

AEI PROGRAM ON American Citizenship

POLICY BRIEF 16 • FEBRUARY 2014

Being Part of a People: Ridgeview Classical Schools and Civic Education

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This policy brief is the sixth in a series of in-depth case studies exploring how top-performing charter schools have incorporated civic learning in their school curriculum and school culture. For more information about AEI's Program on American Citizenship, visit www.citizenship-aei.org.

Early on a crisp Thursday morning at Colorado's Ridgeview Classical Schools, eighth-graders in Mr. Binder's American Literature class are presenting on Benjamin Franklin. The students have read the first and second parts of Franklin's *Autobiography*, and today they are speaking about Franklin's "table of virtues," the famous passage in which he selects 13 virtues he hopes to develop by tracking his progress, each day, in practicing them.

Each student explicates particular aspects of Franklin's text; all are expected to demonstrate mastery of the content. But the main emphasis of each presentation is what the students call their "virtue project." Each student has chosen three virtues: two from Franklin's list and one of his or her choosing. They have identified concrete actions that indicate whether they are succeeding or failing at pursuing their chosen virtues and have spent the past week tracking their actions. Each presentation describes the student's experience: students explain why they chose their virtues, how they understand them, and how their understanding differs from Franklin's. Then they report on their success or failure in pursuit of their virtues and answer questions from the class.

The virtue projects are not just a one-day exercise. For the rest of their eighth-grade year, they will track their progress in each virtue, turn in a weekly virtue chart, and periodically discuss their progress with their teacher and peers.

Mr. Binder's teaching of Franklin's work reveals two important characteristics of the Ridgeview approach. First, the school has built its curriculum, as much as

possible, around primary documents: in the course of studying the American Revolution that year, students will read not only Franklin but also the Stamp Act, *Common Sense*, the Olive Branch petition, the Declaration of Independence, and several other 18th-century documents. Second, education at Ridgeview is never simply education for knowledge; it is always education for character.

A Classical Education

Ridgeview Classical Schools is an integrated K–12 public charter school in Fort Collins, Colorado. The name is plural because it contains an elementary, middle, and high school, but all classes take place on one relatively small campus.

Founded in 2001, Ridgeview houses between 750 and 800 students on a two-building campus. The student body is largely middle-class, with 19 percent of students receiving free or reduced-price lunches last year; about 20 percent of students are racial minorities. Like all Colorado public charter schools, there are no admissions requirements, and students are admitted according to a lottery system. It has a strong academic reputation: *US News* ranks it second among public high schools in Colorado and 28th nationwide among charter schools.¹

The school adheres to a classical approach to education, utilizing a Socratic method of discussion-based classes and inspired by E. D. Hirsch's Core Knowledge sequence. Hirsch's study of the cognitive science behind

learning convinced him that language and reasoning skills are inseparable from content knowledge: to learn to read and reason well, students must master a great deal of the content.² But he went further: in *The Making of Americans*, he sought to resurrect elements of the 19th-century common school, which instructed students in the knowledge and values necessary to participate in a democracy. The Hirschian idea that Americans are defined by certain shared ideas and ideals, and that a school is the main vehicle for passing on those ideas, is central to Ridgeview’s understanding of civic education.

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The Hirsch Core Knowledge model helped to inspire Ridgeview’s approach, but its real heart is classical education. As a classical school, Ridgeview places a high value on a formal understanding of language and exegesis. Students study Latin from kindergarten through high school and learn a small amount of Greek as well; English classes teach the principles of grammar, and students learn to analyze and construct arguments. In humanities classes, students read classics and work on original texts. Literature classes teach major canonical works such as the *Iliad*, *Paradise Lost*, Shakespeare’s plays, and *Heart of Darkness*. In the Western Civilization sequence that covers ninth- and tenth-grade history, students read Plutarch, Thucydides, Plato, Augustine, Machiavelli, and other major writers. Eleventh grade is the “American year.” Students study Emerson, Melville, Hawthorne, and Twain in their literature classes, and they study American history primarily through reading original source documents from the founding through the 20th century. They also take a yearlong course in American Government that includes substantial readings from *The Federalist Papers* and Anti-Federalist writers.

The classical approach means that students spend their time interpreting texts and interrogating arguments and assumptions. In the early grades, the teacher must lead much more of the class, but even then, the

classroom is built around a text-based discussion between students and teacher.

