

Why SLO Classical Academy High School?

part of our Parent Education Literature Series

by Troy Wathen, Ed.D.



With all the educational opportunities around us on the Central Coast and with the daunting question of, “where will my child go to college?” ahead of us as parents, I hope that some would be asking the question, “why should we consider SLO Classical Academy High School?” I believe the decisions about high school loom heavy upon the hearts of parents because most of us are ill-informed about the options ahead. I find that most parents really do want their children to flourish as human beings, but we are not sure where they will best learn the skills and acquire the dispositions that will carry them through their lives. The goal of this article is not to question the merit of other decisions regarding high school, but rather to focus on the distinctive qualities of a classical education and hopefully create a greater awareness of the educational landscape. In the spirit of intellectual honesty, however, it is helpful to have a counterexample to which we can compare the education at SLO Classical. We will call it *modern* education—a well-intended, but broken system. This is not to say that some students cannot thrive in the midst of a broken system. My claim is that for the goal of forming a young person who is prepared to flourish as a human being in a quickly changing world, a classical education is one of the best options.

I will grant from the beginning that modern education is better at offering sports, AP classes, and many extracurricular activities. Having been

the recipient of many of these offerings, I must acknowledge that they had a shaping influence on the person I am today. That being said, there were many costs associated with the modern education I received, which are even higher today. Former New York State teacher of the year, John Taylor Gatto, in his book *Dumbing us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Education*, claims that, “Schools are intended to produce, through the application of formulas, formulaic human beings whose behavior can be predicted and controlled.” This is a strong position that could easily be dismissed as an overstatement; however, my main argument hinges on the fact that modern education has a growing trend towards formulaic instruction that results in success on a test rather than success in life. Classically educated young people, on the other hand, are trained how to think, engage in dialogue, grapple with the big questions of life, and draw on personal and public resources to make wise decisions. The life ahead of our children is one of great uncertainty. Studies show that the

days of working for the same company or in the same occupation for one’s whole life are gone. Graduates are going to need to be resourceful, thoughtful, and possess the wisdom and poise to face changes. While success on educational entrance exams may result in acceptance into the best schools, it does not prepare one for a life that flourishes.

So what makes a classical high school education different than a typical modern education? The primary distinction comes down to the goals we have for education. While modern education’s goal is to have students learn the skills and knowledge that will be tested (on state standardized tests, AP exams, and college entrance exams), the goal of classical education is to teach students how to think and communicate effectively. I want to be careful to acknowledge that students learn when they are taught to a test. What is important to note, however, is that their knowledge and skills are limited proximately to that which will likely be found on those tests. Once the educators figure out what is going to be tested, because their

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performance is evaluated based on the test results, they adapt their teaching to accomplish high scores on the measurement instrument. Because classical educators have the goal of teaching students to think, research, and communicate what they are learning, the end result is not performance on a test but rather participation in the life of the mind—learning, contemplation, communication, creative expression (in many forms), and decision-making; all skills necessary in a changing world.

The big question then is, “how will they do on those VERY important tests???” My experience has proven *much better than the national average*. Most classical schools boast average SAT and ACT scores significantly higher than the national average and on par with many of the best schools in the nation. Statistics from one classical school association shows averages for classically trained students on the SAT math and verbal to be nearly 200 points higher than the national average. The school from which I came had seven graduating classes with even higher SAT and ACT scores.

If you have chosen SLO Classical Academy for your child’s education through middle school, I encourage you that sending them to a *modern* school is like getting them all dressed up in order to watch TV. You have invested in equip-

ping your child with excellent tools to think well. The icing on the cake of a classical education is when students are taught to take these thinking skills and apply them to some of the best

literature read over the centuries, consider the major writings of philosophers, and respond to these books and philosophies in this modern world. Students also learn math and science but with an emphasis on articulating the concepts learned from their own understanding rather than regurgitating what the teacher has taught. A classically educated high school student is

well-prepared for college in all areas of study, but particularly those areas in which college professors are heard bemoaning a lack of sufficiently trained students: coherently crafted writing. Classically educated students think and communicate with winsomeness and clarity. The skills taught at SLO Classical are skills useful in college, but more importantly, they are skills that enable our graduates to thrive in life as they make connections and communicate logically and with creative flair.

I know there was a day when it was questionable whether SLO Classical Academy’s high school would take root, but I want to encourage you to take a serious look at your options. We are in the early stages of the school, but we are growing and looking forward to adding to our offer-

ings in the coming year. Some of the excellent programs we anticipate are competitive teams, such as, athletics, mock trial, and speech and debate, more laboratory sciences, advanced mathematics, philosophy, and our already very strong offerings in history, literature, Latin, math and science. We have great confidence in our high school program and encourage you to add the finishing touch to the quality education you have started with your children.

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Troy Wathen is one of our newest additions to the SLO Classical Academy team. Troy comes to us after over ten years teaching in and leading a classical school community in Houston, Texas. He came to appreciate classical education when he noticed the desperate need to develop thinking young people who are ready to face an ever-changing world. Just as the Renaissance of the 15th to 17th century brought a rebirth of art, science, and literature, Troy is convinced that the modern return to the art of classical learning will inspire the next generation to make a significant difference in our world.

Troy is especially interested in the importance of moms and dads engaging with their children in the Great Conversation of big ideas. Students need to see that learning really is worthy of our life-long pursuit.

Troy’s two daughters, Faith-Marie (11) and Gracie (10), attend SLO Classical Academy’s Lower Middle School, and his wife, Summer homeschools and directs SLOCA’s Jr. Kindergarten. Troy holds a Masters in Educational Leadership from Azusa Pacific and a Doctorate in Education from Biola University.

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