



Classical Education in Public Schools: A Primer

SUMMARY

Classical education is on the rise in the United States. The State of Florida has adopted the classical learning test, and classical charter schools, magnet schools, and home or private school programs have exploded. The Society for Classical Learning, an organization focused on promoting a classical Christian education model, released a document in 2023 that noted the classical Christian movement expanded from **170 schools in 2010 to over 700 in 2023**. While classical Christian is slightly different in form and function to a secular classical model, the growth itself is astounding.

The decline in public school quality and opportunity has no doubt accelerated the decline of student enrollment across the country and opened up plentiful ground for alternative education models. But does it always need to be an alternative? Student outcomes and enrollment are huge indicators for the health of a school district, and implementing classical models may help reverse decline and restore trust.

In June of 2023, the Miami Dade School District passed a measure to research the feasibility of providing a classical education curriculum in the school district. It is still subject to the standards required by Florida law, but would implement the *trivium* of classical instruction: grammar, logic, and rhetoric. More importantly, their program is optional, which would allow only the most interested parents and students to involve themselves in a new program. If a parent does not want their child to participate in the classical curriculum, they may choose to “opt-out” from the program. Since this model is only in one participant school there is no shortage of options for the normal material within the school district.

This would be the largest, and possibly one of the first, school districts to adopt a classical curriculum model for use in *public schools*. It is still in the early stages of implementation, but its existence poses a question for all school districts that are struggling to stem enrollment decline and restore community trust in the school system. The substantial increase in classical learning options, both private and in charter schools, should be a signal to school boards that parents are more open to alternative school and curriculum options. This is an opportunity that, *done correctly*, could provide a new model to student populations and contribute to the overall development of the student body, and potentially bring back engaged parents.

WHAT IS CLASSICAL EDUCATION?

Classical education programs are rapidly growing in popularity across the United States. Classical models have been adopted in private schools, charter schools, and even in homeschool collectives. The modern classical movement is largely influenced by *The Lost Tools of Learning*, an essay presented in 1947 by Dorothy Sayers. In her paper, Dorothy suggests that we teach our children everything *except how to actually learn*.

Classical education in the United States today might cover topics such as:

1. Emphasis on the origins of American self-government and culture
2. Teachers leading classes in learning through storytelling, questioning, and discussion
3. Reading, writing, and speaking based on cognitive science
4. Virtue-based student discipline
5. Equal treatment of literacy, math, science, and history

Just how popular are these models, and what does it entail for students and teachers alike?

In February 2024, Arcadia Education performed [a market analysis](#) of K-12 Classical Education.

They found that:

- There were ~1500 classical schools in the 2023-24 academic year, totaling almost 700,000 students nationwide.
- 219 of those schools were public charter schools, with a total student population of roughly 125,000.

- Homeschooling, co-ops, or micro schooling options with a classical curriculum had just over 260,000 students.
- The number of classical schools is *growing* at almost 5% per year.

The 2019 National Household Education Survey, which Arcadia Education used in their analysis, showed that 74% of parents considered homeschools out of a desire to provide *moral instruction*. In addition, 72% were dissatisfied with the academic instruction in their schools.

Moral instruction is a key component of the classical model – although each institution may be different, especially between classical programs of different religious denominations, they all share a common goal in promoting *virtue*, intellectual rigor, and an understanding of the Western tradition within their students. The western tradition is a mixture of ancient classics, medieval literature, and philosophical texts.

Fundamentally, a classical education is meant to help students grasp a wide variety of topics with a clear mind, but also give them the ability to learn on their own well into the future and, in the United States, American cultural literacy and civics instruction for free self-government. Instead of just being taught what to know, they are given the opportunity to learn how to learn, whether it's an academic subject or the ethics that govern adult life. Ideally, teaching these students how to think and engage critically with the material will lead to truthful conclusions about what they're studying.

The typical classical model is broken up into three stages, also known as the trivium, which are based on the approximate developmental stages of what children are able to learn and think about. The trivium is more skills-based and may not accurately correspond to grade level, but there are rough comparisons to be made. They are:

- Grammar (K - 4/5)
- Logic or Dialectic (4/5 - 8)
- Rhetoric (9 - 12)

Grammar is applied much more broadly than it may seem. Every “subject” has its own grammar, that is, its own foundational elements. Grammar is important for language development, but it's

also important that in each academic subject, the student learns the foundational elements for their long-term understanding of the subject. It is impossible to learn algebra without first knowing how to add, after all. Memorization and repetition are key for this stage.

