



NEW ENGLAND CLASSICAL ACADEMY
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The Classics Case: Pursuing Wisdom the Old Way

What should students know and when should they know it? If there were a definitive answer to that question, the K-12 curriculum in this country wouldn't be the battleground that it is.

The New England Classical Academy, an independent school that opened three years ago in the former St. Mary's School in Claremont, has its own response. As the name suggests, it has adopted a classical approach, seeking to educate young people according to the traditional understanding of education as the pursuit of wisdom.

In practical terms, this means that the school provides an integrated sequence of courses, from pre-K through 12th grade, which mines that rich vein of Western literature and humanistic thought. The school follows Catholic scholarly tradition, but it is not a parochial school, nor are most students Catholic. As staff writer Dan Mackie reported last week, mandatory subjects include Latin, beginning in third grade, as well as logic, which is taken in high school. The schools' 110 students are taught skills rarely emphasized in most public schools, including penmanship, recitation and grammar.

Classical schools -- both secular and Christian -- are gaining ground, and the classical curriculum in particular is popular among home-schoolers. The curriculum borrows from eclectic sources, including the ancient Greeks, the Jesuits, even British mystery writer Dorothy Sayers, whose 1947 Oxford University lecture titled *The Lost Tools of Learning* sparked a movement to revive the teaching of grammar, logic and rhetoric, or what is known as the medieval *trivium*, Latin for "where three roads meet."

New England Classical Academy's lower school relies heavily on the "Core Knowledge" curriculum devised by E.D. Hirsch, whose popular 1983 book *Cultural Literacy* highlighted what American schoolchildren don't know and enumerated what they should. By arguing that schools were depriving students of basic knowledge that would enable them to function successfully in contemporary society, Hirsch challenged the status quo.

In the upper school, the New England Classical academy requires students to study Latin, Greek, mathematics, logic (formal and informal) and rhetoric. Humanities seminars focus on classic texts that foster an understanding of Western thought, including Dante, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Chaucer and St. Augustine.

The Classical Academy's approach isn't for everybody, but clearly some parents and students are attracted to its formal structure and its rigors. Sophomore Andre Kepler told



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the *Valley News* that he enjoys studying philosophy and Aristotelian logic. “It's confusing, but it makes you think hard,” he said.

That's the point, after all, of a liberal education -- to learn to think hard and to think for oneself. “Whatever instruction fails to do this is effort spent in vain,” said Dorothy Sayers, who advocated a return not only to classical texts but to classical modes of inquiry and skills -- imitation, memorization, recitation, drills and grammar, which is not only the study of language and sentence structure but of any formal structure.

Classical education and the Core Knowledge curriculum have been criticized as elitist, rigid and far too narrow for a multi-cultural society. There's no question, though, that a well-conceived, coherent and content-rich curriculum is a good way to give children a solid foundation of knowledge. That may sound obvious, but too many school systems in this country operate without a road map, and they resort to the teaching of basic skills without providing the content to excite the imagination. That's why there's an undeniable appeal in a school that gets back to basics by exploring the great books and the ideas that make us human.