Students recite text at Washington Latin Public Charter School in Washington, D.C. (Photo via Instagram)

Inside the New Wave of Old-School Education

Amid growing claims that schools indoctrinate students, 'classical education'—which teaches kids to think critically and master old books—is making a comeback.

By Julia Steinberg
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MENLO PARK, CA — On a rainy evening last January, a group of girls in long, pleated skirts and boys in jackets and ties were sitting around a mahogany table in an old house discussing Homer's *The Iliad*.

It was parents' night at Chesterton Academy of St. James, a private school in Silicon Valley, the fertile crescent of innovation. And even though the ninth- and tenth-graders were working through a text that dates to the eighth century BCE, the lesson felt—as Big Tech likes to say—disruptive.

Lily Ahern, 15, was talking about Priam, the father of the slain Trojan warrior Hector, who asks the Greeks to return his son's body so he can be properly buried. Her teacher, a bespectacled man with a trim beard and wire-rim glasses, peppered Lily with questions: What did she make of Priam's request? Was the Greek response morally defensible?

Every time Lily replied, her teacher pressed her to cite some passage from the text to support her argument. The whole back and forth—the sharing of premises and conclusions and points and counterpoints—seemed straight out of a Platonic dialogue. It was all so thoughtful, so measured, so wide-ranging. Students were free to argue *anything* (about the text, at least) as long as it was well reasoned. And as a 21-year-old who was taught *what* to think—not *how* to think—at my supposedly top-tier private school in Los Angeles, it felt liberating.

Lily was being trained in what parents and educators across the country are calling "classical education"—teaching kids to think critically and master old books, which are often written by a lot of dead white males. (In the past, this used to be called just "education.")

While this time-honored approach to education has fallen out of favor in recent decades—as many American schools have prioritized ideology and equal outcomes over excellence—it is now making a big comeback across the country. This is driven not only by parents' growing realization of the old system's academic failures but a sense that contemporary campus culture lacks much in the way of moral vision.

"If you are not given an education and the basic human skills of reading, writing, communicating, thinking, deliberating, you're at mercy of being left in the dust; you're being left where the animals are," Greg Billion, Chesterton's 32-year-old headmaster, told me. "We're seeing that in the world: reason has been abolished, rational discourse has been abandoned. And that's largely because our education system has failed to form people. The classical way of educating places a special emphasis on forming the faculties by which man can be free."

Classical education revolves around the great-books tradition, which starts with ancient Greece and works its way through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment to the present. There are grammar, rhetoric, logic, composition, the Socratic method—the building blocks of a self-governing mind. It is meant to teach students how to argue and reason and wrestle with the greatest literary, philosophical, and scientific ideas of all time, and it seeks to protect kids from indoctrination of all stripes—including the critical race theory that has seeped into most schools, public and private.

Central to its mission is a de-emphasis on technology—which, classical-education enthusiasts say, has the allure of the new and sophisticated, but actually distracts from the serious business of learning.

"I like being present and not using devices," Lily Ahern told me.

Lily, who plays club soccer with lots of kids who don't go to Chesterton, said sometimes those other students seem sad.

Referring to the social-media app Snapchat, she said: "In big schools, you'll snap your friends every day, but you won't ever talk to them in person. It causes people to be lonely, because they're not actually connecting in person."

A classical education, said W. Martin Bloomer, a classicist at Notre Dame who specializes in Roman literature, strengthens students with "not just skills of language or interpretation but a habit of sympathy."

He added: "It's not really dogmatic. It is philosophical and meditative."

Rabbi Abe Unger, the head of school at the Emet Classical Academy in Manhattan, which is opening in the fall of 2024, told me: "Students who reacted in that sort of antihuman way to October 7, supporting random shootings and kidnappings and killings, they really can't see nuance. They don't have the skills to read history. They don't have the skills to parse out a slogan. They don't have the skills to parse out a slaughter."

When I half-seriously asked Greg Billion whether he was concerned that, in the absence of diversity training and affinity groups, his students would become racist, transphobic, unemployable Luddites, he laughed.

Chesterton, which opened its Bay Area outpost in 2022, is in the business of cultivating healthy, curious, enthusiastic souls, Billion said.

"We're not worried that our students are not keeping up with the Joneses or keeping up with other kids, because the other kids are being fed a lot of untrue things," he said.

The Chesterton school system is part of a boom in classical education that stems from a long-festering frustration with American schools. After opening its first campus in a Minneapolis suburb in 2008, it expanded to roughly 20 campuses by early 2020, and has since morphed into 61 campuses in 24 states.

Today, more than a million students in the United States, ages five to 18, are receiving a classical education in public or private schools, or at home, Dan Scoggin, co-founder of Great Hearts Academy, a network of public charter schools in the classical education tradition, estimated. That's nearly two percent of all 55 million students across the country. Meanwhile, a February 2024 report conducted by Arcadia Education, a consulting group, estimates a 4.8 percent yearly growth rate for the number of classical schools in the U.S.