One important element of the Ridgeview approach is the way in which texts and assignments are made to do double duty, so that assignments teach grammar and logic while introducing students to profound ideas and artistic beauty. T. O. Moore, the founder and first principal of Ridgeview, describes the way in which the school integrates skills and core knowledge:

A classical education requires more than functional literacy, however. It teaches students high standards of grammar, precision in word choice, and eloquence. Throughout his education, the student will be exposed to the highest examples of eloquence attained by the greatest writers in the language.

“. . . I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.”
 Shakespeare

“These are the times that try men’s souls.” Paine

These sentences are entirely grammatical. They could just as easily be used to teach grammar as “I come to help Jane, not to hurt her.” By preferring Shakespeare to an anonymous “See Jane” sentence we teach three things rather than one. We teach grammar. We teach cultural literacy. We also teach beauty. Our purpose is to introduce students to the masters of the language so they will begin to emulate them.³

Students at Ridgeview master a body of literary and philosophical texts, language skills, and mathematical and scientific knowledge. That knowledge begins in the lower grades with a curriculum based on Core Knowledge, then expands to include more advanced works in grades 9–12. Inspired by its classical forerunners, Ridgeview teaches that knowledge has value for its own sake. But knowledge is not enough. Ridgeview history teacher and former principal Florian Hild writes,

The trivium is one of the paradigms of classical education, but without a moral purpose it only aims at intelligence. While Core Knowledge without a civic purpose is still much better than anti-curriculum, anti-intellectual, anti-traditional education, it is like

a powerful engine without a steering wheel, a great athlete without a competition: It lacks a destination. Hirsch's *The Making of Americans* knows where it is taking Core Knowledge. Intelligence, gained by studying the Core Knowledge sequence, needs to be coupled with character, gained by learning what it means to be a good citizen.⁴

If you were to sum up the Ridgeview philosophy of education in one word, it would be “character.” In ways large and small, the school seeks to inculcate good character; Ridgeview teachers see teaching character as inseparably bound up with teaching their subjects. After all, a lazy student will not learn, an arrogant student will learn at most superficially, and a rude or cruel student will disrupt education for his peers. But Ridgeview’s understanding of “character” goes much deeper than simply having “good character” or being a “good person.” Character is built into the way that Ridgeview students read literature, the way they think about history, and the way that they approach building the distinctive school culture of which each one is a part.

Educating for Character

Ridgeview’s faculty have designed their curriculum as a coherent whole; ideas and approaches that are introduced when students are six or eight years old are developed, expanded, and drawn into increasing complexity as students turn 12, 14, or 18. One parent described this as a “cycling back process:” the curriculum introduces young children to a simple form of an idea, an intellectual method, or a story, and then brings it back recurrently in increasingly complex forms. A student might read a picture book of Greek myths in first grade, Edith Hamilton’s *Mythology* in sixth grade, and Euripides’s *Medea* in ninth.

Observing classrooms during a typical day, a visitor can see how this “cycling back” approach builds Ridgeview’s approach to character education. In a fourth-grade class, for instance, students read Washington Irving’s *Rip Van Winkle* (the original text). The teacher walks students through reading-comprehension questions, calling on them to read sentences and prompting them to explain what the text means. Near the end of the story, when Rip returns home and the narrator describes

his son, the teacher pauses to ask, “What kind of man is Rip’s son? What kind of character does he have?” Quickly the students point out that he’s lazy. He neglects his own business and loafs about at the tavern.

Teacher: “Where did he learn to be that way?”

Students: “From Rip.”

At a much higher level, high school students learn to read for character as well. In ninth-grade Western Civilization students read the *Iliad*; I sit in on a discussion of a passage from Book Nine. In the text the Achaeans are arguing over how to persuade Achilles to return to the war. The teacher guides them to look at the offers made by various Greek leaders and ask: what does each one indicate about the speaker’s opinion of Achilles?

Ridgeview teachers see teaching character as inseparably bound up with teaching their subjects.

Moore’s theory that a carefully designed curriculum can teach character, knowledge, and skills all at once shows up throughout the school. In sixth grade, for instance, students study mythology and handwriting and continue their study of character. A handwriting assignment in one sixth-grade class asks students to copy, in cursive, sentences about the personal character of Prometheus and the morals of the Centaurs. Later in that same class period, the teacher, Mr. Collins, introduces the topic for the students’ first paper for the year. Students must compare and contrast two myths: they must either pick two myths with the same theme but different plots or write about myths that share a plot but demonstrate different themes.

