

**Board's Statements to Clarify and Provide Practical Guidance To Implement
Frederick Classical Charter School's Vision and Mission
*Volume 1, Issue 1***

Context

As the school progresses and questions of philosophy, purpose, or intent arise, the Board will issue statements that further clarify and expound upon the vision outlined in the application. Classical schools vary in what they consider to be "classical". The Board of Trustees is responsible for defining what constitutes the kind of classical education the Frederick Classical Charter School will offer. The Board, which has the ultimate authority over the vision of the school, encourages staff to contribute their ideas to support the vision of the school. When issues and questions arise as to what constitutes "being classical", staff should first direct their questions to the Head of School, who will consult with the Board if needed to ensure that our vision for classical education is fulfilled.

Now that the Frederick Classical Charter School has been in operation for half a school year, the Board of Trustees thought it would be good to address a number of issues and questions that teachers, parents, and others have asked us about the kind of classical school that we intend to be. We hope that in addition to the application, the information below will be helpful in further defining the type of school we wish to become.

Overall Climate

Our approved charter school application stated that "The mission of the Frederick Classical Charter School is to provide elementary and middle school-aged children in Frederick County with a well-rounded, college-focused instructional program that develops students' knowledge, reason, and self-expression...We started with our primary goal to prepare all students to succeed in high school and attend the college of their choice, and our secondary goal to have students develop an appreciation for the classical liberal arts. The underlying purpose of pursuing these goals is not just college preparation or appreciation of the classics, but because pursuing them will equip students for citizenship and lifelong learning." The Board vision for the school is that it will impart intellectual lessons not only by means of the rigorous academics, but also character formation by means of these rigorous academics – to partner with parents to produce students who are thoughtful, caring, and humanitarian.

Though left unstated in the application, part of the rationale for pursuing research-based instructional approaches is that these approaches create less confusion and more confidence in students, and reduce the need for students to experience unnecessary struggle and frustration. While students should develop persistence to overcome academic challenges, unnecessary strife due to ineffective teaching is counterproductive, and is not justifiable on the grounds that it "builds character". Our official motto, "Nil Sine Magno Labore"—nothing without great labor—is not intended to imply that children should experience unnecessary labor in their academic pursuits, but reflects the belief that good things come from hard work.

At the root of our academic program is a sense of being thoughtful, caring, and humanitarian. This sense extends to the school's policies in other areas, the goal of which is to create an atmosphere conducive to the enthusiastic and enjoyable pursuit of the true, the good, and the beautiful. Fundamentally, a good policy results in students experiencing on a daily basis the virtues we wish them to develop. Students experience these virtues as they develop their relationships with the adults and other students at school.

Discipline Policy

Discipline at the school should always be done in a spirit of developing students' virtues through encouragement. Though some students will receive consequences for inappropriate behavior, the emphasis of the school is the positive reinforcement of good behaviors, not punishment of inappropriate behaviors. An overemphasis on discipline sends the message to students that they are not trusted, and adults expect them to engage in inappropriate behavior. It also creates an unnecessarily strict and stressful environment that can impact learning. An emphasis on positive behavior sets the expectation that most students will do the right thing most of the time; those who don't will be dealt with individually.

The goal of our discipline policy, particularly at these early grade levels, is for students to experience a sense of justice and fairness with regard to the consequences of their actions and to learn from those consequences. If students do not see the discipline policy as fair and reasonable, they will not learn to respect it, which is contrary to the school's goal to cultivate respect for reasonable rules and laws. Our discipline approach will clearly distinguish between willful and repeated behavior deserving consequences, and infrequent mistakes and behavior that may have its roots in anxiety, hunger, disability, fear, lack of sleep, or other causes that may be better addressed through counseling and communication with parents.

Our Approach To Classical Education

Our school looks first to research when making instructional and other decisions, coupled with common sense. The school does not make instructional decisions based on how "classical" a particular practice is, but looks first to evidence. If evidence is lacking, then teachers will need to make a common sense decision, and can certainly choose to support common practices that are used at other classical schools. Many of the practices that are commonly done in classical schools (an emphasis on phonics and phonemic awareness, for instance) are indeed supported by research. There are also practices common in classical schools that are neither supported nor unsupported by research, such as wearing uniforms. In some cases we will adhere to a classical tradition for a common sense or practical reason, while in other cases we will not follow a classical tradition that is not a priority for the school to fulfill its mission.