The schools riding the classical ed wave include:

- South Bronx Classical Charter Schools, a charter school network that has expanded to four locations since its founding in 2006, where students are required to study Latin and visit New York's Metropolitan Museum. Currently, the network has a waiting list of 7,000 students.
- Emet Classical Academy, a Jewish school in New York that teaches Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and philosophy. Launching this fall with inaugural fifth, sixth, and ninth grade classes, Emet plans to enroll up to forty students in its first year.
- Hózhó Academy, a New Mexico charter school, opened in 2018 and requires fifth graders to study *Don Quixote* and Shakespeare. Now expanding from K–8 to include an upper school soon, Hózhó had 616 total students in the 2022–2023 school year, and currently enrolls 680 students, with a waiting list of 166 students.
- Hillsdale Academy, in Hillsdale, Michigan, a Christian school affiliated with the liberal-arts college of the same name. It started as a lower school in 1990 and expanded to an upper school in 1998. Hillsdale has added nearly one hundred students in the past four years, with a total of 308.
- Kenai Classical School, a Christian school on Alaska's Kenai Peninsula, which is in its fifth year of operations. The school started with nine students and has grown to 42 for the current school year.
- Nashville Classical Charter School, in Nashville, Tennessee, a K–8 school where students score far above their peers, opened in 2013 and has grown steadily ever since—with nearly 300 students in 2017–2018, and 550 today.

Students with their teacher at South Bronx Classical School, which has expanded to four locations since its founding in 2006. (Photo via Marta Skovro).

- Washington Latin Public Charter School, founded in 2006 in the nation's capital, now serves more than 1,000 students across two campuses and plans to open a second upper-school campus by 2028. It added 118 students in the last year.
- Then there's Great Hearts Academies, which was founded in 2003 in Phoenix and has spread across Arizona, Louisiana, and Texas. It is now the "largest brick-and-mortar provider of classical education in this country," Dan Scoggins said. In the past five years, the network of schools has grown from 17,000 to 27,000 students—a 47 percent yearly growth rate. Great Hearts operates nearly 40 schools across three states.

Meanwhile, the once-puny Association of Classical and Christian Schools—a group that has been working to revive the classical Christian-education movement since the early nineties—included 40,000 students in the 2015–2016 school year, and 57,000 students in 2021–2022.

The goal of classical education, Scoggins stressed, is not getting graduates into the best universities or making sure they land top-paying jobs (although it's pretty good at that). In 2022, Great Hearts' students' average SAT score was 1,189—129 points above the national average.

"We want to produce morally flourishing and happy individuals that will be great fathers, husbands, wives, and great friends," he explained.

Kira Krieger Senders, who plans to send her 10-year-old son to Emet Classical Academy, said: "I'd love for my son and daughter to be very successful. I'd love for them to be captains of industries and leaders of the future. But my first step is making them *mensches*."

Which means thinking clearly and critically, reasoning, and not being held captive by other people's ideas, Billion said. This lesson is hammered home in each and every lesson throughout the school day.

Case in point: a Chesterton freshman named Giovanni proved two Euclidean proofs on the chalkboard. "I am going to prove that, given a finite straight line, I can construct an equilateral triangle upon it," Giovanni said. Then he wrote the proof on the board in lovely, legible handwriting while speaking clearly and confidently to the roomful of adults.

When I asked Billion about Giovanni's presentation, he said it was wrong to think of math as distinct from any other subject students study. The point was always the same: to think better.

"To learn how to reason, especially about complicated things, you have to learn how to reason about things that are very simple and very clear, like lines and angles and circles," he said. And, to do that, students are expected to communicate their ideas in proper handwriting rather than via text or computer type.

Lily Ahern, the Chesterton student, added that the classical school rule that everything should be written in longhand can sometimes be "a little bit strict. Like, you're supposed to write all of your papers by hand, unless they're super long."

But forcing kids to go back to basics without taking any technological shortcuts is precisely the point, said Kira Krieger Senders.

During the Covid lockdowns of early 2020—when tens of millions of kids were forced to go to school online—Krieger Senders said her daughter, who has learning disabilities, suffered in the digital classroom.

"She couldn't write a letter properly. She couldn't pay attention. Online studying was the worst thing that ever happened to my child."

It wasn't just kids with learning disabilities who were losing out, Krieger Senders said. "I don't know one parent who was like, 'Oh, our school is doing an amazing job.' "

At the same time that standards have plummeted, schools have become political battlegrounds—with California introducing its mandatory ethnic studies program, steeped in identity politics; and school districts from Florida to Virginia to New Jersey banning novels by Toni Morrison, among others.

Rabbi Abe Unger, Emet's head of school, added that most teachers do not really challenge their students, depriving them of the chance to build their self-esteem. Classical education, by contrast, helps counteract the worst aspects of contemporary culture—including widespread unhappiness, shrinking attention spans, and a greatly diminished discourse, Unger said.

"By saying to our children, 'You can do anything' "—like writing a mathematical proof or working through complex philosophical arguments—"we create citizens of the world that are confident and then actually can confront the issues of the day," he said.

Drew Heiskell, a senior at Atlanta Classical Academy, agrees that the teachers at his school have given him a new confidence. He recalled a political philosophy class he took last year on Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and their contrasting views on the social contract.

"Usually, with these discussions, when a question is asked, there's a little bit of silence, because we have to think through what the question is, and then there's someone who starts off, almost like taking a leap," Drew told me.

"Anyway, someone in class took the first leap, and it got heated, and then it got *really* heated. But it never got personal, and everyone respected everyone else thinking through their arguments," he said.

"I think that these discussions kind of prove that there is still the capacity within human beings to be rational and to communicate and to speak to each other with kindness, even in their disagreements," he said. "It just goes to show it's possible."

Julia Steinberg is an intern at The Free Press. Read her last piece, "Why This Berkeley Professor Is Sleeping in His Office," and follow her on X @Juliaonatroika.

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Great article. It made my day!! I pray that "classical education" continues to make a comeback and more and more parents have the chance to get their kids this education.
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