Mr. Collins asks for examples, and one student volunteers the stories of Hercules and Jason because, he explains, both of these stories are about things that should not have had to happen. With Mr. Collins’s prompting, students discuss how the stories treat fairness and unfairness.

Ridgeview’s emphasis on character—as a set of models and a mode of analysis—is built into its history classes, too. In one eighth-grade American History class, I observe students working through the text of the Olive Branch Petition, the 1775 petition passed by the Continental Congress as a last-ditch attempt to avoid war with England. The teacher, Mr. Smith, uses the petition as the centerpiece of a class on the reasons why Americans left the British Empire. He reviews the Townshend Acts, prompting students to explain what the acts did and asking them how the colonists responded. The discussion proceeds through the American boycotts and the nonimportation agreements that spread from Massachusetts to several other colonies. They reach the point at which the British taxes are repealed—except the tax on tea, which was retained to assert the Crown’s right to tax the colonies.

What happens next, Mr. Smith says, might be read as a reflection on human nature or on the American character. Guided by their teacher, students discuss why the colonists fought so hard against the East India Company’s importation of tea. It could not have been the tax itself, which was too low to cause hardship. Was it the principle of “no taxation without representation?” Was it the economic interests of American importers (and smugglers), who stood to lose their businesses as the East India Company sold directly to American consumers? Or were the Americans, as one student said, just “acting like teenagers,” wanting to have everything their way?

Students will need to decide, Mr. Smith says, because their next paper is on the motivations of the colonists during the revolution. Students may take whatever position they want—that the revolution was a principled stand against unjust government or that it was nothing but juvenile self-righteousness—but they will need to grapple with the motivations of real human beings by working directly with the words that those people wrote.

Virtue and Contemplation

The word “character” can refer to someone’s personality, or it can refer to someone’s moral habits or virtues. You ask about the first by asking, “What is his character?” and the second by asking, “Does he have character?” But the two are interrelated: a person who has character is a certain kind of character, and there are many ways to

have character. Both kinds of character are essential to Ridgeview’s style of education.

Ridgeview teaches character in the second sense—having good character—both explicitly and implicitly. On the walls of every classroom from kindergarten through sixth grade hang posters of Ridgeview’s “character pillars”: each pillar is a particular virtue that the school seeks to instill, such as respect, responsibility, or citizenship. Teachers have some flexibility in presenting the virtues: in one classroom, a quote accompanies each pillar; in another, we find the pictures of people who embodied those virtues: Eleanor Roosevelt, Robert E. Lee, and so on. But the same eight pillars hang on the wall in each classroom.

The youngest students learn character very directly; in kindergarten there is often a “character pillar of the week.” But even there, students learn to draw lessons of character from the texts the teacher reads to them.

Ridgeview expects students to embody its character pillars, and that has given it a reputation for enforcing discipline: indeed, some parents send their children because of that reputation. But “strict discipline” is a somewhat misleading account of the school’s approach. “People think we have a lot of rules,” says Peggy Schunk, the school’s human resources and enrollment coordinator. “But it’s not that we have a lot of rules, it’s that we enforce the rules that we do have. Students are expected to be polite, respectful, attentive, and prepared. And if they do those things, they can get up and get a drink of water, they can have some freedom to eat a snack if they want to—as long as they are being polite, respectful, attentive, and prepared. We treat them like adults.”⁵

Derek Anderson, Ridgeview’s principal and American government teacher, has broad responsibility for ensuring effective education, including character education. I ask him how he measures success in teaching character, and he tells me what he told students at the opening assembly of the academic year: “Based upon the way that you present yourself, the way that you articulate what you want to say, the way that you demonstrate respect for others and yourself, people should know within five minutes of talking to you that you are a Ridgeview Classical student.”

One way the school teaches the importance of character is to treat Ridgeview students as *Ridgeview students*, not just as students who happen currently to be on the

Ridgeview campus—that is, they expect the same standard of behavior when students are off campus as when they are in class. Athletics is a prime example: Ridgeview is unable to offer athletics on campus, but many students play on teams at other public schools. Anderson explains, “Whether they’re playing a sport out on a field or in class . . . we expect students to behave with good sportsmanship and the same character that we’d expect in the classroom.” If one of them breaks the rules or acts disrespectfully, he says, “It doesn’t matter where it happens; if we hear about it, their conversation with us is going to be the same as if it had happened in the school.”

