

What is Classical Christian Education?

Article written by Dana Heidelberger, Cindy Leahy, and Judy Taylor of the Classical Cottage School and reprinted here with permission.

<http://classicalcottageschool.org/>

We believe this article explains the methodology of a true Classical Christian approach to education.

The Classical Cottage School Approach

The classical education movement has received a strong reception within the homeschool community in recent years, and with good reason. Classical methodology, when taught properly, teaches students how to think and learn for themselves. As the benefits become widely known, more classical programs are being written and marketed to homeschool families than ever before. But while they may appear similar on the surface, classical programs can in fact have quite different approaches. We feel compelled to give you an honest evaluation of how the Classical Cottage School excels above other classical homeschooling programs and why we think it is your best choice for classical homeschooling in this area.

CLASSICAL METHOD VERSUS CLASSICAL SUBJECTS

First of all, there is a big distinction between a program that uses classical methods and one that simply covers classical subjects. The classical method is characterized by the motto “less is more.” A true classical education gives a student the tools of learning, not through superficial subject completion but through the use of focused concentration on just a few subjects to develop key skills. At CCS, we do not attempt to cover 12 years of the various subjects taught in a typical school because we are not focusing on filling up our children with as much knowledge as possible. Our focus is on creating lifelong learners who are able to learn for themselves. They themselves will fill in any “gaps” as they continue to grow and mature. As Dorothy Sayers writes, "The sole true end of education is simply this; to teach men how to learn for themselves; and whatever instruction fails to do this is effort spent in vain."

In modern education, we have put the proverbial cart before the horse by expecting students to master a great number of subjects before they have mastered the tools of learning. While the study of language and logic may seem dull in themselves, they are the tools a student needs to develop to be able to approach the task of mastering any particular subject, whether Scottish political history or carburetor maintenance. We believe this model is in perfect harmony with how God has equipped our children to learn. Classical teaching methodology changes as the child matures in order to accommodate the three stages of the child's mental development; on the other hand, modern American education generally fails to make this distinction and uses the same methodology throughout a child's schooling.

At CCS, we firmly believe that Latin, Logic and Rhetoric are more than subjects. They are pathways to skills and should be the core of any classical program. A program in which Latin is tacked on as an elective or for mere exposure is not a classical program the way Dorothy Sayers

intended it. The benefits of learning Latin extend far beyond language acquisition, study of ancient history and mastery of grammar. Through the study of Latin, students are being systematically trained to tackle any difficult subject matter. Much like mathematics, in-depth study of Latin builds analytical skills that will be a foundation for all future learning. This is why advanced Latin students consistently score higher on SAT tests and in other academic areas. Those of us whose children have reached advanced levels of Latin cannot imagine accomplishing this without the aid of an outstanding teacher, such as we have in Susan Schearer, nationally recognized as one of the finest Latin teachers in the nation.

When you choose to make Latin the core of your family's education in the late Grammar and early Logic stages, you will not have time for a lot of other "subjects"; in fact, there will be days when all you will be able to accomplish academically is a careful study of Latin and Math, and that will be a job well done. However, this apparent lack of breadth should not concern you. International testing has repeatedly shown how American students score most highly in relation to other industrial countries while in the elementary years. A startling decline begins in about 4th grade and continues through high school. This alarming trend is not so difficult to understand. David Marsh, a professor at the University of Southern California Rossier School of Education, believes it is because we try to teach too many topics too quickly. Bruce Alberts, the president of the National Academy of Sciences, ascribes the poor performance of American students to American curriculum being "...a mile wide and an inch deep." Simply stated, American schools have opted for a subject-filled curriculum that produces only a superficial understanding and coverage, and lacks skill development. This lack of skill development begins to show as the children mature. As Martin Cothran of Highlands Latin School says, "Formal education should not merely introduce us to many things...which can by necessity lead only to superficial knowledge...but should encourage us to drink deeply at the springs of our culture. Much, not many." *Multum, non Multa.*

GRAMMAR SCHOOL PHILOSOPHY

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges for families with young children is waiting for those Upper School core classes. We understand how anxious parents are to begin a "serious" education with their young children; pressure from family and friends increases this anxiety to make sure young children keep pace with the vast amount of subject trivia to which public-schooled children are exposed. However, we are firm believers in the Charlotte Mason/Bluedorn methodology of early education. The best education for young children is the reading of many good books. Reading, math, and moral training at home are excellent preparation for our Upper School core classes. Young students need a lot of time outside (4—6 hours daily, according to Charlotte Mason!) for nature exploration, creative play, and refreshment.

