

Why Choose Paideia?

Seven Years Later

By D. Matthew Allen

Seven years ago, in 2006, I wrote an article entitled “Why Choose Paideia?” The purpose of the article was to explain why my wife and I chose to educate our children in the Classical Christian tradition and, more specifically, at The Paideia School of Tampa Bay. Now, candidly, there was a bit of hubris in the article. At that time, Paideia was a brand new school of 54 students, we had no graduates, and my two girls were in sixth and third grades. Granted, the founders of the school were not babes in the woods; we had come from another classical Christian school, and we intended to replicate the good of what we had there here. But still, we were looking forward with a great deal of promise.

Seven years later, Paideia is leaving the “start-up” phase. We have over 100 students presently enrolled and seven graduates (after May, 2013, it will be 17). Of that number, we have two National Merit Scholars, four National Merit Commended students, and a high number of college scholarship recipients. We also have a recommendation from the Association of Classical Christian Schools accreditation committee that the school receive a five year accreditation, for which God is to be praised. At the personal level, my oldest girl is a senior, with a mere two months left in her high school career, before we pack her off to college and new adventures. My youngest is a high school freshman, and next year, she enters the Rhetoric School.

I thought it was time to update my article.

What Have We Learned?

In the earlier article, I described our delight with the grammar school years (1st through 6th grades), when our children learned primarily by reciting chants, singing songs, and memorizing history facts, Bible verses, Bible chapter concepts, and poems. I asked my girls recently which grammar chants they consider their favorites. They responded that they remember with fondness Mr. Mahurin’s Latin songs (“Carmen is neuter, don’t you know ...”) and the preposition chant (“Preposition, preposition, starting with an “a” ...). I didn’t remember the preposition chant, but I do love the history timeline. Last week, I watched a grammar school assembly for the first time in a long time. I still get chills every time I hear the students recite their timeline, marveling with delight at the enormous amount of history data the children absorbed, and recited, in chronological order, accompanied by the most delightful hand motions. My wife loves the history time line as well, but she still chants the sentence chant (“A sentence, sentence, sentence, is complete, complete, complete, when five simple rules it meets, meets, meets ...).

I knew when I wrote my earlier article that those chants and songs and recitations were “grist for the mill” in the coming years, that the grammar facts that children memorize in the early grades become the foundation on which logical thinking abilities and rhetorical speaking abilities are built. What I didn’t know is how well that house of dialectic and rhetoric would be constructed in my own children. What I can say now, looking back, with far deeper emphasis than I understood seven years ago, is: *Classical Christian education works!* I knew it before intellectually. Now I know it experientially through the lives of my girls. Paideia truly creates disciples, scholars, and citizens.

Paideia Creates Scholars

Students in the pre-teen and early teen years are naturally argumentative. Anyone who has a 13 year old knows this! But at Paideia, they begin to use that natural argumentative bent for good, not ill or simply annoyance. They learn, not only how to absorb facts, but how to put those facts together in a logical, coherent way. This occurs in the formal Logic class, of course, as students learn to spot fallacies (and they will spot them in things you say, to be sure). It also occurs in Literature, Bible, History, and everything else. Teachers begin using a Socratic questioning style of teaching. Students are encouraged to offer their opinions, which they will do anyway at this age. But their assertions are then examined in terms of strong and weak points. Teachers harness students arguments and help reshape them to be more sound (and more pleasing). In other words, students not only learn what to think, but they also learn how to think. This was a priceless gift my wife and I did not receive until law school. Our girls are getting it now.

Our children in the Upper School years also were introduced to the beauty of great literature. They read from such works as *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and *Aeneid* in seventh grade, *Beowulf*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*, in eighth grade, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Moby Dick*, and *Pride and Prejudice* in ninth grade, plays from Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles in tenth grade, *Canterbury Tales*, *Othello*, and *Frankenstein* in eleventh grade, and *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *The Great Gatsby* in twelfth grade. They discuss the great ideas embedded in these works. It would be tedious to list out all the books and poems the students read, but the complete list is on the school's website. Mr. Bray has a saying, "Over me." It refers to the fact that soldiers in World War II would stretch their bodies over barbed wire fences so their fellow soldiers could climb over them in a protected fashion to lead the charge. This is what we are doing for our students. We as parents sacrifice so our children can charge ahead over us. My ninth grade daughter has read far more great literature than I have at age 48. *Over me*. One of last year's graduates wisely compiled the list of works he had read while at Paideia and submitted it to the colleges he was considering. He then had the good fortune to choose between several lucrative scholarship offers.

When our students enter the Rhetoric School (10th -12th grade), they receive a copy of the 60 volume Great Books of the Western World, and use these volumes as textbooks in their two year philosophy course called The Great Ideas Seminar, as well as Rhetoric, Apologetics and History classes. As a result, my high school senior is more well-versed in the philosophy of Plato, Aristotle, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Kant than I was when I graduated college and law school. She also has read far more great poetry than I have, even now. *Over me*.

