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Classical Curriculum

Classical education is on the rise among private and charter schools.

BY TERRY SCHUSTER

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BROOKFIELD ACADEMY AND LAKE COUNTRY CLASSICAL ACADEMY

The rise of classical education in recent years reflects a growing desire among parents and educators to return to time-tested methods that emphasize critical thinking, moral virtue, and a deep understanding of Western civilization. Rooted in what's called the trivium—grammar, logic, and rhetoric—classical education focuses on teaching students how to think, rather than simply what to think. This educational model often includes the study of classical languages like Latin and Greek, as well as great works of literature, philosophy, and history.

Two area schools—one private and one charter—offer their take on classical education.

BROOKFIELD ACADEMY

A typical day at Brookfield Academy begins with an all-school assembly outside, with intentional messages delivered to reinforce one of the school's featured "5 Stars," or virtues of the day. The assembly is a "huge part of who we are and how we deliver our mission and our goals on a daily basis," according to the school's website. That goal is for all the young minds in the group to be thinking about their stars: Truth, Character, Individuality, Intellect and Heritage.

"There is something different about the feel of this community," says Head of School Doug Ricci, who's entering his fifth year at the helm at Brookfield Academy and 35th year there overall. "What we do well with our kids is to help them become better persons as well as better students."

A college prep private school on the northwest side of Brookfield, Brookfield Academy is one of a growing number of independent private schools that follow a classic, liberal arts curriculum that includes phonics, grammar, math and classic English novels. In addition, every middle school student must take one year of Latin. LATIN?

"I get a similar response from many people," Ricci says with a chuckle. (Studies have shown that knowledge of Latin leads to improved command of the English language as well as foreign languages, such as French and Spanish, and higher test scores on the ACT and SAT.)

Brookfield Academy is one of about 2 schools in the state that focus on classical education.

Challenges

The biggest challenge facing schools today is dealing with technology.

"Kids really haven't changed over time," says Ricci, recalling his teaching years at Brookfield Academy. "What has changed for kids is access to their phone and social media. They've lost that face-to-face communication. Technology has impacted us all as humans."

Over the summer, teachers attended professional development sessions that focused on the proper use of AI.

"AI is not going away," says Ricci. "It's not much different than when calculators were first introduced, and we thought we were losing out on basic skills. With AI, we must find the best uses for it without being unethical. We still want our students to be critical thinkers. We can't ask AI to do it for you. You must be able to write things yourself. That is our biggest challenge."



Brookfield Academy's Head of School Doug Ricci



Brookfield Academy Middle School Service Club works on a community project.

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A sixth grader at Lake Country Classical Academy works on a sheep dissection.

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LAKE COUNTRY CLASSICAL ACADEMY

Lake Country Classical Academy (LCCA) in Oconomowoc is an independent public charter school that promotes the principles of moral character and civic virtue. It is a Hillsdale College Member School.

"This is a tried-and-true education model," says Margaret Hagedorn, who became the principal of LCCA in 2021 and helped open the school. It recently graduated its first class in May. "We use books that you've probably read in school."

The school uses explicit phonics instruction, and the elementary mathematics curriculum uses Singapore math, which builds strong problem-solving skills and critical thinking.

The faculty uses traditional, teacher-led methods of instruction. It is committed to using technology effectively, but with limited use.

"In many schools, students are one-on-one with their chrome books," Hagedorn explains. At LCCA, students have more one-on-one time with their teachers, who follow the Socratic questioning method of pursuing one question with another question.

"The goal is to pursue the good, the truth and the beautiful," says Hagedorn, reciting a catch-phrase often used as a means staying grounded in its academic rigor and human flourishing.

That includes proper behavior, with behavioral expectations displayed along the hallways. LCCA follows the classic education approach that adult authority is good, healthy and necessary, and that children learn best with structure.



LCCA Principal Margaret Hagedorn

"It does work," she says. "Our students are orderly and respectful."

While the more studies need to be done on the overall effectiveness of classical education, particularly with the newer schools, the state report card lists LCCA as exceeding expectations by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

In addition to taking all of the state standardized tests, LCCA also has students take the classic learning test. CLT is equivalent of the ACT, and Hagedorn says many colleges are now recognizing these scores.

"These tests are geared toward the content of the liberal arts education," she says. "Lots of grammar and the basic academic concepts. There is no political bent in their assessment. They are authentic in nature."

Hagedorn adds that classical education is in no way an affront on public education.

"The beauty of school choice is that parents can discern the educational environment that aligns with their own family lives," she explains. "I love what we do here." **MKE**

Classical Education Meaning

Rob Jackson, founder of Classical Commons, a web-based social network designed to further advance classical schools, explains the meaning of classical education.

"Simply put, classical education is a recovery of liberal arts education, where language, mathematics, history, and the sciences are integrated in K-12 academics. Good and great works serve as the exemplary content for those subjects," he explains.

In addition, Jackson says, most classical education incorporates training in the fine arts and athletics for a well-rounded experience of schooling. Most importantly,

K-12 classical schools place character — which includes the development of intellectual virtues like understanding and craftsmanship alongside moral virtues like courage and self-control — at the center of students' formative years.

"In short, classical education is a holistic approach to schooling that encompasses mind, body, and spirit," says Jackson in an online blog.

Jackson disputes the perception that classical education is frequently regarded as conservative in today's polarized environment. "It's disappointing to see classical characterized as political, as if studying good and great works is partisan," he says. "The classic schools with which I am most familiar read deeply and broadly into the political philosophical tradition, from Plato to Marx. In that sense, classical education is philosophical and pre-political," he says.

With an emphasis on these classic philosophical works, there isn't a dispute over book bans.

"When it comes to exploring specific topics, classical education introduces students to a chorus of authors who prepare students' minds to engage those topics," Jackson continues. "For example, if you want to root out racism, you should read the greatest thinkers and arguments that address the perennial human error of viewing others with disdain — e.g., Augustine, Bartolomé de las Casas, Ghandi, King, and others. Such writers remind us that society's defense of human dignity is ongoing — and those writers inspire the next generation to take up that just cause."

For a list of classical schools in Wisconsin, go to <https://classicalschoools.heritage.org/>