

Draft

Classical Christian Education at Whitefield Academy

“The end then of Learning is to repair the ruines of our first Parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him, as we may the nearest by possessing our souls of true vertue, which being united to the heavenly grace of faith makes up the highest perfection.”—John Milton, *Of Education*

As a classical Christian school, Whitefield Academy—teachers, parents, and students—seeks to glorify and to enjoy God through a superior liberal educational experience. Our mission statement expresses this desire as “The mission of Whitefield Academy is to provide a Christ-centered environment of classical academic excellence to equip students for a life of learning and service to the glory of God.” As a classical Christian school we are seeking to implement what historically was called a Liberal education. The Seven Liberal Arts¹ served as the foundation of a Liberal education which sought to create “free” (liberal) graduates who could think critically and communicate persuasively, and were no longer limited, that is “enslaved,” to their innate or natural abilities alone. Whitefield seeks to instruct students in ways to help them critically think through a problem, communicate a solution persuasively, and thus to be wise. However, to be truly “wise,” must also include a biblical sense of wisdom. True wisdom in the Scriptures means gaining an understanding of God’s design for human growth and flourishing.² Becoming wise in this sense presumes first a deep respect for God—or the “fear of the Lord” (Proverbs 1.7). This wisdom also includes: listening to the wise among us, treating our fellow man ethically; choosing our friends carefully, becoming a skillful worker, and cultivating skills related to the gaining of understanding and knowledge (Proverbs 9.9; 22:17-21). Applying the pursuit of wisdom for the liberally educated then requires that individuals master the skills that allow one to see or discern (critical thinking) as well as the ability to assess and choose between alternatives (decision-making) across a variety of situations (different contexts). Becoming the wise person, while never a guaranteed outcome, is pursued at Whitefield through the Liberal Arts, along with Moral, Religious, and Physical education.³

¹ Grammar, Logic, Rhetoric, Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, and Astronomy.

² Proverbs 3.13, 4.6-7; I Cor. 1.30; Col. 2.2-3; James 3.17;

³ Fivefold division of education included Liberal, Moral, Religious, Physical, (the province of the schools) and Productive (the province of the employer). Plato, *Laws VII*, 795-6; Plato, *Laws I*, 644; Augustine, *Confessions IV.30*; Francis Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*, II.1.8

The first three Liberal Arts, called the Trivium Arts, train the Mind to comprehend (Grammar), analyze (Logic) and then to synthesize (Rhetoric) texts in order to solve particular problems with wisdom. Whitefield teaches the Art of Grammar in pre-K through 6th grades, the art of Logic in 7th through 9th grades, the Art of Rhetoric 10th through 12th grades. Throughout this progression, the skills learned in the earlier arts are reviewed and broadened through repetition and the application of these skills in new contexts. For example, in 11th and 12th grades the skill of phonogram mastery which was introduced early in Grammar school, receives fresh study as students deepen this skill by writing original poetry and mastering the ability to write in various prose styles with attention to sound, cadence and rhythm.

The Quadrivium refers to the four Liberal Arts that pertain to matter: Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, and Astronomy. These arts train about Matter⁴ and require students to learn about numbers, mathematical and scientific concepts with their specific vocabulary, and how to read the unique “texts” of math and science. In our time, training about Matter is expanded to include Algebra, Trigonometry and Statistics, Calculus, Biology, Chemistry, and Physics. Each of these subject areas provide unique “contexts” for the exploration of new areas of knowledge and requires ongoing development of the skills learned each year and reinforced through our vertically integrated curriculum.

Our approach to education, therefore does not teach subjects but rather Arts. The difference between teaching Arts with the goal of graduating students who have the ability to learn any subject, and teaching subjects with the goal of imparting knowledge of a subject, profoundly impacts educational outcomes. We have chosen our classical approach in large part due to the failure of contemporary schools, whether “traditional” or “progressive,” to impart the reading, writing, and math skills necessary for our children’s success in the twenty first century, let alone undergraduate success. Through the Seven Liberal Arts, classical Christian education focuses on successfully developing verbal and quantitative reasoning skills in each and every child. We intend and purpose that students will be better “reasoners,” as a result of this education--to the glory of Christ. This fundamental difference between our classical model of education and a “modern” approach lies in whether the mental skills of each student are assumed or are explicitly developed. In other words a contemporary approach (again whether “traditional” or “progressive”) either assumes verbal and quantitative skills are already present, or that they will emerge on their own. Our approach gradually and explicitly seeks to impart the skills associated with learning.