A culture of respect enforced by peers can exist only if the students themselves buy into it, and by and large they do.

Ridgeview’s ethos is often enforced by peers, not by teachers. Several staff members recall an incident that encapsulates Ridgeview’s “peer discipline.” Every spring, high school students put on a musical; this year’s was *The Sound of Music*. During the last performance, several student actors sat backstage, planning a prank that would have disrupted the performance. A student actress overheard their conversation and called them out, urging them to respect their peers and the audience; the students sheepishly agreed.

What the actress did not know was that she had left her mic “hot,” so the entire theater heard her say, “Guys, that is so disrespectful!” The student may have been mortified when she found out, but her teachers were proud: she had learned to value the time and attention of the audience and her peers and to stand up for what was right even when she thought no adults could hear.

A culture of respect enforced by peers can exist only if the students themselves buy into it, and by and large they do. All of the parents and teachers I met spoke very highly of the school’s culture; faculty could only think of a handful of serious disciplinary incidents in the school’s history. Their success is due not just to willpower and consistency; Anderson attributes a large part of it to their Socratic approach to education.

He tells a story of one teacher turning a disciplinary infraction into a learning experience. In one history class, a group of students had decided to perform mock “civil disobedience”: when the teacher walked in, the students put their heads down on their desks and refused to respond to the teacher. Quickly, the teacher set aside the day’s lesson on the Cold War and instead talked about the way the students were behaving—and what that behavior meant. Once he has regained control of the class, the teacher began a conversation with the students about the virtues and practices necessary for education; they went on to talk about the value of education—to the students, and to the community and country that are educating them.

Students emerged chastened. But they also emerged with a deeper understanding of the reasons for the school’s behavioral standards. Reason and virtue are not identical, and students’ understanding does not guarantee that they will behave in the future—but it surely helps.

“Being Part of a People”

The climax of the Ridgeview experience comes when students write their senior theses. The thesis is a 25–32 page research paper that asks students to sum up and reflect on their education. Students often describe the paper’s question as “What is the meaning of life?” or “What is the good life?” Students draw on texts that they have read throughout their schooling, especially the landmarks of their 11th- and 12th-grade literature classes: *The Scarlet Letter*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Moby Dick*, *The Apology of Socrates*, Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *Heart of Darkness*. At the end of the year, each senior delivers the paper to an audience made up of his teachers, his fellow students, and their parents. After delivering his or her paper, students devote 15 minutes to answering questions from the teachers who oversee the thesis project.

Because the thesis is the climax of students’ work, students begin thinking about it early in high school. Whether or not they talk about it explicitly, they know that the questions they ask about the nature of honor in the *Iliad*, the law of consciousness in Emerson’s *Self-Reliance*, or the nature of the American political community in Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address will return in their

final papers and that they will have to draw from those texts a theory of the good life that they can defend before their parents and peers.

So when I interview a group of Ridgeview high school students, I ask them, “What is the good life, anyway?” The first student to answer, a senior, begins by talking about duties:

Part of the good life—and I think that this is something that Ridgeview helps teach us—is that you have responsibilities, you have duties, and you do them. One of the most important parts of being a good citizen, of being a good man, is always knowing what you must do. And . . . you have to go about and do it morally: you have to go about and do it in the right way. There’s a difference between the student who says, “OK, I have to do these problems,” and looks at the answers in the back of the book, and the student who says, “OK, I have to do these problems,” works through them, figures them out, does it the right way, and then goes and looks to the back of the book to say, “Did I get this right? Is there anything more I can learn here? What do I need to do differently if I got it wrong?”

So there’s a sense of doing your duty, of doing it morally, and of reflecting on what you have done and always trying to improve on it.

A ninth-grader supplements this idea with a characteristically Ridgeview answer: “When you have an ability to help someone, you should, and you should try to have that ability if you don’t have it. . . . A lot of the good life is helping your fellow mankind, guiding them, teaching them, and being part of a people.”

