

## Parents' Demand for Classical and Character Education and Why they Are Right to Want it

Remarks Delivered to the Arkansas Senate Education Committee, February 16, 2022]

Good afternoon, Senators. I am Professor Albert Cheng and I want to begin by expressing my gratitude for the opportunity to discuss the work of the Classical Education Research Lab in the Department of Education Reform. The Center exists to serve the public good of our state by conducting research about the effects of classical pedagogy, particularly on character formation. While most approaches to education primarily focus on filling the head with information, the classical approach is uniquely attentive to the *formation* of the whole child – head, heart, and hands; what they think, what they are drawn to, and what they do.

Classical education also draws upon diverse traditions and thought, stretching across millennia and different cultures throughout the world, to invite students to entertain questions of great import from different perspectives: (1) What is a life well lived? (2) Who is a just person? (3) What is a just city? (4) What is true, good, and beautiful? Wrestling with these questions is essential for character formation — all of which is necessary to address today's intractable challenges such as mending civic division, addressing today's mental and emotional health concerns, and better caring for our neighbors and communities.

Parents across the country and in Arkansas recognize the need for cultivating character. In 2015, a national poll conducted by *Education Next* at Harvard — a project with which I have past affiliation — found that although nearly one third of parents thought schools should emphasize character education “a lot”, less than 10 percent of parents reported that their schools were doing so. In 2021, parents responded to a related question: How much should schools focus on student academic performance versus student social and emotional wellbeing? The average parent said schools should split their time 50-50.

The hunger for character education is evinced by long wait lists and prolific enrollment growth in classical schools. Great Hearts Academies, a national classical public charter network, had over 13,000 students on their wait list in 2020. More locally, in Northwest Arkansas the demand for classical education has burgeoned too. Across the two campuses of Founders Classical Academy in Bentonville and Rogers, 337 new families of kindergarteners are applying for one of 140 available seats. Three classical schools have opened in the last four years. Ozark Catholic Academy opened first in Tontitown with about 20 ninth and tenth graders and now has quadrupled to over 80 students. All 12 sophomores in the inaugural year graduated and now attend college. Sager Classical Academy opened a year later in Siloam springs with 49 students in the kindergarten through sixth grades. It now plans enroll 140 students and open a high school next year. Anthem Classical Academy, where I am a governing board member, opened last fall with 24 kindergarten through fifth graders, and is poised to double enrollment next fall.

Parents are right to discern something good about these schools. A national study conducted by researchers at the University of Notre Dame compared adults who attended classical schools with adults who attended non-classical schools. Among other results, the authors found that individuals who attended classical schools:

- Reported feeling more prepared for college or job by their school
- Were more likely to earn a four-year degree
- Had the strongest sense of purpose, agency in dealing with life's problems, moral obligation to take actions against injustice – indeed, they were most likely to participate in voluntary community service

By studying the classical approach to education and providing professional resources to steward them, the Center for the Study of Classical Education aspires to improve educational opportunities for all students. Classical schools can benefit not only students who attend them, but also be a beacon, guiding all schools to refine their teaching and learning.

In closing, I will leave you with a passage from an article Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote for the Morehouse College newspaper: “The most dangerous criminal may be the man gifted with reason, but with no morals.... We must remember that intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education.”

Those words succinctly capture the practical aim that Center for the Study of Classical Education seeks to attain for all students in our state. Thank you for your time.