The success of the Classical approach to education is due both to *what* is taught (the Trivium and Quadrivium), as well as *how* we teach—our pedagogy. Our methods are time-tested—going back over two thousand years. These same methods are also receiving present-day affirmation by empirical validation in emerging human brain research. Our focus on the discrete skills associated with grammar, logic and rhetoric (such as identifying the grammatical

⁴ Joseph, *The Trivium*, p.3 Knowledge of the physical creation.

structure of a difficult passage or creating persuasive arguments around a particular topic) unfolds gradually through their application in multiple contexts that require our students to think deeply about their use. Mastery of discrete skills in multiple contexts requiring deep mental cognition creates in students a fluency in verbal and quantitative reasoning that allows the transference of these skills to new and unique situations. Such a skill based education profoundly differs from the knowledge based, contemporary approaches to education that assumes the skills that we explicitly teach.

Skill mastery at Pre-K students might look something like this: youngsters begin the process of learning grammar through the explicit phonics curriculum we use. Students memorize each of the 84 discrete phonograms by the end of Kindergarten. They also begin to develop the skills of English spelling rules to decode written words (visual language) into their spoken words (auditory language). We give them word after word (multiple contexts) in which they have to use the phonograms to read (decode) the words. They work hard at these exercises and we increase the “difficulty” of the words in order to continually engage them at a deep cognitive level. We see the same method at work in how we teach arithmetic beginning with simple number recognition leading to the ability to tell time. This pedagogy of discrete skills, multiple contexts, and deep mental cognition remains consistent all the way through the senior year, whether we are teaching them to master a variety of styles in writing, synthesizing Spencer’s *Fairy Queen*, or conquering concepts in Physics.

From Pre-K to 6th grade, the academic curriculum centers on the Art of Grammar and Arithmetic. Grammar may best be defined as the art of utilizing (reading) and inventing (writing) symbols⁵ and Arithmetic as the art of discrete objects⁶. Writing instructions advances through our explicit phonics program *Spell to Write and Read*, *Cursive First*, copybooks, sentence variations, and the Progymnasmata⁷. Reading is conceptualized in three stages⁸ with the first two stages (decoding and fluency) taught beginning in Pre-K. The reading curriculum includes: our explicit phonics program, *Spell to Write and Read* (serving double duty with writing instruction); *Read Naturally*; in-class “read alouds;” and our independent reading program. The third stage of reading, “comprehension,” gradually becomes the focus from the second-third grades while the skills clusters of activating background knowledge, identifying text structure, making predictions, creating questions, forming images, self-monitoring, and summarizing take center-stage from 4th-6th grade. As soon as students are able to decode they begin an independent reading program guided by reading ever more difficult books (our Lexile based assessment program) in order to acquire and reinforce explicit reading skills. The material we use for our reading instruction includes the Bible, fiction, poetry, and expository literature

⁵Joseph, *The Trivium*, p.3

⁶ *Ibid*, p.3

⁷ Concise explanation of the progymnasmata??

⁸ Our K-12 reading program contains five stages as identified by Jeanne Chall in *Stages of Reading Development*.

represented in our history, biography and science texts. Arithmetic⁹ begins with the discrete skills of the Arabic numerals in PreK and K and advancing to the first introductions to algebraic concepts in 6th grade.

During this vertically integrated academic instruction we are also teaching Religious and Moral instruction, which would include listening to, memorizing, and later, reading Scripture. In addition, beginning in Pre-K we introduce and seek to cultivate good learning habits such as listening and talking skills that will set a standard for, and establish, our School's classroom norms.

As students complete the 6th grade they transition from the Art of Grammar¹⁰ comprised of reading¹¹ and writing¹² skills to the Art of Logic in the 7th – 9th grades. Though formal logic courses will come in the 8th and 9th grades, inductive logic and the advanced skills of analysis begin to be taught within the contexts of reading as we introduce our students to difficult texts represented by the Great Books of Western civilization and most significantly the Bible, and of writing as teach the initial skills of argumentation. We continue to utilize and hone the comprehension skills mentioned earlier (activating background knowledge, identifying text structure, making predictions, creating questions, forming images, self monitoring, and summarizing) as we introduce the discrete skills of analysis called the Great Ideas. Memorizing these ideas and learning how to use them begin the skills of analysis with the resulting judgment of truth in texts at the heart of the Art of Logic. We build on the earlier skills of comprehension as we introduce the Great Ideas. These 102 concepts¹³ are big concepts that humanity asks questions about generation after generation. These general topics serve as focal points for our students as they comprehend particular texts and recognize how they relate back to the Great Idea—the first step of analysis is being able to relate a particular back to a more general concept. This Great Idea may then be used to direct the students thoughts back to another particular text¹⁴ in order to compare and contrast the ideas—the second step of analysis. These additional texts may be from passages read earlier in the book, previous books read, or most significantly to passages from Scripture.

