

Classical Education: Towards the Revival of American Schooling

*This reading is excerpted from the book **Classical Education: Towards the Revival of American Schooling** by Gene Edward Veith and Andrew Kern of the Capital Research Center.*

Classical Education and the Next Millennium

"Our professor began class by saying that everything we will learn in this course will be obsolete by the time it's over." This complaint by an adult taking a technical education course captures the dilemma of contemporary education. We are living at a time when information is multiplying exponentially, when technology is advancing at a dizzying pace. To take advantage of the information age, we need more skills, not less.

All sides demand education reform: conservatives and liberals, business and labor; above all, parents. Proposals of all sorts circulate -- back to basics, school to work, computers in every classroom, self-esteem training. Yet they are panaceas, comically inadequate to the intellectual and cultural challenges we face.

Somehow, American education must become both intellectually stimulating and morally disciplined. We need schools and colleges that will foster the intellectual and creative powers of our children and prepare them to be good citizens.

This is the promise of classical education. Classical education is currently being rediscovered in classrooms across the country. It can revitalize our schools just as it has always revitalized our intellectual tradition. Classical education has its roots in the philosophy of the ancient Greeks and the practical genius of the ancient Romans. Their conception of the Liberal Arts was systematized by the medieval Church, which founded the first universities and nurtured the flowering of the High Middle Ages following centuries of chaos and barbarism. The rediscovery of many long-forgotten Greek and Roman texts and a new exposition of classical education sparked the Renaissance and informed the Enlightenment, a period marked not merely by empiricism and skepticism, but also by the neoclassicism of Burke, Swift, and the American Founding Fathers. In many ways the cultural crisis

of our own so-called "postmodern" society -- with its intellectual relativism, moral collapse, and social alienation -- is similar to the cultural stagnation of previous eras. Once again, the time is ripe to rediscover classical education.

The revival is underway. The vanguard of the new Renaissance can be found in private elementary schools (some in church basements), inner-city high schools, and re-invented liberal arts colleges. Its heralds include homeschoolers on the internet and isolated rebel scholars at major universities.

Classical education is often reduced to a concentration on the humanities, the reading of old books, or the celebration of a "broadening" general education touted in liberal arts college catalogues. Similarly, classical education has been regarded as a simple "back to basics" curriculum or the moral education of a "book of virtues." But this minimizes its range and depth. A genuine liberal arts education is the salvation of scientific and technical education as well. Classical education provides a conceptual framework for mastering the entire range of objective knowledge. It also offers a theory of human character development, and it contains a teaching methodology that is demonstrably effective and eminently practical.

Classical education is remarkably adaptable. Its medieval, Renaissance, and Enlightenment versions had a common conceptual core, but addressed the needs and dispositions of each cultural moment. Classical education is conservative in honoring past achievement and defending permanent values. But it is also radical in welcoming creativity and individuality, and encouraging new discovery.

What Classical Schools Do

The classical school is committed to a liberal, or general, curriculum. Its territory is all human knowledge, from the arts to the sciences, history to mathematics. It does not claim a narrow field of specialization or market niche for itself. Nor does it permit students to evade issues they cannot understand or ways of thinking they cannot handle. Instead, it helps them confront sources of misunderstanding and develop their intellectual powers.

The classical school explicitly or implicitly recognizes and applies the principles of the trivium

(grammar, logic, rhetoric). A classical curriculum is keyed to the stages of the student's intellectual development and to the universal process of learning. It provides training in language and logic, and in expressive writing and speech. The curriculum also understands the principles of the quadrivium and insists that a good education encompasses abstract thought, aesthetic appreciation, empirical inquiry, and spatial relation. It applies these "arts" of learning to the "sciences" of the natural world, the social world, and the realm of religious faith and meaning.

Classical schools integrate all elements of the curriculum, and learning is unified and cumulative. Students are taught to recognize how areas of knowledge relate to one another, and how basic knowledge learned in earliest childhood is the foundation for more complex ways of knowing.

Classical schools do not denigrate or ignore the past; neither are they nostalgic for it.