It is admittedly hard to imagine that such a simple approach during the early years can result in a well-educated child, but we have met several who have followed this method, including some of the Bluedorn children (Trivium Pursuit), and their accomplishments, character and obvious capabilities are apt testimonial. Another thing to consider that is not widely appreciated is that material learned in the early years is often forgotten by the middle school years unless that material has context and persistent application. Susan Wise Bauer, while speaking about the

teaching of science at a HEAV convention several years ago, cautioned parents against trying to force-feed facts and said that time spent before middle school trying to teach the scientific method is time wasted.

The same can be said of a subject that we all realize is crucial, but few feel competent to teach: writing. Parents often think that extensive preparatory work is needed for achievement in the Progymnasmata classes. If you want to see local examples proving that not to be the case, ask parents of Progymnasmata I students who have never received prior writing instruction to share their child's work with you. Children who work diligently at the Progym assignments show many years of skill improvement in a single year—and there are two years of this thorough instruction. If that is the case with a quality curriculum and no evidence of an advantage exists with children who have had previous instruction, why burden your child and yourself with early formal writing instruction? Time in earlier years is much better spent reading the best of children's literature together to, as Andrew Pudewa of the Institute for Excellence in Writing recommends, establish templates of English well-written.

Workbooks and flashcards may have their place, but as an educational staple they rarely lead to long-term understanding and retention. The best learning occurs in context. Skill development, on the other hand, is permanent. This is the time to learn an instrument, a sport, or a new language. Read wonderful books about history and take a field trip; explore books about science and go to museums; or plant and tend a garden. The books give the activities a meaningful framework and the activities give the information grounding in reality. Time at the grammar school stage is best spent exploring and playing in nature; save the heavy academics for later.

At CCS we do not consider the Grammar School to be an “essential” part of a child’s homeschooling experience; rather, we approach our classes as enrichment courses which provide many benefits that are difficult to duplicate at home. For example, early exposure to foreign languages, opportunities for public speaking and recitation, small and large group discussion of classic literature, and the thrill of exploring history with other creative and enthusiastic young learners are worthy reasons to participate in a classroom experience. We have continued to expand our Grammar School course offerings to include music, science, art and physical education in an effort to balance a young student’s day with a variety of activity and movement. Yet with proper planning and dedication, many of the benefits of our courses could be achieved at home. The Grammar School courses at CCS are designed to complement the Upper School, but they are certainly not prerequisites.

We believe the best preparation for the classical course strands of the Upper School are:

- * the reading aloud of many good books, including historical biographies
- * narration and discussion of “great books” and the ideas that they inspire
- * plenty of hands-on experiences, field trips, and nature walks
- * hours of free time and creative play DAILY
- * daily moral training in the form of Bible readings and character stories
- * short but daily math lessons
- * copywork (for handwriting) of worthwhile poetry or literary excerpts
- * opportunities for artistic creation

- * music lessons and a home environment that encourages a love of music
- * learning responsibility through caring for a pet, light chores, etc...

An excellent site to give you more ideas for how to structure your day for young students is the Bluedorn link http://www.triviumpursuit.com/articles/ten_to_do_before_ten.php.

Of course there are many more ways to nurture young children, and adding more activities to your child's schedule is fine as long as you still have time for those essentials listed above. As parents, it is our job to protect our family time and create an environment where meaningful learning opportunities and relationships can flourish. How you balance your family's time now will greatly affect the habits of your children as they mature. A busy, crowded family life that involves the constant packing up and movement of tired, reluctant children is not abundant homeschooling.

By the way, not only young children need free time—older children should likewise have plenty of time to contemplate. If you do not have long blocks of time at home to read, rest, or take a walk, then we urge you to reevaluate your family's priorities. Please choose your children's activities wisely, and make sure that you do not fall prey to modern society's idea of what children need. They don't "need it all", nor is it healthy for them to have or expect it all. The mottoes "less is more" or "much, not many" can apply to all areas of our lives. It is so important to cherish this time at home with our younger children; they mature so quickly and their academic requirements in high school place so many more constraints on time and energy. Those of us with children in high school look back and realize how precious that freedom was just to have joy as a family.