Toward that end, the Board of Trustees has issued the following statements with regard to practices and issues that have been the subject of questions or concerns:

Instruction

- Use of the Carpet – Teachers are permitted to use the carpet and floor in their classrooms as appropriate. Like all instructional techniques, this is a matter of judgment depending on the age and ability of students and the nature of the activity in which they will engage.
- Show and Tell – Teachers are permitted to have “show and tell” and may use their own judgment as to how often to utilize this approach.
- Direct Instruction – Direct instruction is a useful technique that is often underutilized in other schools. However, our application makes it clear that teachers will employ a variety of instructional techniques supported by research. While classical schools do tend to be more teacher-directed than other approaches, teachers needn't feel this is the single tool in their toolbox. Two excellent articles that explain what research says about direct instruction are:

<https://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/spring2012/Rosenshine.pdf>

<http://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/spring2012/Clark.pdf>

- **Centers vs. Self-Directed Centers** – The Board's vision for the school did not include an emphasis on self-directed centers. However, there is no prohibition on the judicious use of centers in some circumstances, such as when teachers may need to work with a reading or math group and needs to give the other students something to work on, or in the older grades when a teacher might set up multiple experiments within the science room and have students take turns working at each center. The Board's main concern is with an over-emphasis on self-directed or "discovery" learning centers that are favored in some constructivist approaches (similar to TERC math that FCPS had used), in which students are expected to "discover" basic knowledge or skills that they had not been previously taught. The reasonable use of centers that give students a specific assignment to work on is perfectly acceptable, as are occasional, well-planned "discovery" activities in which students have all of the prerequisite knowledge needed to make the "discovery".
- **Student Pacing** – If a student finishes his or her work ahead of other students, the teacher may allow that student to complete an additional instructional activity or pull out a silent reading book. This choice is left up to the individual teacher. The Board's vision did not include a hard-and-fast requirement that students be literally on the same worksheet page at the same time. Teachers should exercise reasonable judgment as to whether having a student move ahead to another activity would better wait until after all students have completed the previous assignment.
- **Guided Notes** – While teaching note taking skills is something the Board supports, that goal should be balanced with the recognition that some students may actually learn less through guided notes due to their inability to take notes. In particular, there is no hard-and-fast rule that history or any other subject must be taught through guided notes. If teachers are finding that the effort to take guided notes is making it too difficult for students to learn the content, they should feel free to adjust their approach.
- **Differentiation** – The original vision of our school included differentiation in reading and math. Parents have commented that the differentiation we described in our application and Community Information Nights isn't yet happening. We understand that it has started to happen in fifth and sixth grade. While the current schedule makes some aspects of this difficult, we encourage teachers to differentiate to the degree that is practical. The Board and Head of School are in the process of reviewing the schedule and is considering other ways of ensuring that differentiation occurs. At our school, differentiation is part of the program. Any suggestions staff have to support greater differentiation would be greatly appreciated.
- **Integration** – The Board's original vision was that all subjects would be integrated with each other so that students could see how knowledge is interrelated. Integration is one of the vital fruits of a classical curriculum: wisdom – the ability to judge with perspective, seeing the relationship of "part-and-whole". To date, there has been limited integration of subjects, which has also been a topic of concern among some parents. Integration is one of the hallmarks of classical education, and the Board had anticipated that it would be a part of our program from the beginning of school. We understand that integration will begin in earnest approximately around the second week of February. We encourage staff to inform the Board if additional resources or schedule changes are needed to support this.
- **Classroom Tone** – The Board envisioned that the tone of the classroom would be personal, warm, relaxed and lighthearted. Teachers will teach with enthusiasm and encouragement. It

is not "classical" to be dry or flat, nor should teachers attempt to "keep a stiff upper lip" for the sake of maintaining discipline. Teachers should be approachable, yet firm when necessary. Students should feel that their teachers know them and their interests. Humor is important: telling appropriate jokes and funny stories is strongly encouraged. The goal for any lesson is for students to end the lesson feeling clear about the content they have learned and more confident about themselves--and hopefully happier, more motivated, and more enthusiastic than they were when they entered the classroom.

