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Embracing a classical education



Gallery: A classical education: St. Jerome Classical School in Hyattsville has transformed itself into a lab for a cutting-edge trend in education.

It's 1 p.m. and time for Amy Clayton's fifth grade to show off their memorization skills.

Decked out in blue long-sleeved shirts and dark pants for boys and bright yellow blouses and plaid jumpers for girls, the students begin with the words of Patrick Henry's immortal "Give me liberty or give me death" speech first delivered on March 23, 1775, in Richmond. That recitation merges into verses from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Paul Revere's Ride." That morphs into a few phrases from the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution and finally to fragments of speeches by Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln.

“Beautifully done,” Clayton says at the conclusion. “We just encapsulated 80 years of American history in our recitation.” She is engaged, dramatic, and students are nearly jumping out of their seats trying to answer her questions about the beginnings of the Civil War. To her right is a banner containing a quote from Aesop: “No act of kindness, however small, is ever wasted.” Near that hangs a crucifix.

This is St. Jerome Classical School, the new name for what once was a traditional Roman Catholic elementary and middle school in Hyattsville. Starting last spring, St. Jerome’s began transforming itself from a debt-ridden, pre-K-8 institution into a showcase for one of the more intriguing trends in modern education. It is one of a handful of archdiocesan Roman Catholic schools in the country to have a classical curriculum.

“Classical” education aims to include instruction on the virtues and a love of truth, goodness and beauty in ordinary lesson plans. Students learn the arts, sciences and literature starting with classical Greek and Roman sources. Wisdom and input from ancient church fathers, Renaissance theologians and even Mozart — whose music is sometimes piped into the classrooms to help students concentrate better — is worked in.

On the hallway walls outside Clayton’s classroom are student posters on the theme “What is goodness?,” “rules for knights and ladies of the Round Table,” drawings of Egyptian pyramids, directions to “follow Jesus’ teachings” and “be respectful toward others,” and other exhortations to live a noble life.

“The classical vision is about introducing our students to the true, the good, the beautiful,” Principal Mary Pat Donoghue points out. “So what’s on our walls are classical works of art. You won’t see Snoopy here.”

Classical theory divides childhood development into three stages known as the trivium: grammar, logic and rhetoric. During the “grammar” years (kindergarten through fourth grade), children soak up knowledge. They memorize, absorb facts, learn the rules of phonics and spelling, recite poetry, and study plants, animals, basic math and other topics. Moral lessons are included.

Thus, in Mary Pat Pollock’s first-grade class, students recite an Aesop’s fable on how a cold north wind made a man cling to his coat but a warm sun persuaded him to remove it.

“What did the sun do?” Pollock asks.

“She was gentle,” first-grader Tommy Hill responds.

“And what did the north wind do that didn’t work?” Pollock asks. The children conclude that being gentle works, but being harsh is bad.

In the “logic” stage (roughly grades five through eight), children learn to analyze, question, discern and evaluate. Students learn to think through arguments, pay attention to cause and effect

and begin to see how facts fit together. This is where the study of algebra and how to propose and support a thesis comes in.

The “rhetoric” stage (grades nine through 12) concentrates on acquiring wisdom and applying knowledge. Students learn to express themselves persuasively.

In Michael Murray’s fourth-grade class, students are moving into the logic stage using focused discussion. They have just read from Plato’s “The Republic” about how people behave when they think no one is watching.

Murray opens the discussion by asking who would like to be invisible. Hands shoot up.

“When you’re invisible, no one can catch you,” a girl says.

“But then you could steal things, and no one would know,” a boy responds.

“Do we act different in a public setting than a private one?” the teacher asks.

“Yeah,” the kids respond.

Central to St. Jerome’s revised curriculum is Latin. “It’s a language based on a lot of logic, and it builds the skill of using logic,” says Latin teacher Elizabeth Turcan. “You don’t have that as much with more common modern languages.”

Turcan was one of eight teachers brought in this year to jump-start St. Jerome’s renaissance. Another was Merrill Roberts, a doctoral candidate in physics and a former public school teacher now teaching nature studies to the upper grades. He uses the Socratic method when he can.

“We’re trying to teach students the need to know the truth of something and the importance of the question,” he says.

