

Saint Augustine School's Classical, Christian, Collaborative Education

An Essay by Ann Lowrey Forster

At Saint Augustine School, we are seeking to offer a specific model of education, and we want to be thorough and clear in communicating our aims and the tools by which we seek to accomplish those aims. In this essay, we will examine two primary topics – the classical, Christian curriculum and the collaborative model. We hope that this information will better enable prospective members of our community – parents, students, and faculty – to know what we're after, how we're endeavoring to get there, and whether your beliefs and desires for education align with ours at Saint Augustine.

Before we get into the details, it is important to state that we do not believe there is one right way for Christians to educate their children, nor is there one right school to attend in central Mississippi. The model and methods at Saint Augustine have been chosen based on what we can learn from those giants who have gone before us and based on the collaborative decision making of its founders and continuing Board of Directors. The Bible does not command a specific method or model of education. We are seeking to apply biblical principles and practical wisdom to our specific context.

Collaborative Education

Philosophy and History of the Model

Scripture teaches that parents have the responsibility of educating their children, and at Saint Augustine we seek to honor and uphold that truth. We do believe that parents can wisely delegate portions of those responsibilities. We also believe that a child must take hold of his own education, just as he must take hold of his own faith. Additionally, as we look around at our current culture, we see frenetic busy-ness as the default lifestyle of most families. However, we want space for intentionality, for community, for joy, and for rest. We believe that the collaborative model of education provides a path for parental engagement, student ownership, and a restful yet engaged family.

The collaborative model has been in place, formally, for about thirty years in American schools, but the principles behind it are not new. At-home study is a very old concept indeed. The expansion of classroom hours actually developed as a necessity of modern life. We see the collaborative model as returning to a previous mode of education, simply in a way that is more formalized and fits the current needs of our families and pupils.

Logistics of the Collaborative Model

Collaborative education is the term we have chosen to describe our model. Other schools around the country are using other terms. *University-Model*® education, *hybrid* or *cottage* schools, and *conservatories* have popped up around America – and the world – over the past few decades. Regardless of its name, this model has as its distinctive characteristic the structure, accountability, and professional nature of a school, but with fewer hours in a classroom each week. At Saint Augustine, our younger students (K4 – 5th) come to school two days a week, for instruction totaling between 8 and 12 hours per week. As our



students grow, they add more class instruction; they will be in class as much as 18 hours per week in high school.

At school, classrooms at Saint Augustine look a lot like classrooms at traditional schools. The teacher is a professional who has been called to teaching in a vocational capacity. There are tests and quizzes, presentations and projects, pencil sharpeners and group activities. Teachers who know and love their material are presenting it and sharing that love with their students.

In the younger grades, parents serve as true co-teachers of their students on home days. The school and classroom teachers provide the structure - giving assignments and training parents in how to complete those assignments. The parent at home is free to add to and adjust how that instruction happens. This allows for students to receive individual support in areas in which they are still growing, as well as allowing for efficient work in areas in which students are excelling.

As the student ages, we employ our model to gradually shift the educational burden to him or her. Parents move from co-teaching into a role of mentoring, encouraging, and holding their children accountable. Assignments are directed to the student, and teachers communicate their expectations through assignment sheets meant to more and more look like a college syllabus as the children move through high school. Students are expected to complete readings and writings outside of class and to come to class ready to contribute to discussion and take advantage of the time they have with their teachers, who are experts in their individual subject-areas.

Benefits of the Collaborative Model

The parental engagement in the model ensures that parents remain the central influencers in their children's lives. We trust that this will lead to the building up of relationships and the transmission of the faith. Additionally, siblings can know and learn from one another, and we believe that their common experience and time with one another will knit them together for years to come. Parents who do not see their children very much cannot know them well. We want to leave space in the day and in the week for parents to come alongside their children, be on their team, and model virtue in close proximity, not only in the early morning and during the race to bed time. We believe this parent involvement - first as co-teacher and later as mentor - will allow for the growth of wisdom in the student. A parent who knows his child's vocational tendencies can better train him in those virtues that will follow him the rest of his life. Finally, we believe that the culture we find ourselves in currently is not *for* the family. Twenty-first century Americans are radically individualistic, and this includes dividing children from parents - and family member from family member - early and often. The collaborative model is a small step in an effort to bind us to rather than unravel us from one another. Parents being involved in the daily education of their children is a good thing, and we believe the collaborative model gains the benefits of that involvement, while holding on to the benefits of professional educators and experts transmitting their knowledge.