What does she mean by ‘being part of a people?’ The student turns to the *Iliad*, which she is reading in her literature class:

Hector has a duty to his wife and to his children, to his city, to his army, to his brother Paris. Of course he thinks what Paris is doing is wrong, but he’s not going to throw a spear at him because Paris is his brother. So he has a duty to a lot of things. And Achilles doesn’t know his family, he doesn’t have a duty—he only has a voluntary duty to his friend Patroclus. If you have duties like Hector does, you’re

a better person, you’re happier: because Hector, he has someone he can rely on in ways. But when Achilles is upset he has his lyre and Patroclus, and when Patroclus is dead he’s alone.

This young woman has not read Aristotle, but she is expressing the Aristotelian idea that human goods are always found in a community. The good life necessarily involves us in particular relationships within our community and obliges us to perform certain duties. We are always already enmeshed in those duties because, in our community and our country, we have already been helped by others. And those duties might require us to stretch beyond our current powers: as she says, if we do not have the ability to help another person, we should try to acquire that ability.

These students are able to articulate the relationship between goodness and a “people”—Aristotle would say a *polis*—for two reasons. First, of course, they are very bright. But second, Ridgeview calls attention to the things that are required of each student, parent, and teacher if the school is to flourish as a community. It leads students to reflect on their studies to realize how much their education depends on others: on their teachers, their parents, the taxpayers who support them, and also on each student’s efforts to help and encourage his or her classmates. The students know that each one of them relies heavily on others. It is not surprising, then, that several years ago, when the students voted on a school mascot, they chose the hoplite, a Greek soldier who fought in a tight phalanx and depended on his comrades for protection.

But the senior thesis, the final product of a self-conscious community of inquiry, might be the most individual thing that any student does. John Herndon, a high school history teacher who frequently advises thesis writers, urges students to address the question by asking, “Given everything I’ve seen in my education up until this point, what can I actually put stock in?” Students reading the thesis have read Augustine and Plato but also Nietzsche and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Necessarily they must pick and choose, rejecting some texts (at least partly), while making others their own. And they must do it in full view: Herndon says that, standing in front of their peers and fielding questions from their teachers, “They can’t hide anymore.”

As a result, students have a unique freedom to interrogate their own lives and experiences. Herndon speaks of a particularly memorable thesis. The student had come to Ridgeview at the start of his sophomore year and taken to classical education immediately. Although he had never studied Latin or the exegetical method, nor worked with original historical documents, he mastered everything he was assigned and graduated as one of the top two students in his year.

Ridgeview places, at once, emphasis on the community of learning and on individual thought.

But he presented a senior thesis that rejected classical education as a means of understanding a good life. Biblical faith, he said, is where one finds a good and meaningful life. Some of the faculty were initially distressed by the student’s dismissal of classical education, but ultimately, Herndon says, they were “very proud . . . because he had the strength to stand up and say, ‘This is what I believe.’”

For Ridgeview, independence of mind depends on the community, and the community relies on independent minds. That is why Ridgeview places, at once, emphasis on the community of learning and on individual thought. And independence of mind is closely allied to Ridgeview’s understanding of its civic mission.

Good character is essential to good citizenship anywhere. But given the nature of the American polity, Anderson explains, a thoughtful, historically informed, and self-aware citizenry is particularly important. Asked what he would tell a student about the kind of citizen Ridgeview wants her to be, he says:

Rather than a hyper-explicit idea that “this is what a good American is,” what we want you to be is a contemplative American who is cognizant of your history, cognizant of your inheritances, values them, and has an appreciation for a sort of American exceptionalism in the best possible sense. You are an inheritor of a country which is founded on an idea. It’s not founded on blood laws or a happenstance of

geography or a common language. The only thing that holds America together as a people is a set of ideas. And you really need to think about those ideas deeply in order to be a good American.

A Community of Learning

The first students I met at Ridgeview were not even enrolled.

I had arrived at 7:30 a.m., just after parents had dropped off their children. Middle and high school classes, which start at 7:30, were already in session; the elementary school begins at 7:45, so young children were lining up outside their classrooms.

But this class, meeting around a long table in the school auditorium, was made up of parents. About a dozen had stayed after dropping off their children to spend 45 minutes discussing John Jacob Ellis’s book *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* with Florian Hild, a history teacher and former principal of the school. Some participants were stay-at-home parents; others would head off from school to the office.