We begin the sixth and seventh stages of our writing program with Refutation and Confirmation in which students master the ability to create or “invent” arguments. The remainder of our Logic instruction in writing (into the 10th grade) will expand the capacity of

⁹ As stated above the Quadrivium was developed for the purpose of understanding matter, which we take to be everything in the created order. Because God is unchanging, so is the image of God in man. The arts of the Trivium are the same today as they were thousands of years ago, because the nature human mind has not changed. However, we are constantly learning more about the natural world, and so we have expanded the Quadrivium at Whitefield Academy to include additional studies relating to the physical world.

¹⁰ We understand Grammar in the historical sense of an art, not a stage of memorization.

¹¹ The first three skill clusters of decoding, fluency, and comprehension.

¹² Fable, Narrative, Chreia, and Maxim stages of the progymnasmata.

¹³ Such as Beauty, Experience, Government, Love, Mind, Reason, etc.

¹⁴ Or particular movies, show, song or other contemporary expressions

students to invent arguments, arrange the components of compositions according to purpose, and equip students with two fundamental styles of writing.

Students transition from the Progymnasmata into Rhetoric with the study of Hermogenes, *On Issues* (beginning near the end of the 10th grade year), which teaches students to clearly understand the nature of a thesis, how to best articulate a thesis statement, the rhetorical structure of argumentation for each type of thesis, and, most important, trains students to think and write critically through both sides of an issue.

We teach the art of Rhetoric using the classical five canons of Rhetoric: Invention, Arrangement, Style, Memory, and Delivery. Memory and Delivery are skill clusters dealing with the spoken word while the first three canons encompass both the spoken and written word. Invention teaches students how to “find” or create arguments through the use of Common and Special Topics. Arrangement teaches students how most effectively arrange the ideas of a communication most effectively, and is taught using the five parts of a speech, epideictic arrangement and Hermogenes, *On Issues*. Style teaches student six basic style types and the fourteen sub categories on which the six styles depend. We turn once again to Hermogenes here using his classic text *On Style*. In Rhetoric students continue to develop their language “copia” through the ongoing study and use of figures of speech and figures of thought. Erasmus, *De Copia* is our text in all three grades 10-12. Also in the tenth grade year our Great Books curriculum transitions from mastery of analysis to the skills of synthesis or, as Jeanne Chall writes, “...creating new meaning.”¹⁵

In relation to our “expanded” Quadrivium (math and science) we teach Pre-Algebra (7th), Algebra I (8th), Geometry (9th) and Algebra II (10th) grade, Trigonometry and Statistics in the 11th grade, and conclude with three possible courses depending upon abilities and resources—college algebra, Pre-Calc, or AP Calculus. Our science courses include Life Science, Earth Science, two years of Aristotelian Logic, Biology, Chemistry, and Physics.

Christ is the center of Whitefield Academy. His Lordship drives us in our pursuit of educational excellence and has led us to implement our flavor of classical Christian education. Our mission envisions a “Christ-centered environment of classical academic excellence to equip students for a life of learning and service to the glory of God.” We believe a Liberal education as it was practiced for centuries in the West is not only possible but is to be preferred. With the constant working of the Holy Spirit, the Liberal education at our school trains “free” graduates who choose to live and act according to the Mind of Christ. Such wisdom demonstrates I Corinthians 13.4-8 in the face of life’s difficult problems.

¹⁵ Our reading curriculum at Whitefield owes its structure to Jeanne Chall and her pioneering work in Reading Theory specifically as represented in her book, *The Stages of Reading Development*. Her empirically based understanding of the “Art of Reading” fits well into a classical understanding of the Trivium.

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

Whitefield Academy with God's grace and through the classical framework of Religious, Moral, Liberal, and Physical education seeks to send Christ-like graduates into the world to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.