Parents and teachers may be passionate about and excellent at their jobs, but that alone cannot cultivate an educated student. A student must grow into ownership of his own education. There are new articles each week lamenting the extension of adolescence and the infantilization of young people. The shift to require less of teenagers and young adults in America has been chronicled thoroughly. This is not a



good shift for the cultivation of wisdom, and the collaborative model helps to push back against it. As the student grows, he is given the tools required and expected to take responsibility for his own education. When a student is in a classroom for 35-40 hours per week, he does not have the space to learn to manage his own educational tasks. They are managed for him. We want our students to leave their parents' homes ready to manage the responsibilities of higher education and the workplace, and the collaborative model allows for that growth while they are still within the home and under the guidance of parents.

Finally, we believe that collaborative education provides much needed margin and space for families living in today's culture. Because families can be at home more, they are able to engage in church and community life without sacrificing an excellent education. We want our students to be outside, to be in the community, to be doing things that put grins on the faces of the young, and we believe that the collaborative model is a great aid in this pursuit. For the older child, joy is often found in pursuing his or her specific interests. We know that engaging meaningfully in many extra-curricular activities requires many hours of work each week. The model allows students to pursue ballet or horse-back riding or the mastery of musical instruments, while still having time for school and play. The wonder of a young child evolves to be the engagement of the adolescent. When they are young, children look and talk about the anteatr or the beautiful painting; when they are older, they read about the anteatr, write about the painting, and find part time jobs at the zoo or the art museum. The collaborative model allows for the wonder of the child to grow into the pursuits of the young adult by providing more time outside of the classroom. The family can still have meals together, even with full community engagement, because fewer hours each week are devoted to time behind a desk. Much time each week in traditional school is taken up by things that can be done much more efficiently in the home, and the collaborative model seeks to provide the benefits of school without taking up more of our families' very precious minutes in each day.

Classical, Christian Education

At Saint Augustine, we are endeavoring to offer our students what we have called a classical, Christian education. I am treating the two concepts – classical and Christian – together, because the overlap is considerable, and the disentanglement is difficult. In theory, one can have a classical education that is not Christian or a Christian education that is not classical. But, for us, these two concepts are two cords woven together into one strand, and so I will attempt to examine both at the same time.

History, Philosophy, and Benefits of the Model

Like the collaborative model, a classical, Christian curriculum has seen a resurgence in the past few decades. But it is not a new curriculum at all. Millenia ago, Greeks and Romans began educating their citizens with some core principles. Early church Christians baptized this method of education by using those same tools, but from a commitment to the authority of scripture and the supremacy of King Jesus. In the Middle Ages, philosophers categorized and formalized these elements, coining the term *artes liberales*, or the liberal arts. Again, Christians adopted the curriculum, investing in it their theological commitments and utilizing it to serve the church and the kingdom. Different models and methods (parochial schools, education at home through tutors and governesses, boarding schools) were employed



but the basic curriculum remained the same for hundreds of years.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, educators in Europe and America began to rethink what we were teaching our students. The education of the men and women who led the renaissance, the reformation, and the American revolution had seen much success. Despite this success, the changing goals of the modern industrial world led to a rethinking of the purpose of education. When there is a shift in purpose, there will also be a shift in principles, and the educational curriculum began to change.

G. K. Chesterton tells us that, “Education is simply the soul of a society as it passes from one generation to another.”¹ The soul of America saw a shift, and so did its education. John Dewey, the great father of American progressive education rejected classical language studies and emphasized training citizens for the growing industrial economy. Christopher Perrin, in his primer on classical education, provides the following glimpse into the changes that happened in the early part of the twentieth century:

A few examples of the progressive approach should ring familiar: classical languages were dropped altogether and relegated to shrinking classics departments in colleges; basic instruction in phonics and decoding was replaced with a “whole language” approach of reading instruction; training in logic and dialectic was replaced with self-expression without fault-finding; writing instruction guided by imitating the masters and frequent practice was replaced with more individualistic, creative approaches and less practice; math instruction steeped in drill, practice and repetition was replaced with curricula containing less drill and practice and more activities and stories related to the subject; history instruction grounded in and celebrating the western tradition from which the U.S. emerged was gradually replaced with a multi-cultural approach that downplayed European and even American history and presented instead a smattering of world history (your old social studies classes). Furthermore, progressive educators often looked back on the classical model as harsh, cold and unpleasant for students. As a result progressive educators strove to be entertaining and fun, and gradually began to expect less of students in terms of work and achievements.²

We see in our educational statistics the failure of the progressive education experiment. College freshman today are much less prepared than they were a hundred years ago, and we have fallen behind the world in achievements and abilities. In fact, we had fallen behind by the early 1980s.³

As parents have made note of the lack of success of the modern education project, they have begun wanting something better for their children. This critique has, not coincidentally, come at the same time as post-modern relativism has taken root in America. It is not palatable to Christian parents for their children to be given a mediocre education, and it is not acceptable for them to be taught as truth principles which run contrary to the teaching of scripture. While either reality may have been stomached for longer, the combination of the two have led many to demand and work for more.

Before parents were demanding more, great intellectuals were pointing out the failures of modern education. C. S. Lewis offered a scathing critique in his famous essay, *The Abolition of Man*, published in 1947. In the same year, Dorothy Sayers urged a rethinking of educational practices, when she

¹ G. K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong With the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 112.

² Christopher Perrin, *An Introduction to Classical Education* (Classical Academic Press, 2004), 16-17

³ https://www.edreform.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/A_Nation_At_Risk_1983.pdf



penned, *The Lost Tools of Learning*. It wasn't until the 1980s that the wheels began to turn in favor of action. More thinkers weighed in – David Hicks in *Norms and Nobility* and Mortimer Adler (from the secular viewpoint) in *The Paideia Proposal*. And then, slowly but surely, classical schools began to be founded, and homeschooling parents also took up the mantle.

So, what does this new but old curriculum look like? Well, it isn't formulaic. Yes, there are some commonalities in subjects taught, but there is not a one size fits all plan for classical schools. But, there are some commitments to certain principles that classical schools hold, and Saint Augustine is no exception.

First, we believe that all knowledge is unified in Christ. Knowledge is not piecemeal. We do not learn math in isolation from language, or the other way around. God has knit us together, and similarly, He has knit together our world our ability to know it. Ears do not function without kidneys and chemistry does not function without history. This knowledge is not just unified in itself though. God tells us in John's gospel that Jesus is the *logos* and through Him all that was made was made.⁴ *Logos* is the Greek word for reason, word, or knowledge. Jesus is the Word. He is the incarnation of all knowledge, and because of that, all of our knowledge must serve Him. We reject the concept of morally neutral education, and we want to submit all things to Jesus and to the Word of God as revealed in scripture.

Connected to that, we believe that education is not merely a transmission of facts and skills but is for the ordering of loves and cultivation of virtue. God does not only take an interest in our brains, but He commands our hearts, minds, souls, and bodies. At Saint Augustine, we see a child as a precious person who is, like our knowledge, indivisible. We have in mind this *ordo amoris* in all that we do– we seek not to teach a child simply what to think or how to think, but how to prioritize his affections. We are also very much interested in the recovery of virtue – we seek to train children to be citizens of the kingdom. This means we hope our students will know things and be able to do things, but it also means they should care about the *good* and be able to order their priorities in a way that brings glory to God.

We believe that our minds require discipline in the same way that our hearts and bodies require it. We are commanded by our Savior to love God with all our minds⁵ and the apostle Paul tells us that we will be transformed by the renewal of our minds⁶. We seek to train students who work their math problems as unto the Lord – and who work them until they master them. We want transferrable intellectual skills. This means that rather than simply checking boxes, we are teaching our students to be life-long learners who know when they have mastered something and when they have not. And when our students have not mastered something, they know how to find the path to mastery. We hold our students – and teachers – to high standards. This is not driven, we hope, by pride, but by its opposite. Because we know how much work there is to be done, we should get to work, cultivating diligence, perseverance, and excellence.