The logic, or dialectic stage, is focused on critical thinking. They take the foundational knowledge presented in the grammar stage and build upon it. They ask questions about the material, make comparisons, and determine cause and effect. They may know the United States became independent in 1776, but this stage would address the conditions that led to such a declaration.

Rhetoric is the final stage in the trivium. It's largely focused on *output*, that is, allowing students to synthesize the knowledge and understanding from the previous two stages to develop their own thoughts, and present it in their own words. By this level, the students would be able to engage with new information and form an opinion, then articulate it concisely and with persuasion.

The trivium has been adapted by Dorothy Sayers and those who came after her in an attempt to provide students with the core skills to engage with, understand, and articulate belief in material, whether it originates from the classroom or over the course of life itself. The end goal is an academically, morally, and intellectually well-developed student who is ready to enter the world upon graduation.

HOW DID MIAMI DADE BEGIN THE PROCESS TO IMPLEMENT?

Monica Colucci, the Board Member who began the process by [proferring an item](#) at their regular meeting on June 21, 2023. The item contains an overview of classical education, including the trivium, but also the underlying philosophy that guides classical education instruction and curriculum across the country. The purpose of public education is not just to teach students to read and write, but to develop virtuous and inquisitive people – this is especially true in the modern environment, where students and even many adults struggle with illiteracy.

The ability to provide classical education is tied in with the district’s mission to provide innovative educational programs and foster academic excellence. Monica also made a point to include *results* from other classical programs, specifically classical charter schools in three states: New York, Washington, D.C., and Tennessee. She includes Math and ELA proficiency rates from all three example schools, as well as demographic information, and finishes her pitch with the rates of the Miami-Dade school district itself. This has no bearing on the directive of the board – it merely serves as priming material not only for the other board members, but the superintendent and other administrators.

The actual directive of the item is stated simply:

“This item seeks to direct the Superintendent, to explore the feasibility of offering a Classical Education curriculum and if viable, develop a plan and timeline for its implementation at an elementary school(s) or K-8 Center(s), for the 2024-2025 school year.”

The official action from the District, when the item was approved, stated:

“That The School Board of Miami-Dade County, Florida, directs the Superintendent to:

1. Explore the feasibility of offering a Classical Education curriculum, and if viable, develop a plan and timeline for its implementation at an elementary school(s) and/or K-8 Center(s), for the 2024-2025 school year, and
2. Present the findings concerning the feasibility of offering a Classical Education curriculum at the Academics, Innovation, Evaluation & Technology Committee meeting of Wednesday, October 4, 2023.”

The policy adopted by Miami-Dade was not rushed into development or implementation. Instead, it was the result of rigorous work on the part of the school board to identify the attraction and benefits of classical education and make sure that the superintendent, as well as other key staff, were involved.

The presentation of a concrete plan by the Superintendent will allow the board members to accurately assess the potential costs, risks, and benefits for their district, as well as allow input from parents, teachers, and other community members. Community buy-in is imperative for

establishing a classical program, especially if it's within the public school system and not through a charter method, or if there are little to no local examples of a classical program being implemented.

ACTION ITEMS

As a school board member, your job is to provide policy and oversight for the direction of the school district, not manage day to day operations. Introducing a proposal such as this is a strategic and programmatic change, and must be made in consultation with the superintendent and school administrators. Follow this checklist as closely as possible, because it will set the stage for conversations between fellow board members and administrative staff.

Preliminary Action:

- Assess demand for classical education in the school district. Are there local options?
- If there are, meet with the administrators of those classical schools. Learn about their curriculum and student strategies.
- Bring your superintendent, curriculum staff, and other board members on site visits to those schools. If there are none, extend your search to nearby counties.
- Draft a similar resolution and run it by your board attorney.

Implementation Strategy:

When your resolution is introduced and agreed to, the superintendent should begin work on a proposal to present to the board at a later date. This proposal will study the feasibility of the project, and should cover:

- Grade-level determinations. (Miami-Dade started with Grades 1-3).
- Teacher retraining methodology and opportunities
- Opt-in or out provisions for parents and students
- Grant or other funding opportunities for training and curriculum material
- Aligning classical curriculum with state standards
- Student achievement indicators
- Mechanisms for program feedback and adjustment