The discussion group is a small part of Ridgeview’s schoolwide effort to generate a conversation about the Founding Fathers. The school chooses one to focus on each year: this year it was Jefferson. As part of students’ summer reading, Ridgeview assigns an age-appropriate biography of the year’s founder; this year, students in grades 9–12 read *American Sphinx* and younger students read easier biographies of Jefferson. Teachers read the biography that they will teach plus a more scholarly biography.

The Thursday morning parents’ meeting serves a practical purpose—helping parents answer their children’s questions as they read their biographies. But it is also intended as a free-standing discussion group that brings parents into the intellectual conversation of the school.

Today’s passage covers Jefferson’s temporary “retirement” to Monticello in the 1790s, but several participants discuss Jefferson’s presidency as well. One parent mentions Jefferson’s conciliatory inaugural address, which sought to heal the wounds of a bruising election season; several consider what Jefferson would be like as a contemporary candidate, and they spend a substantial time on the Sally Hemings affair.

Hild points out that Jefferson’s presidency is a paradox, and the parents spend much of their time discussing that paradox. Most readers know Jefferson’s famous claim that “the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.” Jefferson idolized yeoman farmers and was deeply skeptical of centralized power. He was the man who called for a revolution every 20 years, yet he was inaugurated 20 years after General Cornwallis’s surrender at Yorktown.

The paradox, then, is that he did not govern like a revolutionary. He did not fire Federalist appointees or shut down government agencies. As parents puzzled over Jefferson’s unexpected conservatism, one mother offered an answer that was classic Ridgeview: Jefferson might have used the rhetoric of a radical, but he was not the sort of person who would seek to overturn the constitutional system. He had the temperament of a gradualist.

The parents’ book club—which will continue throughout the year and cover Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, *Crime and Punishment*, and several more books—is an important part of Ridgeview’s attempt to build a community of learning. Like any school, Ridgeview works to involve its parents through field trips, music groups, and student organizations. But Ridgeview also seeks to involve them in the intellectual work of the school.

Nearly every week during the academic year, Ridgeview hosts what it calls a “colloquium.” These informal, after-school assemblies meet in the auditorium; each consists of a volunteer giving a talk on a (preannounced) topic in which he or she has some expertise. Usually the speakers are Ridgeview teachers speaking on their own academic interests. Recent colloquia have covered topics including the Anti-Federalists, the civil rights movement’s connection to the Declaration of Independence, *Paradise Lost*, and the music of Bach.

Colloquia are optional for most students, although occasionally a teacher will require his students to attend one that is relevant to his or her class. But parents, too, are invited to attend, and many do when their schedules permit. What’s more, parents and students will occasionally give colloquia themselves. The colloquium series offers additional enrichment for the entire Ridgeview community—parents, students, and teachers—and strengthens their bonds as a community of learners.

Recruiting Teacher-Students

In a sense, every academic community must be re-created each year as seniors graduate and new students of all grades enter knowing nothing about the Ridgeview culture. The burden of maintaining that culture rests on the faculty, and the administration at Ridgeview places a great emphasis on recruiting teachers. Everyone I spoke with about recruitment—including Principal Anderson, teachers, and the president of the board of directors (who is also a Ridgeview parent)—said that the recruitment process is particularly extensive, demanding, and important.

Ridgeview frequently searches for candidates through advertisements on classics or classical-education websites or through liberal arts colleges and graduate programs. They are generally looking for three things. First, candidates need broad alignment with the school’s mission and values. As Anderson puts it, “Do you understand why we believe classical education is important, and are the same things that are important to us important to you?” To figure this out, they ask big questions to see how candidates respond; a candidate might be asked, for instance, “Is beauty in the eye of the beholder?”

The second question: is the candidate a master of his or her discipline? Interviewers begin to answer this question through ordinary measures, like coursework, GPA, and letters of recommendation. But none of those measures is enough: the potential teacher must also be able to “have a real conversation” about her subject.

Kari Halseide, who has taught American Literature at Ridgeview for eight years, remembers the first time she had that “real conversation” about her subject. She was fresh out of graduate school and had applied to teaching jobs all over the country. She had never heard of Ridgeview, but she applied and was offered a telephone interview with Moore, who was the principal at the time.

She was nervous going into the interview, and a friend reassured her that a school principal was unlikely to “ask you anything hard about literature.” She was wrong—Moore’s first question to Halseide was, “If you were teaching *Moby Dick*, what are some of the main themes you would want the students to understand, and what ultimately would you want them to get out of the book?”