COMPARISON OF UPPER SCHOOL CURRICULA

In order to develop the skills of Latin, Logic and Rhetoric, the CCS Upper School curriculum has three core strands, each six years in length. The question to ask of a classical program is how well their diligent students are learning and applying these core skills. It is these core skills, rather than a simple exposure to classical subjects, that distinguishes the classical approach from the American methods of the past 50 years.

Latin

Advanced achievement in Latin cuts in half the efforts for other studies such as modern languages, A.P. (Advanced Placement) Government, ancient history, and A.P. English Literature, to name the more common applications for high school coursework. As proof of their achievements, CCS Latin students of every level have done phenomenally well in a wide variety of competitions. For example, the May 2nd, 2007, edition of Middleburg Life announced that 7 of 14 students at Foxcroft (an exclusive girls' prep school that costs between \$30,000 and \$40,000 per year) had received an award for the National Latin Exam scores; the highest award a Foxcroft student received was a single silver medal. On that same national test, CCS students garnered 7 gold medals, 3 silver medals, 1 magna cum laude and 4 cum laudes (15 out of 18 students testing). How can that be explained other than by excellence of teaching and of method, particularly when our students meet with their teacher only once a week?

Logic

A classical education revolves around words. The Aristotelian logic that we use involves the four most basic verbal communication arts: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Modern logic has abandoned this methodology, replacing word-driven logic with a mathematically-based, symbolic approach. The abstractness of an emphasis on symbolic logic makes it far too challenging for a parent without a heavy math/science background to teach successfully—yet the biggest problem is that such an approach leaves one wondering how this type of logic applies to daily life. The tool of verbal logic, a basis of advanced discourse, is therefore never fully developed.

Through extensive research and consultation with other schools, we chose the Martin Cothran formal logic texts and the Socratic Logic text by Peter Kreeft because of their thorough and accessible presentations of verbal formal and material logic. Student comprehension and achievement have been excellent in our two-year Logic course and there is no need for parental involvement. Logic centered in verbal discourse is the tool our children most need; the ability to read an essay, hear a speech or engage in a discussion and evaluate the structure and soundness of the ideas presented is this essential tool that most children never develop. From the idea of His Son as the Word of God to our created image, the word is foundational to our being and what He intends for us to be. A true classical education seeks to lay that foundation by carefully developing the tool of verbal logic.

Progymnasmata/Writing

We believe that the only way to develop higher order skills is to focus on the skills systematically, using the classical method. That is why we have a two-year Progymnasmata classical writing curriculum (far and away the best writing curriculum our writing teacher, who has specialized in teaching writing for over 25 years, has seen) to carefully build writing skills. These skills are reinforced and developed by the six-year Omnibus writing component and the two-year Rhetoric class. Such an emphasis on the skills of writing is unique; we think it is essential to fully develop a student's ability to understand, conceive and express ideas.

Omnibus/Literature & History

Our Omnibus literature is presented chronologically and in historical context, with focus on a manageable number of seminal works at length each year to develop ever deepening understanding and appreciation for the best and most noble ideas of Western civilization. The Paideia discussion method used in Omnibus (as well as in several of our Upper School courses) was developed in the early 1900's by the Great Books Program at the University of Chicago and models inductive thinking and skills of analytical discourse—and the students enjoy it immensely, despite the rigor!

While memorizing historical facts is a necessary part of understanding the complex puzzle that is history, ever deepening study of the chronology of cultures and ideas is the way for those facts to be meaningful. That's why we have arranged all Upper School courses that pertain to

history (Omnibus, World History, Art History, Philosophy) to be synchronized so students can discuss and compare these ideas thoroughly in their proper context. The people who teach these courses are specialists who love their field enough to continue to teach it for many decades. Students are blessed by learning from such motivating and effective teachers.