- Movement – To reduce fatigue and create a dynamic, interactive learning environment, teachers at all levels are encouraged to incorporate student movement in their teaching as appropriate. Students do not need to sit at their desks all the time to be “classical”.
- Grouping and Cooperative Learning – As our application explains, grouping and cooperative learning are appropriate techniques and are supported by research. Our school does not group for the sake of “tracking” students into “high” and “low” tracks, but for the practical purpose of ensuring that students who are ready to learn the same topics can be taught in an efficient and effective manner. The degree to which cooperative learning is employed as a teaching technique is subject to teacher judgment in accordance with the considerations outlined in the application.
- Grading -- The grades that students receive should reflect the degree to which they have mastered the material they have had the opportunity to learn. Teachers should strive to ensure that all students achieve mastery. Mastery is defined as 80% correct; for writing, students should be provided with exemplars of good writing that constitute mastery. The implication is that the vast majority of students should be able to be taught to mastery and should receive A's or B's. This does not, however, imply that teachers should avoid giving lower grades when they are warranted, but that teachers should consider re-teaching material when they find that significant numbers of students have not achieved mastery. Teachers must take care in the first year of operation to adjust their expectations to be realistic given that most students have not had the benefit of a classical education prior to attending this school. While teachers and the school should strive to maintain high standards, there must be a balance achieved so children don't become discouraged because they have received lower grades than they had previously. The Board believes that self-esteem is a product of genuine achievement, not that achievement is a result of self-esteem. However, grades do have an effect on students' self-image. The Board's vision for instruction is that teachers will set up students for success so that most will experience the genuine achievement of good grades through hard work, which increases their confidence and desire to learn more.
- Struggles In Learning -- Some parents have commented about the level of difficulty students have experienced with the new curriculum. While it is good for students to learn the value of persistence, the goal of instruction is to reduce the amount of struggle students experience. One of our school slogans is "Motivation begins with success." While encouraging students to persist and not give up, teachers should first and foremost endeavor to make things clear and simple for students, rather than overwhelm them with material that is not within the "zone of proximal development". In other words, the material should be neither too hard nor too easy. In this first year, and particularly at these early grade levels, it is important that teachers set realistic expectations for students, since the vast majority of them will not have learned the pre-requisite material that they would have normally had if they had attended the school for their entire academic career.

Socialization

- Lunch -- Having students eat in their classrooms is not a part of "the classical method". For FCCS it is but a foreseen temporary arrangement that is necessary until the Board is in a position to consider the expansion of the school's physical space to include both a cafeteria and a gym. The Board envisions lunch to be a less structured time and for students to have opportunities to move about their classroom and talk with fellow students, subject to teacher discretion and judgment with regard to keeping the classroom clean and ensure that students, though more relaxed, still maintain reasonable order.
- Recess – Having students relax and play is important to balance the rigor of the academic curriculum. The Board supports students going outside as often as weather and logistics will allow, and encourages teachers and students to find creative ways for students to enjoy indoor recess. Subject to teacher discretion based on students' ability to do so responsibly, the Board supports allowing students to play board games, trade collectible cards, make arts and crafts, and other unstructured, enjoyable activities.
- Uniforms – Just as students wear uniforms for sports teams, our school requires that students wear uniforms to create a sense of community, pride in one's school, and an esprit de corps. In addition, uniforms can help to reduce competition among students for fashion. Uniforms are not worn to create uniformity, nor a sense of formality or conformity, and should never be considered militaristic in nature. Uniforms remove the undue attention given to external fashion which allow students to focus on attaining interior freedom by means of their academic lessons. Research does not support the idea that uniforms solve discipline problems or raise academic achievement. Just as teachers will have "dress down day" on Fridays, the Board supports the occasional "dress down day" as a fun activity for students to provide a bit of variety in our overall program. We also support other variations on "dress down day" such as "crazy sock day", "sports team day" or other occasional alterations to the dress code, including Halloween costumes. It is important that no suggestion is made to students that wearing a uniform is punishment or meant to diminish fun, however. Also, the Board does not support offering a "dress down day" card for good behavior or academic achievement, since it implies that not wearing a uniform is a reward.