After a teacher has demonstrated that she cares about classical education and knows her subject, Anderson tries to answer his third big question: can she communicate

her subject knowledge to students? She does not need to be a practiced teacher—but does she have the germ of what will become teaching talent?

Ridgeview’s main mechanism for answering that question is the “mock teach.” In the summer, the school invites candidates to visit. They ask student volunteers of the appropriate grade to come to campus for a 45-minute “class” led by the teaching candidate. The principal and other observers sit in the class to watch. The hiring faculty will rely on their observations to evaluate the candidate, but they also ask the students to volunteer their perspectives. Older students, in particular, are familiar with the Socratic method as Ridgeview practices it and can compare a teaching candidate with their current teachers.

Once a hiring decision is made, training begins. Every teacher, novice or veteran, attends full-time teacher training for three weeks in August, before school starts. That training handles practical matters—how to understand your health insurance, how to deal with a recalcitrant student—but it also initiates teachers into the discussion-based, text-centered, and Socratic approach that Ridgeview uses in the classroom. All teachers read the books that their students will read; they also read a more advanced, complex biography of the founder that has been chosen for the year. (In 2013, teachers read Michael Knox Beran’s *Jefferson’s Demons*.) They also read works on teaching: this year’s texts included Gilbert Highet’s *The Art of Teaching* and Jacques Barzun’s essay “Trim the College?—A Utopia!” They then discuss those writings in the exegetical, discussion-based method that they are expected to use in their classrooms.

Teacher training at Ridgeview continues throughout the year, especially for first-year teachers. But like so many things at Ridgeview, “teacher training” includes but is not limited to direct classroom effectiveness. Ridgeview sees its faculty not simply as a group of individual teachers, but as a community of learners whose intellectual work will inspire students with models for their own intellectual struggle and striving. As such, the school works hard to sustain an intellectual culture among its faculty.

My first day at Ridgeview started with parents; it ended with the weekly faculty reading discussion group, a series that is open to all Ridgeview teachers and mandatory for teachers in their first year. Each week teachers

read classic or 20th-century essays and discuss them with their peers under the loose guidance of some of the school’s veteran teachers. The texts either relate directly to education or shine some indirect light on the teachers’ work; common choices include Jefferson’s “Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge,” Michael Oakeshott’s “Learning and Teaching,” John Dewey’s “My Pedagogic Creed,” and selections from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Today, history teacher Herndon is leading a discussion on a selection from Stanford economist Thomas Sowell’s book *Intellectuals and Society*. For Sowell, intellectuals are those whose final products are ideas. Unlike, say, engineers or surgeons, whose work is intellectually demanding but whose product is not an idea, an intellectual is defined by producing intellectual content. He argues that intellectuals are useful but also dangerous; they tend to undervalue the tacit knowledge built into ordinary practice and overvalue their own abstract knowledge. Their knowledge also lacks an easy “reality test”: you can tell whether a businessman’s ideas are right by looking at his accounts, but it is hard to tell whether a political theorist’s ideas are right.

Talk quickly turns to the Founding Fathers, political theorists who put their ideas to the test. One teacher wonders whether they were intellectuals; another mentions historian Gordon Wood’s thesis that the founders created a system to make their own repetition unlikely. The founders, he says, had power that no one else under the constitutional order would ever have.

Then they turn to considering their own role as shapers of ideas. Teachers work in ideas: without a direct reality test, how are they to know that they are doing it right?

One teacher points to the difference between teaching and indoctrination. If the Ridgeview system resists indoctrination, it is because the Socratic method puts even cherished ideas to the test. I saw this in classes throughout the school: teachers want students to value the founders’ ideas, but they believe the best way to do that is to put those ideas in question. They say not, “Here is Paine’s *Common Sense*—we expect you to believe it,” but “Here is Paine’s *Common Sense*—we expect you to understand it and master it. We believe the ideas in it are valuable, but we want you to interrogate them, not just swallow them. Truth, after all, will stand up to questioning.”

The Future of Classical Education

It is hard work to run a school along classical lines. It makes demands on students' intellects and on their characters, and those demands are inextricable: you cannot build the kind of intellectual community that Ridgeview strives to be without training students in good character and citizenship, nor can you train their characters without developing their minds. Anderson also notes that the current culture intensifies the challenge:

Teaching character, citizenship, and civics is a challenge primarily because our society is so ambiguous about whether it genuinely values any of these things. Character, for instance, is difficult to teach in a meaningful way because of the inroads a profound moral relativism has made. What does it mean to do the right thing? What is the right thing? If there is no common moral center, what can we really make of a character education? What is it that we hold in common that we can appeal to? Don't steal, don't lie, don't cheat. All very good perhaps, but why?

