



WASHINGTON LATIN

PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL

A GUIDE TO WASHINGTON LATIN'S CLASSICAL EDUCATION FOR THE MODERN WORLD

“To All Who Seek to Learn and All Who Love to Teach”

Many schools are not sure what they stand for, hoping by their ambiguity to reach everyone. Such is not the case at Washington Latin Public Charter School. In joining the community of WLPCS, you have joined a school with a particular mission and culture. Some parts of this mission coincide with modern educational practice and theory; some set us radically apart.

WHO ARE WE?

Public and Accessible – As a public school, we have civic and moral obligations to use our public funds equitably and wisely, and to accept all students who come to us for an education. Our campus is accessible by public transportation, and we are the only charter school to run a bus; our curriculum is accessible for those who are willing to work with us.

Charter – As a public charter school, we enjoy the freedom to design our own approach to the curriculum and to hire faculty as we see fit. We must live within the words, history, and spirit of our charter. While we have greater autonomy, we have greater accountability.

Classical and Challenging – In calling ourselves a classical school, we are aligning ourselves with the established wisdom of the ancients, most particularly of the intellectual backdrop of the cultures of Greece and Rome. We believe that many of the tenets of ancient educational theory still pertain to the issues of the modern world. At the very least, our students study the language, literature, and history of the ancients. At the most, we believe, as did the ancients, that education is a training of character, and character is the intersection of intellectual development and moral integrity.

Our program is not easy, and its difficulties take more than industry to surmount. We ask our students to read difficult works and to write extended essays, but the greatest challenge comes in our expectation that students will think before they act and do what is right rather than what is expedient.

WHAT DO WE BELIEVE?

The classical tradition in education, unlike its modern, more progressive counterpart, held that one needed an image of the ideal human in order to aim towards that ideal. The ideal for the ancients was a rational, articulate, civically committed statesman who could hold his own in the public examination of ideas. We have updated this vision for our time and culture.

Thoughtful people who will contribute to the public good and continue a life-long quest towards a fuller humanity.

Thoughtful – This word unites both the cognitive and the affective aspects of the human being, as does its synonym “considerate.” We aim to teach students how to be “full of thought” – to think through issues for themselves in their personal and professional lives, and to consider the implications of their thoughts for others. We believe that the thoughtful self requires training in both the intellectual and moral virtues.

Public Good – In agreement with the ancients, we believe that public and private goods are distinct, and that modern culture continues to blur the distinction. We aim to develop students who will understand the difference between public and private goods, and who will be able to defend their private opinions in a public setting. We also hope that they will contribute to their respective communities.

Humanity – Both the ancients and their ideological children, the Renaissance humanists, were unabashed in their belief that the goal of education is the fulfillment of one’s humanity. To be more fully human, one needed to know and come to love the eternal verities, the concepts of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness. Their curriculum provided students with disquisitions on the nature of these ideas and examples of people who embodied them. The trajectory of the past century has tarnished these ideals with the reality of humanity’s potential for cruelty and ugliness. We believe, however, that young people still need to know and feel the glory of an ideal even while acknowledging the possible difficulties of the real. Our students also deserve to fall in love with beautiful and good truths, and so realize the fullness of their humanity.

The curriculum should inform, provoke, and inspire students. Ultimately, we want them to know.

So much of the talk of education now revolves around the notion of preparation. We are preparing students for standardized tests, for college, for citizenship, for success in their professional lives. While we acknowledge preparation as a worthy goal, we want our curriculum to do more than that. We also hope that our curriculum will inform, provoke, challenge, and inspire our students so that ultimately they have a deeper knowledge both of themselves and of the world they enter as adults.

Inform

The classical tradition made a distinction between information and knowledge. Having good information is the first step towards deep knowledge and in this modern Age of Information, it is very easy for students to get information. Our curriculum aims to give students the background they need in a range of subjects and to provide access to the cultural literacy that will enable them to think further and know more within the major academic disciplines. We aim to train students to sort through information and decide what is essential. Given the vast amount of information a curriculum could cover, we aim to choose only what is necessary to move students to deeper knowledge.

Provoke

The quintessential image of the classical tradition is that of Socrates wandering through the marketplace provoking people to challenge their own views and refine their definitions. His provocation of others ultimately cost him his life. Throughout our curriculum, we aim to provoke our students, literally “call them forth.” Real education cannot happen unless a student’s affective side is engaged and his/her self involved. We aim to provoke students by putting in front of them conflicting views on controversial subjects so that they can begin to see themselves as active participants in their own education. For the ancients and for us, education is a process of waking people up to their own possibilities.