Teacher Professionalism

- Trusting Teacher Professionalism – At our school, teachers' professionalism is assumed, just as in medicine, law, or engineering. That said, we envision that parents will become active partners in the education of their child if they feel confident and knowledgeable. Parents are primary educators of their children; the school – any school – only aids parents achieve this end. If a parent has a question or concern, our staff will make the best effort to educate the parent and help them understand why we do what we do. Teachers should avoid the trap of responding to questions with phrases along the lines of "Trust me, I'm the professional." This phrase, though intended to express confidence to parents, can inadvertently suggest to some that the teacher is asserting that he or she knows better than parents and should be trusted without question; it can also appear as a logical fallacy known as an "appeal to authority" – that is, one's professional status/standing used to avoid justifying a decision with logic and evidence. At our school, we want to avoid that trap. We request that teachers emphasize their reasons for making a decision, not the fact that they are a professional. The Board wants to create a culture where teachers' professionalism is

assumed—and is left unsaid.

Rationale for Choosing the Classical Approach

We should be clear that choosing to become a classical school wasn't because there is any requirement in Maryland's charter school law to have a well-known model, or because the Board thought that using a well-known model would increase its chances of getting a charter. Our rationale for choosing this approach is based on both research and common sense.

Our starting point was that large-scale, reliable education research was not valued highly in education schools and as a result most public schools did not pursue research-based approaches. American education has for a century swung from one side of the pendulum to the other—going from the progressive/constructivist philosophy, to a the “back to basics” philosophy, and everything in between. Instead of pursuing a “philosophy” of education, we wanted to create a school that avoided trends and relied on evidence to find more solid ground on which to found a school.

After years of research, we found that the classical approach had many features that were supported by research, particularly in the areas of reading and math. Additionally, the classical tradition, which teaches history in chronological order, had a common sense rationale—that students would understand history better if they read it in order, just as reading a book in order is easier than picking out random chapters. Integrating science, art, literature, music, and history also had a common sense appeal—this organizational structure allowed students to better understand how these subjects are connected to each other through history. Teaching Latin and Spanish also provided a wonderful opportunity for students to further develop their language skills.

We hasten to add that it is important to avoid overstating the research—comparison studies of classical education versus other approaches were not available for review and to our knowledge have never been done in a reliable or large-scale fashion. Claims that classical education was superior to a scientific certainty are not justifiable based on current research. Most of the reliable studies compared the effectiveness of specific programs in specific subject areas to each other. We noticed a trend in the research we reviewed—that the curricula and approaches used in math and reading that often were found to produce the best results happened to be commonly used in classical schools. That, coupled with the history of American education fads chronicled by Diane Ravitch and her support for a liberal arts education, along with the research in cognitive science by Dr. Daniel Willingham, the work in literacy and knowledge by Dr. E.D. Hirsch, Dr. Jeanne Chall's seminal book about education, and the many research-based critiques of constructivism and progressive approaches cited in our application, pointed toward a middle ground—a certain kind of education known as “liberal”, “traditional”, or “classical”.

There are philosophical aspects to classical education that the Board found appealing. An appeal to philosophy may seem out-of-place after reading about our emphasis on research and quantifiable evidence, but we believe it is justifiable. While the school looks first to research when it comes to curricula and teaching techniques, when it comes to the purposes and aims of education, this is not an issue for quantifiable research. That is a philosophical issue, which requires a philosophical justification. In classical education, we found a philosophical tradition going back for millennia that has in its roots the development of human virtue and understanding—not for the modern purpose

of becoming “college and career ready”—but for the very human and timeless purpose of living a good life.

The classical tradition, with its rich store of literature and philosophy and its emphasis on the true, the good, and the beautiful, has much to offer today’s students. By coupling this with modern research and common sense, we have endeavored to create a unique kind of classical school. In doing so, we continue the classical tradition of looking to history for inspiration and to our new classical school as an opportunity to renew and improve upon the past.



A poem that best expresses the Board's beliefs about how virtues develop is below:

Children Learn What They Live

If a child lives with criticism, they learn to condemn.
If a child lives with hostility, they learn to fight.
If children live with fear, they learn to be apprehensive,
If children live with pity, they learn to feel sorry for themselves,
If a child lives with ridicule, he learns to be shy.

But do not despair ...

If a child lives with tolerance, they learn to be patient.
If a child lives with encouragement, they learn confidence.
If a child lives with praise, they learn to appreciate.
If a child lives with fairness, they live with justice.
If a child lives with security, they live to have faith.
If a child lives with approval, they learn to like himself.
If a child lives with acceptance and friendship,
they learn to find love in the world.

— *Dorothy Law Nolte*