Simultaneously, we know that God delights in his people and commands us to rejoice and to sing. We want to train students who laugh – at school and at home. The classroom should not be a cauldron, and the work of the student should not be drudgery. This belief – that the work of the student is

⁴ John 1:1ff

⁵ Matthew 22:37

⁶ Romans 12:2



naturally a burden to be borne – is as dangerous as any of the other progressive ideals alive today. Work and learning were in the garden before Satan worked his schemes. They are not a result of the fall, and we will work in heaven. Learning is full of wonder and joy, and we believe the classical, Christian curriculum lends itself to embracing the way in which God made us – as people who sing and laugh, whistling while we work, loving while we learn.

Logistics of the Curriculum

If we embrace the principles of classical education and seek to recover what has been lost, we will do well to look to how things went. But, we do not live in 300 BC Rome or 1500 AD France or even 1850 frontier America. We live in the twenty-first century, and we want to equip citizens of *this* time and place, as they seek to be servants in the kingdom of God.

I will list some highlights and principles of our application of the classical, Christian curriculum. This list is not exhaustive, but it should give the reader a glimpse into how we are endeavoring to take hold of the benefits offered by this way of education.

- We approach learning from parts-to-whole philosophy, laying a full foundation before attempting the scaffolding. Practically, we teach our students to read and spell using phonics as our spine. This principle is applied all the way through things like high school math. We build the foundation of number sense before expecting a student to apply that to advanced topics.
- We believe in the value of the ancient languages, and we train in Latin early and thoroughly. This study provides intellectual discipline, training in a child the ability to analyze language, an ability that will be applied in school and work for the rest of his or her life.
- We believe that truth, goodness, and beauty are the transcendentals by which all knowledge is measured, and so we point our students to them regularly. We seek truth by beginning with the Bible in all we do, memorizing it, studying it, and praying it back to God. We seek beauty through our aesthetics classes – art and music for all students through 6th grade, followed by intentional study of the arts in the older grades. We seek goodness by commending in our students virtue and evaluating their conduct, not just their academic successes.
- We employ the seven liberal arts – grammar, logic, rhetoric, geometry, music, arithmetic, and astronomy. Most of these are taught as individual subjects, but primarily we view all seven of them as tools for learning any subject matter.
- We read the great books – from Narnia to the Aeneid to The Adventures of Tom Sawyer - acknowledging that it requires the passage of some number of years to know whether a written work will stand the test of time. Of course, we enjoy what new authors are producing! If new authors quit writing, we will cease to add to the classics. But, those books that have been tested are where we spend the majority of our time.
- We seek to offer athletic opportunities that provide physical training, as well as artistic and cultural opportunities which allow our students to be affected not just intellectually, but through an embodied learning environment.
- We approach the study of history systematically, beginning at the beginning (which is a very good place to start) and continuing until now. This serves to place ourselves and our students in God's story of redemption.



This is not a complete list of ways in which we're applying the classical Christian curriculum to our specific context, but it is a start. We are continuing to learn. Very few of us, after all, are heirs of this approach. If we are doing anything well, it is because, as Newton said, we are standing on the shoulders of giants.⁷ Because we are acutely aware of this, we are constantly seeking guidance in the realm of classical education. We are neither inventors of what we're doing, nor are we uncritical receivers of someone else's plan. God didn't include an education manual as the sixty-seventh book of the Bible, and so we are compelled to utilize human reason, humility, and wisdom in developing and applying our curriculum.

Conclusion

At Saint Augustine School, we believe that the collaborative model of education and the classical, Christian curriculum are the best tools we have available to accomplish our specific mission within our specific context. We want to be ever reforming – examining our best practices and making sure they are still the wisest way to cultivate excellence, wisdom, and joy in our students, as we collaborate with parents in the task of passing on the teaching of the Lord to the next generation.

Collaborative education provides time for families to grow together, for parents to know and disciple their children, and for children to take ownership of their own educational journey. It also allows for the margin necessary for a fully engaged life that is still restful. The classical, Christian curriculum cultivates virtue and trains the whole child in ways that have been proven for centuries.

We look forward to discussing all of this with you and answering any questions you may have.

Soli Deo Gloria.

⁷ Newton, Isaac. "[Letter from Sir Isaac Newton to Robert Hooke](#)". *Historical Society of Pennsylvania*.