Rhetoric

Rhetoric is the art and science of persuasion; this can be interpreted from the standpoint of the speaker/writer or from the perspective of the audience. Few of us have had much exposure to rhetoric, and it is certainly not a field that is developed by anything short of a full classical method, yet it is an essential part of understanding the world around us and how to affect it. Rhetoric should be the culmination of the writing/logic strand, blending these carefully trained skills into a powerful tool of expression and analysis. CCS will be using Edward Corbett's edition of Aristotle's Rhetoric and Poetics. Both Corbett and Aristotle are the esteemed masters of this field. Those who haven't had the prerequisite Progymnasmata I & II and Logic I & II courses would simply be overwhelmed and lost by the technical nature of this two-year class; however, those who've been given the gift of acquiring the tools of rhetoric will never read or write anything in the same way again.

Science & Math

You may still be wondering why CCS offers no science or math for the Upper School: it is both a question of number of class slots in one day and a concern for quality. We decided several years ago that we are better off doing the liberal arts classes well than to try to cover all the high school subjects with lesser quality. A high school science class should include laboratory work. Parents should be aware, though, that if they are planning for their student to apply to a four-year college, it is likely that the student will need to take at least one SAT subject test to prove achievement in a science. The Apologia curriculum will need to be carefully supplemented for the student to score well on the SAT subject test. Another science option for older students is Lord Fairfax Community College, which offers several levels of difficulty, fully-equipped labs and college credit.

For mathematics, we have found that unless a parent has a solid background in this field, a tutor is a wise route for advanced studies. A one-hour class with students checking their own work is not likely to succeed in our opinion. Neighboring groups have tried that for a number of years with an experienced math teacher as tutor and advised us that they experienced only limited success using that format, with SAT achievement a concern. Saxon math is relatively easy for homeschoolers to use because of its format; however, concept development is a noted weakness in the Saxon program starting with Algebra I. Students learn to “crunch through” the numbers, but don't know as well how and when to apply them. It takes a skilled tutor working closely with the student to overcome such a flaw and a weekly classroom format does not allow for such close work. There are several other texts that do a superior job of concept development (ex. Harold Jacobs' Algebra and also his Geometry) and still incorporate the review that is the hallmark of the Saxon approach; however, these texts require a tutor as well, as the lessons are not in the daily format that makes Saxon so manageable.

Remember: Multum, non Multa

As longtime homeschoolers, we've seen precious few families persist with home-schooling through the high school years. One major reason is burnout; certain curricula and methods, for example Susan Wise Bauer's very popular *The Well-Trained Mind*, lead families to think they need to cover all the bases and cram in as much as possible. The other reason is the difficulty of teaching at the high school level. That's why we have experienced teachers who have been respected, even highly recognized, specialists in their fields many, many years and are committed to applying the classical model.

While the majority of students at CCS achieve at levels beyond their years, the number one reason that Upper School students fail to succeed in our program is overcommitment; students lack the focused time necessary to work on these skills. The Upper School core classes at CCS are not electives but require a student's full effort and attention. That is why every year we stand before you at the Orientation meeting and urge you not to take on too many additional outside courses and activities. We urge you not to miss out on the joys of homeschooling and the benefits of classical learning by cramming your schedules so full of "good" things that you miss out on God's "best" for your family.

Our hope is that you will make prayerful decisions for your family based on an informed understanding of the inherent differences in method and quality among the many options available to homeschoolers today. It is hard to understand the long-term ramifications when one is first entering the field; look very carefully at upper level materials in particular. Do the detailed course descriptions sound well-designed? Have you talked to parents of high-school students to see the long term results? A program purporting to be a classical program may just be "a mile wide and an inch deep" in that it neglects careful skill development, and therefore falls far short of the educational results you're hoping for your children.

At CCS, we work with master teachers in the Upper School who spend countless hours weekly deepening their own considerable skills and preparing for class in order to make the most of that weekly hour of instruction. We adhere to a program of classical skill development, skills few American adults were able to learn in our subject-saturated education—and therefore few understand. Mastery of these core skills equips our children to understand the world of ideas. Not only are children thus equipped able to appreciate the noblest ideas that Western civilization has developed, they are also armed to defend their faith and freedom in a culture that attacks them with ideas and words that are contrary to God's Word. May God richly bless you as you train up these precious gifts from Him!