

What is Classical Education?

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There is broad consensus today that our public education system stands in need of reform. Too often, however, plans for reform have resembled the emperor's new clothes: They have cost a great deal of money, produced few results, and embarrassed their patrons.

Seven Oaks Classical School represents a new and, at the same time, a very old, alternative. Seven Oaks is a classical charter school. For two thousand years, a classical education was sought by all who could afford it. Today, classical charter schools are making this education available to all who desire it.

And what is classical education? There has been some confusion on this point. What was once assumed must now be explained. What follows is a brief outline of what a classical education is and, then, of what it is not.

The Aims of a Classical Education

Above all, classical education is defined by its aims. A classical education is an education that seeks after human *excellence*. Human excellence requires a well-ordered soul, one that distinguishes what is superior from what is inferior and prefers what is superior. That means instilling a love of what is most excellent—the true, the beautiful, and the good—and making the pursuit of these things a way of life.

A classical education aims at *virtue*. Here we simply reiterate the first point. The Greek word for excellence is the same word sometimes translated “virtue.” The virtues sought by a classical education are both intellectual and moral. At Seven Oaks Classical School, we prize wisdom, knowledge, prudence, justice, courage, moderation, hard work, and honesty. Virtue is considered both in the individual and as it relates to others. Seven Oaks celebrates mutual respect and a sense of civic responsibility.

The highest end of classical education is human *happiness*. A classical education begins with the conviction that everyone seeks happiness, and that the real and lasting happiness of individuals and societies depends on the cultivation of intellectual and moral excellence.

These ends of classical education are not for an elite few, nor did they cease to be relevant with the twenty-first century. Rather, these goals are good for every person and at all times.

The Attributes of a Classical Education

Closely related to the ends of a classical education are its leading attributes. These qualities further describe the essence of classical education.

The first follows from what we have already said concerning ends. A classical education is a *humane* education. At least since the days of Cicero, the *studia humanitatis* (“humane studies”)

have been thought of as those studies that help a person fulfill his or her nature as a thinking and reasoning human being. As a classical school, Seven Oaks stands in this tradition. We regard vocational training and test preparation as the floor, not the ceiling, of our education. These concerns are secondary to the formation of the human person. Our first concern is the life well-lived.

A classical education is also a *liberal* education. A classical education seeks to liberate students from the double bonds of ignorance and vice. It seeks, as well, to free students from the shackles of their own slender experience—to broaden their existence through an encounter with other times, places, practices, and ideas. Traditionally, a classical education has been regarded both as the education that is fitting for citizens of a free society, and the education that best fits citizens to be free.

Finally, a classical education is a traditional education. Our students will study every major world civilization, ancient and modern. Our focus, however, will be on the West. After all, we live in the West and our culture's roots are predominantly, though certainly not exclusively, Western. We regard Western civilization as a precious inheritance, cobbled together and refined over many generations, beginning in ancient Greece some 2500 years ago and extending down to the present day. Arnold Toynbee, the great historian of liberty, warned that we are “never more than one generation from barbarism.” Through the education they receive, students at Seven Oaks Classical School come into this inheritance. They, in turn, become caretakers of that inheritance, responsible for transferring the principal to future generations with interest.

A classical education prizes innovation, but believes that before students can innovate, they must know what has come before. However, this esteem for the past is not blind. If the Western tradition does anything, it instills a spirit of inquiry. One finds recurring questions in the so-called “great conversation” of the Western tradition. But even on the most basic questions of human existence, the answers offered by the tradition vary widely.

It is this humble respect for the past that has placed Seven Oaks Classical School on the cutting edge of education reform. Instead of following every fad that washes over the educational community, classical education has focused on adapting the most time-tested methods and materials to present circumstance. Far from useless, this approach to education has proved immensely productive for more than two millennia and remains so in the present day.

The Means of a Classical Education

We began with the aims and attributes of classical education. Most contemporary discussions of classical education center, however, on questions of method. How does a classical school go about accomplishing the lofty goals it sets for itself? What does a classical school look like in practice? The question is a fair one. In fact, there is considerable variety among classical schools in the materials they use and the ways they teach. The brief description that follows stresses the points upon which there is broadest agreement. It is convenient to organize this description under three headings: curriculum, pedagogy, and environment.

The Curriculum

Among the more obvious distinctives of a classical school is its curriculum. Since the Middle Ages, classical education has been closely associated with the seven liberal arts of learning: the “Trivium” (Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic) and the “Quadrivium” (Music, Arithmetic, Geometry, and Astronomy). The former focus on speech, the latter on number. Aspects of this older classification remain. At Seven Oaks, for example, students are required to take classes in both Logic and Rhetoric.

In terms of materials, a classical education is one in which the classics feature prominently. These are works that constitute, in Matthew Arnold’s words, “the best which has been thought and said”—what the Renaissance humanists called *bonae litterae* (“good books”), on account of their success in cultivating wisdom and eloquence. Most are old, because time has a way of confirming a work’s merit. All are well-written, and contain profound explorations of the questions that have occupied the noblest minds of every generation.