Without an appeal to something transcendent, these are difficult questions to answer. Similar questions are asked about citizenship. Over the years some parents, teachers, and students have asked, "Do we spend too much time on the founders, on the Constitution, on America?" After all, don't we value diversity and multiculturalism? Isn't this all just indoctrination? Chauvinism—national or moral?

Those are hard questions. When moral relativists argue that character education is just indoctrination, or when multiculturalists argue that emphasizing the common American past deemphasizes minority claims, their arguments have some force. At Ridgeview, they do not accept those arguments, but they do not reject them out of hand either. They try to answer their doubters.

Anderson first points to Hirsch's Core Knowledge curriculum, which "insists we must have at least rudimentary cultural knowledge in common." Hirsch's argument is at once aspirational and pragmatic. In *The Making of Americans*, he expresses his admiration for the work that American public schools have done to pass on democratic values by teaching citizenship and a common body of knowledge. In addition, his research found that

reading comprehension depends heavily on subject-matter knowledge. It is hard, perhaps impossible, to separate "reading skills" from content—and critical-thinking and reasoning skills depend heavily on reading. Paradoxically, then, even a school that wishes to teach only skills must nevertheless teach a core body of foundational knowledge. And if the school wishes its graduates to communicate with the rest of the world, that core knowledge must be similar to what is taught in other schools. A modicum of civic education, then, is necessary not only for citizenship, but also for education.

Ridgeview's second answer is to appeal to American history—and to take their stand. In Anderson's words, Ridgeview "boldly declar[es] that as Americans we draw inspiration from three primary sources: the ancients (which we teach extensively in a classical school), Christianity, and the Enlightenment." Historically speaking, it is indisputable that these three sources established the American way of living and governing. Ridgeview claims quite explicitly that the American tradition is good and that students who attend will be expected to master it. This ensures that parents know what they are getting into. And then, as Anderson says, they "let the chips fall where they may."

But a third answer to relativist critics is built into the Socratic approach that Ridgeview takes to character and civic education. The school does not merely say, "Out there people are relativists, but in here we won't be." It also says, "Some very smart people whom we read, such as Nietzsche, argue against what we believe. Let's interrogate their ideas. At the same time let's interrogate our own ideas, using the best possible thinkers to represent both." In class after class, the school makes interrogation—Socrates called it dialectic—one of its highest values. Teachers expect students to demonstrate good character and citizenship—and to think hard about why good character and citizenship are important.

This kind of education has the power to form a graduate who is especially well equipped to fulfill the duties of citizenship because his commitment to America is reflective, clear-sighted, and mature. As Anderson noted, "The only thing that holds America together is a set of ideas." For America to work, our high school graduates need to understand those ideas and to be the kind of people who will adhere to them.

That is why two things I saw in Mr. Binder's

eighth-grade class, taken together, are so important. Every week this year, Mr. Binder's students will imitate Benjamin Franklin's project of moral improvement. They will practice temperance, sincerity, industry, and justice, and they will learn from Franklin's efforts to do the same.

One eighth-grade student exemplified the way that they are studying Franklin: respectfully but critically, with their eyes open. This student had given her presentation and was taking questions about her virtue project; one of her classmates asked whether she thought Franklin was right to pursue 13 virtues, or whether he should, like them, have started with three.

"Franklin was right to pursue 13 virtues," she said, "because he had a lot of faults to work on."

About the Author

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Notes

1. "Ridgeview Classical Schools," *US News and World Report*, www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/colorado/districts/poudre-school-district-r-1/ridgeview-classical-schools-4146.

2. E. D. Hirsch, *The Making of Americans: Democracy and Our Schools*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 12–15.

3. T. O. Moore, "What Is Classical Education?," Ridgeview Classical Schools, www.ridgeviewclassical.com/index.php?c=33.

4. Florian Hild, "What Is Core Knowledge?," Ridgeview Classical Schools, www.ridgeviewclassical.com/index.php?c=34.

5. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes from Ridgeview staff, students, and parents are taken from author interviews conducted in October 2013.

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