

The Philosophical Pillars of a Great Hearts Academy¹

Our View of Learning: Verum, Pulchrum, Bonum

We believe that the world is ordered and knowable and that the human intellect, while imperfect, can attain knowledge of reality through reason, hard work, and a coherent program of study.

We believe that truth exists, and we must seek it relentlessly by disciplined study and good-willed conversation. Truth is never just “my truth” and “your truth”; truth itself is not subject to historical or personal conditioning or circumstances, though individuals and cultures are.

We take seriously Socrates' assertion that “the unexamined life is not worth living” and believe education should proceed via shared inquiry and honest discussion.

While aspects of our curriculum are subject to new developments in science, discoveries about our universe, and the unfolding of history, our emphasis is upon the enduring, the changeless, the permanent. We give particular emphasis to the literary and philosophical Classics of the West because of the way they speak about the universal human condition and the laws of nature.

We believe that beauty is not merely in the eye of the beholder, and that the classic forms and works of Western music, drama, and visual art should play the central role in forming aesthetic judgment.

Although we teach to a variety of learning modes, we believe the written and spoken word hold a privileged position in human expression and knowledge.

We do not dispute the usefulness of a liberal arts education, and we gladly prepare our students for college studies, but our main purpose is the formation of the soul, heart, and mind.

Liberal education consists of cognitive, emotional, and moral education—thinking deeply, loving noble things, and living well together. We believe, with Plato, that the highest goal of education is to become good, intellectually and morally.

¹As distinct, but not unrelated, from important structural pillars such as uniforms, school/class size, teaching assignments, seminar configuration, etc.

Teaching and Learning

The greatest number of our students benefit when the intellectual and moral bar is set high in the classroom. Lowering expectations is an act of misguided sympathy, not of love and mercy.

Students long for order in their lives, and habits of personal order cultivate habits of intellectual order.

We evaluate the student as a liberal artist (his or her sense of wonder, depth of inquiry, commitment to finding the truth) and do not just crunch numbers to arrive at a grade.

While students do learn at different paces, we believe that true education (as the formation of the soul) is a matter of development over time and within a stable community. In short, we give our students individualized attention, but within a common, compulsory, one-track curriculum.

Thoughtful depth about a subject is preferable to broad or rapid “coverage”. Our goal is to shape minds and souls, not to cover material quickly.

Every high school student must experience the beauty and truth of calculus and a rigorous four-year study of laboratory science.

Children and teenagers have the capacity and desire to be trained in all the arts and sciences, and they have the ability to participate in seminars on a high level. We do not believe they should focus on a narrow course of specialized study which offers only a partial fulfillment of their many capacities and hopes.

A Great Hearts primary school is characterized not only by an academic rigor and a depth of study not often seen at the K-5 level, but also by a student population that is engaged in a joyful and classical study of the liberal arts. Our curriculum focuses on the foundational “grammar” of liberal arts education, and though instruction is more didactic and classrooms formal and traditional, Socratic instruction has an essential role.

We believe that there is mercy in candor, in speaking the truth when we evaluate our students. But we never pigeon-hole them or give up hope in their potential to improve.

Great Hearts academies established in traditionally underserved communities culminate in a high school experience and curriculum that is identical to all Great Hearts network schools. While making necessary modifications to the curriculum to bridge the achievement gap for elementary school students who enter the academy below grade level, we seek to remain consistent with Great Hearts’ classical values, and yet also create a more regimented learning environment that is focused on acquiring foundational knowledge.

The skills of reading and writing are best taught by reading, discussing, and writing about great literature.

Our Culture

A Great Hearts school has a unified, coherent, and intentional culture. Individual classrooms are not spaces for private cultures that are detached from the community of the school.

Our school culture is a reflective space in which students can study the high culture of the West free from the distractions of pop culture and postmodern media.

In keeping with our belief that habits of personal order cultivate habits of intellectual order, faculty performance is grounded in thoughtful and well planned lessons, orderly classrooms, timely and meaningful evaluation/correction of student work, Socratic engagement of students, and attentive performance of assigned campus duties.

The nine core virtues that we seek to model and instill in our Archway Classical students are: humility, integrity, friendship, perseverance, wisdom, courage, responsibility, honesty, and citizenship.

We let the Great Books speak for themselves and we never assign secondary literature (that is, scholarly treatments of a primary work) to students. The great literature of the past need not be re-narrated through contemporary editions in order to achieve relevancy. Great literature is timeless and both student and teacher must be drawn up into the text, rather than bringing the text down to them.

We study our Western heritage and believe that our cultural inheritance is unique and primary to us by virtue of our being Americans. We believe that in order for students to become culturally literate citizens they must share certain specific knowledge based in the study of the humanities, the sciences, and the fine arts.

The most polarizing debates of contemporary politics and culture must be kept out of our faculty offices and classrooms. Our students should not know us as Independents, Republicans, Democrats, agnostics, atheists, or believers; they should see and know us as citizens of the West, united by our love of what we teach and learn together.

A vibrant athletic department, and the competitive aspiration, physical health, and camaraderie of our students, is an essential complement to our academic communities.

Sarcasm, bad will, and apathy are toxic to the work of teaching and learning.

Leadership

The Headmaster is the learner-in-chief and a model of wonder, good will, and intellectual growth. He or she is also the teacher-in-chief and should develop teaching talent through coaching, mentoring, and teaching.

The teachers are the most important daily leaders and shapers of intellectual and ethical culture on our campuses. Every teacher is a role model and must always act and speak as one.

Though every instructional period requires intellectual leadership on the part of the teacher, teacher leadership will look different in a 9th grade seminar where significant coaching is required, than in a mature 12th grade seminar characterized by sustained, free-flowing conversation and complemented by a more subtle form of teacher leadership.

Teachers lead students through intelligence, charisma, humor, moral integrity, and example—in short, through love and friendship, as modeled by Socrates.

The collegiality of the faculty around the shared intellectual and moral ideals of the Academy is the primary indicator of institutional health and sustainability. One way this collegiality is expressed and developed is through guided, common study.