

Classical Cottage School Hosts Clarke County Certamen

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Approximately 200 students from across northern Virginia gathered at Powhatan School on Saturday for Classical Cottage School's Fourth Invitational Certamen tournament. The competition provides middle and high school students with an opportunity to test their knowledge of the Latin language as well as Roman culture. Seventeen schools attended the event as well as many home-schooled students.

Saturday's event was hosted by Classical Cottage School, a consortium of professional educators that focuses on developing essential skills using classical methods, based in Winchester, Virginia. Classical Cottage offers courses from elementary to upper school and meets 32 Thursdays from mid September through the end of May. Many of the upper school courses can be taken as preparation for Advanced Placement exams and are taught by professional teachers with extensive experience in their fields.



Classical Cottage Instructor Susan Shearer has taught Latin for forty years - Photo Edward Leonard

Student teams in the certamen were divided into five levels ranging from “novice” to “advanced”. Teams then compete in a series of elimination rounds answering questions about all things Latin. Points are awarded for correct answers based on twenty questions posed by a

moderator. Moderators are either experienced Latin instructors or a college student with significant Latin training.

Because Latin plays a role in so much of our modern language and culture, many of the certamen questions can be easily answered with just a casual knowledge of the English language. For example, “When should a Latin student most appropriately say *Mea culpa*?

Answer: When he or she is guilty or at fault.

Roman culture questions can be more difficult with out prior study. For instance, what color was a Roman bride’s veil? Answer: Orange.

Classical Cottage instructor Susan Shearer, was the coordinator for Saturday’s certamen, Shearer has been teaching Latin for over forty years since her taking her first teaching position at Hanley High School in Winchester in 1970. Shearer says that although Classical Cottage is comprised mostly of home schooled students, many public school students attend as well.

“With the four block class schedule at the high school here in Clarke County it’s easy to take one day a week to attend Classical Cottage courses” Shearer said. However, according to Shearer one big difference is that home schooling parents usually attend courses with their students.

Classical Cottages’s focus on Latin and classical education is starkly different to the approach in public schools. Parents who choose to make Latin the core of their child’s education in the late Grammar and early Logic stages focus primarily on Latin and math rather that a range of other subjects. Under the classical education approach parents are encouraged to reject the current trend in educational breadth in exchange for a mastery of basic subjects including logic, writing, history and rhetoric.



Middleburg, Virginia's Hill School certamen team - Photo Edward Leonard

According to Classical Cottage’s website, “international testing has repeatedly shown how American students score most highly in relation to other industrial countries while in the

elementary years. A startling decline begins in about 4th grade and continues through high school.”

Some educators think that education problems in the United States aren't difficult to understand. David Marsh, a professor at the University of Southern California Rossier School of Education, believes that the lack of skill development begins to show as the children mature because US schools try to teach too many topics too quickly. Bruce Alberts, the president of the National Academy of Sciences, ascribes the poor performance of American students to American curriculum being "...a mile wide and an inch deep." Classical Cottage attempts to offer an alternative to schools that have opted for a subject-filled curriculum that produces only a superficial understanding and coverage, and lacks skill development.

While some of the certamen questions can be answered by a casual observer, other questions require in-depth knowledge of Latin words and grammar mechanics.

For example, Jeff Streed, an Episcopal High School Latin and Greek instructor with 29 years of teaching experience, asked the students in the session that he was moderating "Responde Anglice: Cur puer sultus horologium a fenestra iecit?" Answer in English: "To see time fly". Kelly Lawyer, a Christendom College student and certamen moderator asked her contestants "What case is used with the prepositions *causa* and *gratia*? Answer: Genitive.

Classical Cottage School contends that advanced achievement in Latin cuts efforts for other studies such as modern languages, A.P. (Advanced Placement) Government, ancient history, and A.P. in half citing that CCS Latin students of every level have done well in a wide variety of competitions. For example, in 2007 14 students at Middleburg's exclusive prep school Foxcroft School received an award for the National Latin Exam scores; the highest award a Foxcroft student received was a single silver medal. In that same national test, CCS students garnered seven gold medals, three silver medals, one magna cum laude and four cum laudes (15 out of 18 students testing).



Certamen Moderator Kelly Lawyer (l) and judges - Photo Edward Leonard

As Clarke County Public Schools wrestle with improving student performance with its International Baccalaureate (IB) program many parents may not be aware that CCS's advanced placement courses provide an alternative course of study. However, not all parents have the time during the day or the extra money (Susan Shearer says that classes cost approximately \$100 per semester at Classical Cottage School) to opt for a public school alternative.

"We meet for instruction only one day each week" Shearer said. "But we are first and foremost classical in our approach to education."

As for Saturday's certamen, Thomas Jefferson High School defeated Flint Hill School and Herndon High School for top honors in the Level One skill group. Other schools participating included The Hill School, Chancellor, Fairfax, Frost, Madeira, St. Veronica, St. Stephen and Agnes, Episcopal High School, Haymarket, Holy Family, Woodson, Riverbend and Spotsylvania.

Neither Clarke County High School or Powhatan School fielded teams for the event.



Flint Hill School certamen team - Photo Edward Leonard

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