

# What is Classical Education?

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

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

Ridgeview Classical Schools have deliberately taken a classical approach to education. That is, we adhere to an ancient view of learning and traditional teaching methods. Such a choice might at first seem paradoxical. 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, should a forward-looking school root itself so deeply in the past? Is not newer always better? What can 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*. Fellow revolutionaries so admired 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, Ridgeview does not make the medium of instruction Latin and Greek. Nonetheless, Ridgeview remains classical by upholding the same standards of teaching, of curriculum, and of discipline found in the schools of old. Indeed, we teach English as a classical language. Ridgeview thus takes stock in the "tried and true" rather than in the latest fads popping out of the nation's schools of education.

Apart from this impressive history, Ridgeview has embraced classical education for at least four reasons that separate it from modern, progressive education. Classical education:

- values knowledge for its own sake;
- upholds the standards of correctness, logic, beauty, and importance 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. Finally, we shall consider the ways in which parents can support their children's learning at home.

## **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 the truth. From birth, the curiosity of children is astounding. Children observe everything around them. They pick up language at an astonishing rate. And 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 natural learners. Therefore, any plan of education should take advantage of young people's natural curiosity. Schemes that stall children in their learning because "they are not ready for it," or that use various gimmicks that sugar-coat learning as though children take to their books as they do their medicine, are not only unnecessary but counterproductive and insulting to humanity.

As children grow, their questions become more 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. Yet classical education does not simply leave children to their own inclinations. Rather, it feeds and directs and strengthens children's mental abilities 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 and modern, progressive education. By stressing childhood "creativity" and "spontaneity," without making children do much work or work on anything important, the modern school turns bright young children into 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, leads nowhere.

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 the human community. To this end, Ridgeview Classical Schools have adopted the Core Knowledge Sequence for the K-8 curriculum. Core Knowledge is based upon 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 the culture. 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 education. Yet he read intensively the works of Shakespeare, the King James' Bible, the fables of Aesop, 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.

The danger 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 pregnant allusions of a Lincoln would fall upon deaf ears. 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 vast areas of human knowledge necessary for his political, economic, social, and moral well-being.

By teaching the Core Knowledge Sequence and an advanced liberal arts high school curriculum, Ridgeview Classical Schools have resolved to break out of the cycle of ignorance that modern society and modern educational theories perpetuate. The students of Ridgeview study the traditional liberal arts—language and literature, math, history and government, the sciences, music and art—in a coherent and orderly program. The curriculum runs from the rudiments of basic literacy and math skills to the higher orders of thought and expression. All students are 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 Ridgeview 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, or importance. The study of a language offers the best example, especially

since human beings live by communicating. Everyone can talk, and most everyone can read and write on a functional level. A classical education requires more than functional literacy, however. It teaches students high standards of grammar, precision in word choice, and eloquence. Throughout his education, the student will be exposed to the highest examples of eloquence attained by the greatest writers in the language.

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

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

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 we teach three things rather than one. We teach grammar. We teach cultural literacy. We also teach beauty. Our purpose is to introduce students to the masters of the language so they will begin to emulate them.

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. At Ridgeview teachers do not shy from presenting students with 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. Ridgeview does not pretend that all writing is equally good, that all human endeavors are equally important or beneficial to society, or that all scientific theories are equally true. In choosing works of art, pieces of music, works of literature, and the like, 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 my mother 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 you say "this is right" and "this is wrong" you are teaching virtue. 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, Ridgeview teaches the classical virtues using traditional methods. We do leave religious questions entirely 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 teach them how to uphold the school's pillars of character. 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.

Ridgeview Classical 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 had created. They realized that a 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 her founding principles. As much as they embraced free, constitutional government, the Founders feared the unchecked passions of an uninstructed multitude. In this light, Ridgeview regards the decline in political knowledge in our day as dangerous as the waning of intellect and virtue.

