditional methods. In the public charter school setting we leave questions of faith up to the students and their parents. But we agree with Aristotle’s dictum that one becomes virtuous by practicing the virtues. We believe that every young person has a conscience. It may be a conscience embattled against the individual’s own passions and the allurements of the culture, but it is a conscience nonetheless. Like the capacities of the mind, the conscience must be educated or it will lapse into lethargy. We insist that students always be attentive and polite. We insist that schools inculcate core virtues at all levels of learning. When students become capable of discussing virtue, we do not present them with moral conundrums that seemingly have no right or wrong answers. Instead, we confront them with the great stories of self-command and self-sacrifice found in literature and history. These narratives show that actions have consequences, and that there is a clear difference between right and wrong. Just as we encourage students to emulate the intellectual virtues of writers and scientists, so we lead them to emulate the moral virtues of heroes and heroines. The history of classical education is quite simply a history of the conjunction of learning and morality. The Roman teacher Quintilian made the connection explicit:

My aim, then, is the education of the perfect orator. The first essential for such a one is that he should be a good man, and consequently we demand of him not merely the possession of exceptional gifts of speech, but all the excellences of character as well.

The Hillsdale model schools expect no less of their students.

Civics and Citizenship

Classical education has always been concerned with the political order. Aristotle defined man as “by nature an animal intended to live in a polis.” Accordingly, for the Greeks education was essentially political. All free citizens bore the responsibility and the privilege of voting in the assembly and defending the polis from invasion. Young boys were taught from an early age how to speak and how to fight. The American Founders similarly hoped that schools would teach young people how to preserve the constitutional republic they would inherit. The Founders knew that free government depends not on the decisions of a few politicians but on the wisdom and virtue of a

people. Political wisdom and virtue do not come easily. More than two centuries of American history have confirmed that this nation can be sustained only by citizens who understand, serve, and defend America's founding principles. As much as they embraced free, constitutional government, the Founders feared the unchecked passions of an uninstructed multitude. In this light, Hillsdale regards the decline in political knowledge in our day as portending untold compromises on the safety and happiness of our people.

Hillsdale-sponsored schools will provide a political education reaffirming our nation's founding principles. They will exalt the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as guaranteed by and realized through the American frame of government. They will ensure that their students enter the world as citizens fully cognizant of their rights and responsibilities. They will teach students that true freedom and happiness are to be obtained through limited, balanced, federal, and accountable government protecting the rights and liberties of a vibrant, enterprising people. Such political knowledge can only be gained by a thorough study of American history and government: that study to consist principally in the reading of primary sources. If such explicit political instruction appears to some too patriotic, we must remember that James Madison, the father of the Constitution, considered a "reverence for the laws" a "prejudice" which even the most enlightened nations cannot afford to be without.

The End in View

Contrary to popular opinion, classical education is far from arcane, irrelevant, dull, and unimaginative. Rather, the classical view understands that a human being without knowledge of the past, without reverence for his inheritance, and without a judgment formed by the standards of true greatness, is much like a man with amnesia. He does not know who he is or where he comes from. He does not know his rights or his duties. He knows neither his debts nor his debtors. Worse, he may easily become the pawn of the first person he runs into, so unfamiliar and mysterious will his surroundings seem to him. A true classical, liberal, civic education recognizes with Lincoln that if we know where we are, by knowing where we have been, we shall then know "whither we are tending." While Hillsdale College worries that today's educational practices shortchange young people and fail to provide them with the cultural, moral, and civic literacy necessary to live a productive and happy life, it sees great opportunity in the resurgence of classical schools. Indeed, the demand for traditional education on the part of students and parents alike promises to be one of the surest methods of reacquainting today's citizens with the nation's Founding principles. Another way of saying this is that an increasing number of people today, even young people, demonstrate a longing for the good and the beautiful and the true. And such a longing is the first step on the road to true happiness.