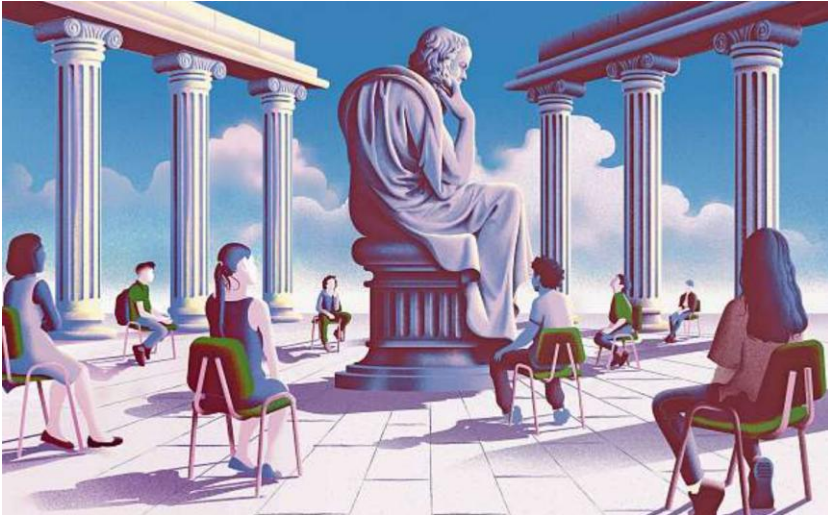


How ‘Classical’ Schools Teach Kids To Be Citizens

A growing number of charter and private schools are rejecting progressive education in favor of old-fashioned instruction in knowledge, virtue and liberty

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I arrived at Founders Classical Academy of Lewisville, Texas, in September 2023 and found my way to the gym of the lower school, where the K–5 students gather every morning. Usually, the kids from one grade recite a poem they’ve memorized.

Today was Patriot Day, a state holiday, and the fourth-graders recited the Preamble to the Constitution, from “We the people of the United States” all the way down to “ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

I was sitting on the bleachers with the third-graders, and we all applauded. Established in 2012 in this Dallas suburb, Founders is the oldest of a network of 23 “classical” schools, chiefly in Texas and Arkansas. The Founders network is one constellation in an expanding galaxy of about 275 classical charter schools across the country. Including private Catholic and Protestant schools that call themselves classical, about 250,000 students now attend such schools.

If you live anywhere outside the Sunbelt, you may never have heard of this movement, though it is one of the fastest-growing school reforms in the country. Classical education is largely a red-state phenomenon. To liberal critics, these schools represent the thin edge of the wedge of cultural warfare. A 2023 report by the Network for Public Education, an advocacy group, describes the terms “classical” and “traditional” as “dog whistles to attract conservative families with Christian nationalist identities anxious to place their

children in schools that reflect early and mid-20th century values, pedagogy and curriculum.”

Founders’ headmaster Jason Caros rejects the allegation of “Christian nationalism” but argues that there is much to be said for those traditional values, pedagogy and curriculum. Caros and his faculty are engaged in what they regard as a counter cultural project, working against the grain of a progressive, utilitarian culture that they believe offers too little to children and demands too little of them. The school’s Latin motto is “Scientia Virtus et Libertas,” or “Knowledge, Virtue, and Liberty.” Founders does not offer classes in “civics”; the school’s very reason for being is civic.

One morning I sat in on Daniel Bishop’s sixth-grade English class. A plywood arch bearing the words “Caius Caesar: Preparing For Triumph” had been fastened to the door; the kids were getting ready for the annual Roman pageant. There was a brief discussion of togas and other Roman paraphernalia. Then Bishop got down to business, telling the kids to stand up and recite Shakespeare’s great Sonnet 65—the one that begins “Since brass, nor stone, nor earth...” They did, flawlessly. Bishop told me later that he had helped the kids parse the difficult phrases and imagery.

Then it was time for “oratio”— oral presentation. The class was reading “The Count of Monte Cristo.” A girl volunteered to get up and summarize the chapter. When she came to the chief themes, she spoke of “false identity”— people misrepresenting who they really were. Bishop pointed out that Count Morcerf had a strange name, which could be translated as “dead deer.” He asked, “Are there dead deers in mythology that are significant?”

Everyone seemed to know the story of Artemis, who turned Acteon into a stag and allowed him to be torn apart by his hunting dogs. Here was the Founders’ model in miniature: classical knowledge, truth and beauty, memorization and public speaking. The vibe was eager.

My conversations with teachers at Founders kept circling around the difference between the classical and Classical education does not regard individual

autonomy as the supreme good. No one ever spoke the words “critical race theory” or “woke” or even “Joe Biden.” No doubt they thought about those things in their private lives, but as classical teachers their concerns lay elsewhere. They objected, rather, to the orientation of conventional schooling, which they used interchangeably with “progressivism,” toward the market and toward “college readiness.”

Caros recounted for me with real horror a story he had recently heard about a school where teachers in each grade met weekly to review student test data and then draw up individualized plans. That would, in fact, count as state-of-the-art pedagogy in many schools. Caros’s reaction had been: “You can’t have a school like that and teach beautiful content.”

In fact, John Dewey and other founders of the progressive education movement in the early 20th century were deeply anti-utilitarian. Dewey regarded the vocational orientation of education as profoundly antidemocratic, because it limited real intellectual development to the college-going elite. But it is true that, for progressive education, school begins with the child and her interests and developing faculties, not with the subject matter and its intrinsic nature. The liberal ideal is individual development: Education allows each of us to become, not the ideal citizen, but whoever we wish to be.

What makes classical education fundamentally different is that it does not regard individual autonomy as the supreme good. Rather, it believes in what Aristotle called “eudaimonia,” a word typically translated as “happiness” or “human flourishing.” Education is ultimately a form of training—above all, in reason—that makes the good life possible. In the “Politics,” Aristotle wrote, “There is a certain kind of education that children must be given not because it is useful or necessary, but because it is noble and suitable for a free person.”

Lewisville has a self-selected population. Although, like most charter schools, it chooses students by lottery, those who attend are the ones whose parents wanted them to go. Dallas is one of the most conservative big cities in

America; the school draws from a churchgoing, conservative pool of families. But the kids aren't privileged. The median income is slightly below the American average of \$74,000; 45% of the 935 kids at Founders are white, 22% are Asian, 20% are Hispanic, and 7% are Black.

The traditionalism, rigor, and discipline of classical schools—the thick wall against peer and popular culture—appeals to many newcomers to the U.S. As the school's reputation has spread, immigrant families have applied in increasing numbers, so that the lower grades are much more diverse than the high school. This reflects a larger trend: A 2023 study found that while enrollment in classical charter schools in Texas had grown sevenfold over the previous decade, growth among Asian American and Hispanic students had far outpaced growth among whites.

The culture of Lewisville Founders suited the culture of its community very well. But a gay student, a trans student, even a mildly rebellious or slightly weird kid—anyone disinclined to be compliant—might have been unhappy there. The wild variety of American life can never be clamped down on the Procrustean bed of a single form of schooling.

Yet Caros (who now serves as academic director for the Founders Classical Academies) and his colleagues are right about the failures of conventional schooling. Sixth graders elsewhere do not read novels; high-school students are not asked to elevate their gaze to the beautiful and the true. As Caros put it, “If we want to maintain our individual liberties, our societal freedoms and flourish as a people, we must have a well-educated and virtuous citizenry.”

This essay is adapted from James Traub's new book, “The Cradle of Citizenship: How Schools Can Help Save Our Democracy,” which will be published by W.W. Norton on January 13.