Inspire

In his dialogue “The Symposium,” Plato describes the quest for knowledge as a journey of love. To see the truth is for Plato to fall in love with the beautiful; one’s eyes, when enlightened, are filled with the light of beauty. So too, we aim to remember that education should be a beauty-filled experience. We aim to inspire our students, or literally “breathe” life and beauty into them. Our curriculum focuses on ideas and works that will awe our students, whether these are pictures of the solar system, images of a cathedral, or gorgeous sentences.

Our selection of literary and historical texts also aims to inspire our students and presupposes a commitment to a classical canon of literature that has passed the test of time. This canon includes works from diverse civilizations, but also acknowledges that some literary works are more worthy of study than others.

Know

Knowledge for the ancients was the highest level of commitment to an idea that a student could demonstrate. There was nothing superficial about knowledge. In asking our students to engage themselves in their own education and to make ideas theirs, we are asking them to commit to a deep knowledge. Only from such a deep knowledge can moral action emerge. We aim for a student to be so committed to some ideas that he or she will be willing to defend them in the face of critique and doubt.

A trusting, gracious relation between teacher and student should be at the heart of every classroom.

While we applaud the curricular decisions of our ancient models, we do not aim to replicate the dynamics of the ancient classroom. The relationship between teachers and students should be ones of mutual respect and trust. We aim for students to trust their teachers so that they will speak out in class, be willing to make a mistake, try out for a team, lead a group, or extend themselves in every way possible. We aim for teachers to trust their students so that they will allow students to lead classes, to speak out in disagreement, to challenge received ideas. We encourage graciousness and decency in all our dealings with one another. We also wholeheartedly believe in the potential of our students to take charge of their own education and to learn, over time, the liberating power of self-discipline.

Learning should happen all the time and in every space.

School is more than the time teachers and students spend together in the classroom. School also happens in the hallways, in the lunchroom, on field trips, on the soccer field, and at end-of-the-year ceremonies. We believe in using teachable moments to train our students' moral sensibilities and model for them how adults make moral decisions. The students are watching the adults at all times, most intently when it is least expected. We admire the ancient model of a Socrates who walked in his bare feet around the marketplace, asking questions and leading young people to better lives.

Assessment of how we are doing is crucial and should be multi-faceted.

One of the better developments of modern educational theory has been the cry for more accountability in schools. Schools should be able to tell parents and the public how their students are doing. Unfortunately, the wish for accountability has become something of a mania and is currently strangling rather than helping many schools. At WLPCS, we want to know how our students are doing against barometers we ourselves define. We understand our obligation to prepare students for various standardized tests, but we do not want to reduce our curriculum to those alone. We are in the process of creating our own assessments of our unique approach to curriculum, including several performance assessments and tests of cultural literacy.

WHAT DO WE DO?

We know our students.

The only way to bring students along on their own path of education is to know them. We insist on small class sizes and an active advisory program to allow teachers to know their students as adolescents and as learners. We ensure that each student has at least one adult whom he/she can trust. We aim to engage the families of our students with constant feedback about how their children are doing. Our lofty curricular goals require educational intimacy; we cannot afford to allow our students to be anonymous.

We use Socratic seminars

We aim for Socratic teaching to be at the heart of what we do in the classroom. Dialogue is our preferred pedagogy as it asks students to “involve” themselves in an idea and in a community of shared talk. While teachers may be the initial catalysts for a discussion, we aim for students to take up the challenge of wrestling with ideas among themselves. We also recognize that students need to be trained in Socratic methods and to understand how to form an opinion. To that end, we work on the components of critical thought.

We assign meaningful homework.

Homework serves two functions: a chance to practice new concepts and the time to prepare for the next day’s lesson. Socratic teaching is not possible unless students come to the experience with some previous investment in the ideas. We try not to give tedious homework unless the tedium of repetition is a necessary component of constant practice.

We use classical pedagogical methods of drill and memorization.

While the Socratic method of inquiry provides a pedagogy for our moral discussions, we also are not reluctant to use the old-fashioned methods of drill and memorization. Students are asked to chant vocabulary words, multiplication tables, and other discrete pieces of information so as to internalize them. We also believe in asking students to memorize poetry and pieces of prose they find pleasing. What is learned by heart becomes part of one’s deepest self.

We ask students to write.

Writing, unlike speaking, is not a natural skill, and is therefore much more difficult to teach. But writing well is central to a life of thinking well, and we therefore take on the challenge of teaching our students to write well. Students write in a variety of genres and learn the process of brainstorming, drafting, and editing. We also use student writing as an integral source of getting feedback about students’ learning.