Some may say this is too hard for their children; that only "brains" can succeed in such a program. I reject that viewpoint. As a parent and teacher, I see average and above-average, but not genius-level children, thrive in Paideia's academic environment. Is it hard work? Yes, it is. But now that we are at the finish line, at least for our first-born child, for this stage of her life, we believe it is well worth it. We saw the results in her SAT scores. We saw the results in the constant calls and letters from colleges fighting to win our daughter's college attendance. We see it in her ability to carry on an intelligent and winsome conversation with adults. We give the glory to God, but humanly speaking, we give the credit to Paideia and her teachers, who diligently and faithfully worked to teach our girl to think and speak well.

Paideia Creates Disciples

Our students do not just become budding scholars sought-after by colleges. They also grow as disciples. In seventh, eighth, and ninth grades, our children are immersed in the books and great themes of the Bible. In tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades, they study the great works of theology by the best Christian thinkers of history, Augustine, Aquinas, Anselm, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, B.B. Warfield, C.S. Lewis, and Francis Schaeffer. I love the fact that my senior daughter has read – and understands – more Francis Schaeffer than I had at age 30. I equally love the fact that she knows more theology than most Christians this side of seminary. This will serve her well in future church life.

Our students also learn how to defend the biblical doctrine of the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, one of two key points of attack on which the modern world is engaged in a vicious war against biblical Christianity. They learn how to defend the deity of Christ against the claims of contemporary scholarship that Jesus never claimed to be God and that there are valid, competing versions of Christianity that reject his divinity, the second major point of current attack. They learn how to study the Bible using the grammatical, historical, literary method of interpretation, so they will both understand the right way to read Scripture and be armed to take on whatever intellectual and spiritual challenges the church may face in the future. They learn about Islam and eastern religion and the best ways to witness to a Muslim or Buddhist. Most importantly, they learn that the Christian intellectual life can never be divorced from the Christian devotional life. Both are necessary, and they inseparably go together. Do students learn these things in public school? Not on your life. Do they learn them in most churches or in other Christian schools? Sadly, the typical answer is “no.” They do learn them at Paideia.

Paideia Creates Citizens

Finally, my daughters are learning to be good citizens at Paideia. Because of the small size of the school, they have the freedom to serve in ways as unique as they are. My senior, who feels called to teach, has served by volunteering as an aide in the grammar school classrooms. She also has joined her classmates by performing in each of the school’s seven Shakespeare plays. This too is a service, as well as a blessing to the entire school community. My freshman has decided to serve in her own way. She created an after-school tutoring program for younger students. Although these are ways my children have decided to serve and reflect their growing citizenship, they are not alone. Our upper school students go on mission trips, speak against abortion, serve in their churches, and give money every month to starving children in Africa and Asia. They learn citizenship at Paideia.

Why Choose Paideia?

I feel sorry for children whose parents thoughtlessly remove them from the classical Christian school setting after fifth or sixth grade, to go to a public middle school. I spoke at an education seminar in January, and a public school teacher was on the panel. He was passionate about the public school option for Christian families, but even he admitted he likely would not send his children to a public middle school.

I also feel sorry for children whose parents abort their classical Christian education after eighth grade, to attend the local public school or even Behemoth Christian Academy, because of sports or prom or some other perceived deficiency with the smaller classical school. I understand the desire for one’s children to experience some of the things we hazily remember from our own high school days. Yes, larger schools offer such attractive features as Friday night football lights, slow-dancing beneath the cheap gauzy

artificial glow of a high school gym, and a myriad of after-school activities like the New Age Club, Video Games Club, Environmental Club, or the Goth Group. But from where I sit, these lesser desires pale in comparison to the greater desire to have my children leave their high school years well-armed to enter the Great Conversation of Western Civilization as scholars, ready and able to engage in public service as citizens, and to take on their discipleship responsibilities as churchmen and women. As C.S. Lewis said, we are far too easily pleased.

Really, from the mature adult perspective, which is more important – receiving the tools of learning for a lifetime or playing high school soccer? And are students really missing that much when they forego sitting on the bleachers at the football games (which is where most of them will be, not on the field), exposure to gay and lesbian students, avoiding drug deals in the hallway, or going to a dance with a boy or girl they will lose touch with when they head off to college?

For my own children, I do not regret for one second forgoing these “typical high school experiences” in favor of training them to be good women speaking well. In the classical Christian distinctives described in this article, they are reaping a reward far more valuable than a “typical high school experience.” I do not think I am going out on a limb in asserting that they will not obtain anywhere else as high a quality education as they are getting at Paideia. Not at Jesuit, not at Berkley, not at Tampa Prep, and not at an International Baccalaureate (IB) school. I could not say this from experience seven years ago, but now I can: *Classical Christian education works!*

In the end, however, the main point in this article is the same as it was in the first article seven years ago. In 2013, just as in 2006, classical Christian education is not just about our kids, but it’s about Jesus Christ working through the lives of our children and many others like them to bring revival and reformation, if God allows it, to our land. Even more so now than then, the Christians of our generation have failed, and the evangelical church is in retreat. Our hope is that God will use the next generation, or the one after it, to repair the ruins.

We have seen that God has had his hand on The Paideia School, and we remain excited about what He will continue to do in the lives of its students. I can think of no better place to facilitate growth in your children in wisdom, and stature, and favor with God and man. That is why we chose Paideia. We pray you will choose it as well.