

# *Westminster School . . . A Classical Education for the 21st Century*

---

The lament of many educational philosophers, as well as parents, employers, and generally concerned citizens, is that, although American schools may succeed in teaching “subjects” to students, they seem to fail to teach them how to think. Students may learn any number of facts and the skill sets to accomplish particular tasks, but they do not seem to know how to approach learning something new, how to analyze a problem, how to discern a well-reasoned argument from a spurious one, how to reach a circumspectly informed opinion, or how to articulate that opinion clearly, concisely, persuasively, and elegantly. These, however, are the thinking skills demanded by almost any field of human endeavor and, indeed, by the everyday challenges of modern life in a free, democratic society. They are also the precise goals of a classical education, along with the application of these thinking skills to the study of worthwhile content.

“ . . . the sole true end of education is simply this: to teach men how to learn for themselves; and whatever instruction fails to do this is effort spent in vain.”

—Dorothy Sayers

In other words, the fundamental goal of a classical education is to teach students not what to think, but how to think. This is done in the earliest grades at Westminster through specific exercises such as comparing and contrasting, logical sequencing, drawing inferences, identifying similarities and differences, discerning likely outcomes of a particular real-life situation, etc. The children are asked to articulate their reasons for the answers they give in class. As the child progresses, he is asked to explain how he arrived at the answer to a math problem, support her literary opinion citing specific passages from the reading, and ensure that his project fulfills the requirements of the scientific method. In the higher grades, she is expected to integrate information from different sources, such as class lectures and discussions, textbooks, educational films, internet research, etc., draw logical and original conclusions about the topic under study, and articulate those conclusions in the form of essay-style answers to homework or test questions. These and numerous other reasoning exercises, which are implemented repeatedly throughout the curriculum, instill in the child essential tools which prepare him for all future learning.

The most important classical tool of learning is “grammar.” In this usage, grammar does not apply only to the study of the structure of a language, but the formal structure of anything—a mathematical equation, a sonnet, a scientific experiment, the human figure in art, the game of basketball, or an automobile engine. Westminster’s curriculum systematically presents and helps students discover the structure and principles of each topic under study. This approach requires consistent effort and engagement on the part of the student, as well. Therefore, Westminster classrooms are well-organized, purposeful, and free from distractions, thus creating a respectful atmosphere for student learning. Class time is devoted to the teacher’s presentation of material, discussion, student practice, and instructor feedback. Daily homework assignments, which are based on the day’s lesson, and a regular schedule of quizzes, tests, and creative projects keep the student engaged and directed toward the repeated application of the tools of learning as well as the acquisition of knowledge.

The question then arises, what should students be learning? At Westminster, we agree with classicists that students should learn about the great ideas and endeavors that define our humanity, i.e., language, mathematics, history, science, geography, the arts, and athletics, and come to the understanding that all areas of learning and human endeavor are interconnected. Unfortunately, under the pressure of government mandates and hard economic times, the public schools are focusing most of their resources on measurable achievement in language arts and math, depriving students not only of the riches of other subjects, but of the broader context which might illuminate and help them value and retain the particular set of facts and skills being drilled. By contrast, a classically educated student sees the connections among the things he is learning, grows more appreciative of the fruits of study, and is motivated to pursue further knowledge.

So, how is this to be achieved? It begins with a well conceived, coherent, sequential curriculum embedded in a program whose overall structure supports the goals of learning. Such a program includes the assemblage of knowledgeable, talented teachers who understand that no technological gadget or educational fad can substitute for the time-proven study and practice of the liberal arts and sciences. Westminster searches for teachers who bring not only knowledge of their subject area, but a genuine passion for it; teachers who continue to research their subject and are eager to share new discoveries with their students; who enliven their classrooms and bulletin boards with attractive, informative, and intriguing artifacts from their chosen field; and who are willing to go the extra mile to help their students grasp challenging material or pursue a special interest.

In addition to a thorough exploration and acquisition of the skills and knowledge associated with each academic subject, Westminster ensures that students are exposed to the highest standards of human achievement in these areas of endeavor. The English / Language Arts program is literature based, with students reading several works of high quality literature each year, including important works from the past as well as more recent classics. Required summer reading expands students' exposure to challenging, highly worthwhile literature. Westminster's history program takes students on an in-depth journey through the history of western civilization, with exciting readings and lively class discussions on the cultural achievements and challenges of earlier peoples and the means they found to meet those challenges. Both of these core areas of study are rich in opportunities to explore "the human condition" and develop imagination, understanding, compassion, and a keen moral sense. Math and science classes are comprehensive, detailed, and designed to lead to greater depth of understanding as the student progresses through the grades. In addition to providing a link to classical learning and broadening their cultural horizons, Westminster's inclusion of French and Latin ensures a life-long boost in understanding the meaning, etymology, and proper usage of the English language. Exposure to and participation in the arts offers a vital avenue for self-expression and connection as well as an admirable breadth of cultural knowledge. Public speaking and performance opportunities build confidence and poise. Daily physical education and team athletics foster well-being and strengthen character. The daily emphasis on good manners, respect, and responsibility prepare students for positive relationships and individual achievement in a diverse and challenging world. Finally, numerous enriching field trips and opportunities for celebration and fun round out the student's expanding sense of life's possibilities.

Today, most public schools are in a desperate struggle to "raise student achievement" through SOLs (standards of learning) and an annual barrage of standardized testing, and many private schools offer either a narrow focus or a program not substantially different from that in public schools. Westminster stands out from the crowd, holding high the standard of a classical education for the 21st century. Westminster's adherence to time-tested educational principles in no way limits its commitment to meeting the needs of modern families and preparing children for a challenging and unpredictable future. Indeed, the principles of a classical education provide the best known means for doing just that. There is no magic bullet, quick fix, or easy road to becoming a thoroughly well-rounded, knowledgeable, capable, confident person of good character. But, there is a proven way, and Westminster School stands by its nearly 50-year record of lighting that way by means of a classical education delivered in a nurturing, forward-looking environment. The achievements of our graduates, both academic and personal, testify to the effective and lasting influence of this rich, carefully designed, and well-implemented approach to education.

The ultimate goal of a classical education is to develop in each human the capacity for ongoing personal evolution and responsible world citizenship. What is the value of that in the 21st century—to the individual and to our world? Frankly, it is priceless.