Ridgeview Classical Schools will provide a political education worthy of this nation’s founding principles. We shall exalt the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as guaranteed by and realized through the American frame of government. We shall ensure that our students enter the world as citizens fully cognizant of their rights and responsibilities. Such knowledge can only be gained by a thorough study of American history and government. If at times our political instruction verges on the 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 Home**

Parental support is essential to the success of classical education. We realize that parents send their children to Ridgeview because they want the best for them. Over the course of the coming year our faculty will do everything possible to give children a classical education for modern times. But we cannot do it alone. Teachers and parents must work together to make education effectual. To ensure that students’ learning takes place in both the school and the home, we hope that parents would:

- demonstrate good character;
- help their children develop effective study skills and work habits;
- oversee their progress in reading, writing, and mathematics in the early grades;
- encourage students of all ages by asking questions and discussing what they have learned on a regular basis;
- hold high expectations of student performance;
- support the school by getting children to school on time and ensuring they have the necessary supplies and books;
- understand the mission and philosophy of Ridgeview Classical Schools.

A classical education requires students to engage in serious work at home. The exercises, reading assignments, and test preparation that Ridgeview requires of its students are not busy work. This private study guarantees that they will be prepared for the learning that takes place in class. Unfortunately, the modern world presents all sorts of distractions to youth: television, music, video games. We believe that these rivals for students' attention compromise real learning. It is therefore essential that students have at home a place to work for a couple of hours of the day free from the distractions of other people or the clamor of the various media. Ridgeview cannot police students' behavior outside of school. We do, however, offer these suggestions to parents to aid them in ensuring their children's success and to foster in their children habits and pursuits that ennoble them.

1. Television is a distraction. The notion that one can study while watching television is a complete illusion. The t.v. should be turned off while the student is studying. Moreover, watching too much television compromises the child's imagination. Reading, drawing, and observing natural phenomena, on the other hand, are activities that feed the child's imagination and invite him to pursue further studies. Therefore the amount of time spent in front of the television should be restricted. We recommend no more than one show a day. Movies are rather different than television. Classic films both of the past and the present can be both entertaining and of educational value. Watching movie after movie, however, can be as destructive to the imagination as television. We recommend no more than one or two movies a week during the school year. We would also urge parents to recommend movies not found in the "new releases" section of the video store. It astounds us that today's youth have not seen "Rocky" or "Jaws," much less "High Noon" or "Citizen Kane." For a good discussion of television, we recommend Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.
2. Music speaks directly to the passions. It can inspire us to fall in love, fight a battle, or act with dignity. Music can also invite us to hate other people, engage in sex and drugs, or commit suicide. We must therefore be careful what sorts of music children listen to. The prospect of twelve-year-old girls in tight pants gyrating to a song called "I Like Big Butts" would appear outrageous to any other age in history, but has become entirely normal today. We strongly urge parents to monitor not only the amount of time children spend listening to music but the quality of that music. We recommend that while studying, students turn music off unless it is entirely unobtrusive. Admittedly, children might fight hard on this one. Parents might wish to read the appropriate sections of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* and William Kilpatrick's *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong* to see what is at stake in this cultural battle.

3. Video games are entirely useless. The time they consume in the student's day should be restricted. It should also be obvious that children should not be allowed to move from one mind-numbing activity to another, each with its own limit: one television show, followed by a CD, followed by a half hour of video games, followed by an hour on the phone with friends. Computers certainly have their advantages. But unrestricted use of the internet and e-mail is highly questionable.

4.

We do not make these suggestions to spoil young people's fun or to deny them rest from a busy day. Rather, we have a higher conception of leisure than do most children and teenagers. Young people should, of course, be given a degree of freedom, including free time. At the same time, they ought to be guided towards activities that develop their minds, bodies, and character. Most mature adults regret the time they spent as children watching television. This time could have been used to learn an instrument, write poetry, paint, conduct experiments, read, play chess, or practice a sport. We hope that our students will not have similar regrets.

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