Classical education is also marked by instruction in the classical languages. Latin and Greek offer direct access to the greatest writings of the Western tradition. Furthermore, to a unique degree, the classical languages train students to think and write well in their own language. Over two-thirds of all English words have Greek or Latin roots. At Seven Oaks Classical School, students take up the study of Greek and Latin roots in the third grade; then, in the sixth grade, they begin learning the Latin language.

The Teacher and the Art of Teaching

Classical schools are marked by the emphasis they place on the teacher. It is fair to say that classical schools are student-centered in the sense that they are concerned with the formation of each student. But they believe that formation requires someone to do the forming. It is essential that those with more wisdom and knowledge share that wisdom and knowledge with those who have less. And so classical schools are also teacher-centered. That is, they believe excellent teachers are no less important than an excellent curriculum in the formation of the hearts and minds of students.

Teachers in a classical school go about the work of formation in three main ways. In the first place, they strive to instill good habits. A fine lecture is useless to the student who has not developed the habit of listening. Second, teachers model what they want their students to become. They accept the responsibility of exhibiting the same intellectual and moral virtues they seek in their students. Third, they offer instruction in the various branches of knowledge. Of course, this requires a knowledge both of how to teach and of what to teach. It is an unfortunate fact that most education programs today focus on technique to the exclusion of content. At Seven Oaks Classical School, every effort is made to hire teachers who are expert in the subjects they teach, who know how to communicate their knowledge, who are fine role models, and who understand the need to cultivate good habits in the students.

As for teaching methods, one encounters a wide variety among classical schools. Within Seven Oaks Classical School, visitors will observe a number of methods. Socratic dialogue, seminar, lecture, experiment, recitation, models for emulation—all have their place. The means vary, but the ends are fixed.

This much is consistent, however. Classical schools begin with the basics and build from there. Every field of study employs a certain vocabulary and requires the mastery of a certain body of facts. Students will not be successful in Algebra II if they do not know what an exponent is or if they have not learned their times tables. In short, classical schools accept the maxim that it is impossible to think well with an empty mind. And so they are characterized by the old-fashioned belief that students should memorize a great many facts.

When it comes to the learning of facts, classical schools are careful not to confuse ends and means. Classical schools seek to tap students' sense of wonder and to draw them toward wisdom. In this effort, rote learning is unavoidable. But it is also merely preparatory. Lower-order thinking is for the sake of higher-order thinking. Of far greater importance is good, sincere conversation about justice, truth, and beauty. Classical schools understand that wisdom cannot be reduced to a flashcard. For this reason, classical schools are committed to introducing students to great works of literature, as well as music and art. These have a unique power to shape the soul, cultivate the imagination, and illuminate truth, beauty, and goodness. This power is not easily measured, but it is nonetheless real.

Classical education is often described as rigorous. That is true. Memorizing facts, articulating one's thoughts, cultivating good habits—these are long, toilsome roads, extending over thirteen years, at least, and then, hopefully, the whole of one's life. The way is often enjoyable, and the sense of progress is satisfying; but it often feels like work, and success depends on a good will. The reward, however, is great. Wisdom and eloquence, imagination and a sense of poetic beauty, friendship and virtue—these are not insignificant gifts to give to a child.

Environment

Finally, a classical education is aided in its higher aims by careful attention to the school's environment. If the great work of the classical school is to proceed unhindered, there must be order. Order is established in a variety of ways. Civility, decorum, and a sense of personal responsibility are encouraged. Conduct that interferes with learning or denies others the respect they are due is discouraged. Uniforms have been found useful in the maintenance of order and discipline, and so most classical schools, including Seven Oaks, require them.

Classical schools also seek an environment characterized by beauty. They believe that there ought to be a harmony between what is taught and the place in which that teaching occurs. The environment ought to bear witness to the enterprise. At Seven Oaks Classical School, every effort is made to keep the school buildings and grounds clean and in good repair. Within the school, we seek adornments that are beautiful and that convey to all who enter the sense that they have come to a place of learning.

Above all, classical schools seek to nurture an atmosphere of friendship. It is hoped that faculty will model among themselves a community of learning, and that students will follow suit. What is desired is not the disembodied, fire-walled friendship of social media, but real friendship developed over time as faculty and students together seek to orient their lives to the true, the beautiful, and the good.

What a Classical Education Is *Not*

We conclude by noting a few things that classical education is not. First, as we have said, classical charter schools are not elitist. It is a curious fact that classical charter schools have sometimes been suspected of elitism. Historically, it is true, classical education was reserved for the upper classes. However, that is no longer the case. Charter schools are public. Unlike private schools, anyone may enroll. No tuition is charged, and no tests are given to determine eligibility. If there happens to be a waiting list, the order of admission is decided by lottery. Classical charter schools offer a classical education to anyone who desires it, without consideration of social status, race, or income.

In the second place, classical charter schools are not outmoded. Educators today talk constantly of the need for a “twenty-first century education,” and this has led some to doubt the relevance of a classical education. Yet a classical education is in every essential point a timeless education. It also happens to be the education that has made possible the greatest achievements of Western civilization, not least its science and technology, material prosperity, law codes and free institutions. Perhaps we should keep hold of the goose that lays the golden eggs.