“I don’t think the structure of public school lends itself to questions,” he adds. “The structure is set up to say, ‘This is what you need to know, and here’s the facts.’ ”

Research comparing classical education with other teaching methods is hard to come by. But according to the Moscow, Idaho-based Association of Classical and Christian Schools, classically educated students had higher SAT scores in reading and writing in 2010 than students in public, independent and other private schools. They tied with independent school students, scoring the highest in math.

A year ago, St. Jerome’s was \$117,469 in debt and, as one parent joked, “held together by bake sales and duct tape.” Enrollment had dropped from 530 students in 2001-2002 to 297 eight years later.

Donoghue formed a curriculum committee of parishioners that included parents, homeschoolers and former Peace Corps volunteers, and they began drawing on educational materials from across the country.

The organizers knew of only one other Catholic parochial school — St. Theresa’s in Sugar Land, Tex. — that was trying this method. About 230 other classical schools in the country were mostly run by evangelical Protestants.

“We defined what we meant by ‘classical’ in very Catholic terms,” says Michael Hanby, a committee member and a professor at the John Paul II Institute at Catholic University. “It was not just a method but an incorporation into the whole treasure of Christian wisdom, which includes that of Christian cultures. Our students would get a coherent understanding of history, literature, art, philosophy — the traditions to what Catholics in the West are heirs.”

Parishioners and parents raised \$190,000 to retire the debt. After hundreds of hours of work, the committee produced a lengthy educational plan that included curricula for each grade and subject, lists of suggested books, and criteria that each detail of the school’s life would have to satisfy. Examples: Is it beautiful? Are we doing this because it’s inherently good or as a means to an end? If the latter, what end? Does it encourage reverence for the mystery of God and the splendor of His creation? Does it encourage the student to desire truth, to understand virtues and to cultivate these within him (or her) self?

The plan was for students in successive grades to work their way through the history of civilization, beginning with ancient Egypt in kindergarten, ancient Greece for grade one, the Roman Empire in grade two, the Middle Ages in grade three and so on. Religion, art, Latin, nature studies, math, music and physical education also are worked in. Although some of the influences from more than 2,000 years back are pagan, that doesn’t faze music teacher Michelle Orhan, who teaches third-graders about the nine Muses who are daughters of ancient Zeus.

“I want them to have a well-rounded vision of what music is and where it comes from,” Orhan says after a session of explaining the origins of Calliope, Terpsichore and Urania. “We also discuss the disadvantages of polytheism, a discussion you can’t have in public school today. In anything having to do with Greek mythology, you have to talk about the gods.”

Already other dioceses are taking a serious look at what’s happening at St. Jerome’s to see whether their aging Catholic schools can turn into classical academies. Or, like St. Theresa’s, they can begin their classical school from the ground up.

About 20 miles southwest of Houston, St. Theresa’s school building was dedicated in August 2009. Romanesque arches cover outside walkways. In the atrium, the lower level is Doric columns with images of the seven virtues in the frieze, the upper level is Ionic pilasters. Noted ecclesiastical architect Duncan G. Stroik — also an associate professor at the University of Notre Dame — was commissioned to design the school.

“It’s hard to change the status quo in Catholic education,” says St. Theresa’s Principal Jonathan Beeson, a Yale Divinity School graduate and former Protestant minister who converted to Catholicism. “If you’re not versed in the history of ideas, you cannot be self-critical.”

Teachers from across the country are now applying to work at the pre-K through second-grade school, which is planning to add one grade each year. Latin starts in first grade. Second-graders learn Greek history. Everyone memorizes poetry.

“There’s not a single one of the 92 kids here who’s not eager to recite a poem,” Beeson says. “Kids need content in their brains, and they’re wired to absorb facts. You can’t reflect on something if it’s not in your brain.”

Beeson sees a day when the classical method will become widely accepted by Catholics.

In Washington, Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl backs St. Jerome’s, according to Bert L’Homme, the new archdiocesan school superintendent.

“The classical curriculum existed in the Catholic universities of Paris, Padua and Oxford,” he says. “It’s rooted in the church. The combination of Catholic and classical education is very enticing to some parents.”

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