Acknowledging the continuum of history, classical schools build on great ideas, discoveries and expressions of those who have gone before. They borrow pedagogical forms, such as the trivium. Many require or encourage study of Greek and Latin. The great ideas of the past are a starting point -- not the last word -- for the "great conversation." David Hicks endorses a poised and balanced understanding when he insists that, "The true knowledge of paideia requires a discerning appreciation for the past, unprejudiced by an assumption of progress or regress."

Classical schools cultivate a student's interest in first principles and ultimate purposes. They are not afraid to delve deeply into philosophy and religion, but encourage questions and answers about knowledge, faith and meaning. Teachers in classical schools provoke students to ask about the purpose of education -- and they are not satisfied with money and career as answers.

Classical schools inculcate wisdom and virtue. Children yearn to become adults, and a classical education prepares them for adult responsibilities: for working and earning a living, raising a family, the privileges and duties of citizenship and friendship, and for courage in the face of solitude, illness and death. Career counseling and technical

training will count for little if our schools are unable to order the moral character of their students. Ironically, the desire for a well-paid job -- which many parents and children consider education's only purpose -- has failed to motivate many students to study hard and learn well.

Classical schools educate for citizenship. Citizens give way to alienation, apathy, and intemperance without an education in wisdom and virtue, and this leads to family and neighborhood disintegration, crime and political corruption. Modernism and postmodernism can scarcely speak to such concerns with a straight face.

Finally, classical schools are communities of learning. Because teachers and students share an idealistic and even visionary aim, their schools are humane, disciplined and stimulating. Classical education is deeply personal: teachers are coaches, midwives and mentors of their students. Their classes are not organized around lectures and multiple choice tests; they are Socratic dialogues that provoke clear thinking and fresh insights. Classical schools make demands on students, but they also inspire them.

Misconceptions About Classical Education

Classical education is not elitist. It is true that the wealthy are more likely to send their children to private schools that appreciate the importance of the liberal arts. But this argues for making them more, not less, accessible to all.

Classical education is not traditionalist or reactionary. It hails achievements, not eras, and only honors traditions that represent inherently worthy ideas and practices. Classical education values the testimony of personal experience, but does not glorify it.

Some equate classical education with the humanities, and contrast it to mathematics and science. But this confuses the classical understanding of the "humanities" with what it has come to mean -- an exclusive focus on literature and the arts. Cicero, who coined the term, meant an education fit for a Roman: it comprised all that man could achieve, including arithmetic, geometry, music, the arts, and the trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Properly understood, a classical education values all branches of learning. It seeks to

prevent the unbalanced concentration of studies that too often produces the "artsy" student or the "science nerd."

Some critics believe classical education is authoritarian and stifling to creativity. They imagine a teacher rapping the knuckles of the student who has not formed his letters correctly or forcing children to memorize trivial facts and repeat boring drills. These are myths. Yes, work loads are great, discipline is strict, and there is plenty of drill, especially in grammar school. But the purpose of it all is the adult's creative and independent thought (libera).

Others believe classical education's commitment to the search for truth disguises a mentality of dogmatic certainty. Nothing could be more false. Unlike postmodernism, which is dogmatically certain that all knowledge is relativist, classical education believes in the possibility of objective knowledge and truth. The mind that knows that it does not know everything -- the humility of Socrates -- still aims to know the truth. This is not "dogmatism" in the pejorative sense of indoctrination and narrow-mindedness. The method of classical learning is dialectic, a process of questioning. Dialectic encourages openness to truth in all its complexity and mystery; it does not lead to an unyielding skepticism. Classical education nourishes wonder; it provokes the curiosity and inquisitiveness that leads to scientific discovery; and it inclines the mind to ultimate questions of religious faith.

The Future of Classical Education

We do not propose that classical education return us to the glories of Greece, the grandeur of Rome, the scholasticism of the Middle Ages, the artistry of the Renaissance, or even the moralism of Victorian England. Our times portend a new age of discovery which will require new kinds of learning.

But the past is in our present, and what we can know is contained in what we already know. We do well to avoid the fatal and arrogant conceit of jettisoning our heritage. That heritage is not solely a gift of wisdom and virtue. It also contains cautions and forewarnings. Sophistry and cynicism were characteristics of the Hellenistic world.

Multiculturalism was part of everyday life in

Imperial Rome. Cultural meltdown was a recurring phenomenon in the ancient world and it threatens our own time. Classical education reminds us of this bigger picture.