



## Augustine Classical Academy Provides Alternative to Contemporary Education Model

by Daniel Schechtman

Saratoga TODAY

MECHANICVILLE - Ask the students at Augustine Classical Academy in Mechanicville what their favorite regular lesson of the day is, said Headmaster Matthew Hopkins, and the response you're likely to hear from the class is "bull riding." No, these students aren't gearing up for the rodeo - instead, they're learning how to wrestle with ideas and concepts, forming consistent and logical arguments based on a model of learning favored long before the contemporary model of education was introduced into western civilization.

"Bull riding is a rhetorical exercise where we throw out some random statements to the kids," said Hopkins. Once the student is asked to take a stance based on the statement or question, "the kid is on the bull," said Hopkins. "As soon as he's done talking and he's made some statement about it, his classmates are going to start trying to knock him off [the bull]. They're going to start hitting him with questions trying to get him to be inconsistent. His job is to stay on the bull as long as he can and remain consistent. Either he times out because he's clever at it, or they catch him when he says something that contradicts himself."

At Augustine Classical Academy, no one is trying to reinvent the wheel. Instead, the school favors a model of education - the classical model, which reverts back to a form of education favored for 1,800 years, one largely popular prior to the reformations of John Dewey (considered the father of contemporary education).

"The thing that is really different [at Augustine Classical Academy] is our approach to the learner," said Hopkins. "We are very committed to the notion of the trivium, which is a classical understanding that students develop through three distinct cognitive phases: grammar, dialectic and rhetoric."

The first phase, grammar, is introduced to students in what is typically considered their elementary years. Here, students are taught the absolute fundamentals, focusing on knowledge, content, data and ultimately literacy.

"Children at a younger age have a tremendous capacity to absorb data. Walk up to a 6-year-old boy and ask him how many dinosaur names he knows and he'll start and he won't

stop for a long time. Our thinking is this isn't just true for dinosaurs and language, it's true everywhere."

The idea, explained Hopkins, is to give young students the basic tools and facts needed to simply communicate, and to teach these concepts to them at a period when their minds are best equipped to absorb the data. Once the basics have been established, the students are then equipped to move along to the dialectic phase.

"Dialectic literally means a conversation between two sides. A wrestling of ideas," said Hopkins. "And in middle school, that's where that starts to happen. The students start to ask, why, why, why?"

In the dialectic phase, students begin formal logic classes (something most students will never encounter, even at the collegiate level), playing out different ideas to their conclusions and discovering the consequences of these ideas.

"They take the ideas, boil them down and do the math on every one of the arguments," explained Hopkins.

Finally, the students are introduced to the rhetoric phase, where students build upon the first two phases and begin to express themselves, to synthesize their own ideas.

"The beginning is essentially literacy, the second emphasis is understanding, and the final emphasis is on expression, synthesis and creation," said Hopkins.

It's a system of learning which Augustine Classical Academy extends out through every subject matter and course they teach, attempting to develop a growing mind based on a model that Hopkins believes, "teaches to the grain of the student, and not against it."

Augustine Classical Academy is a Christian academy, although there is no single denomination or dogmatic association. In some ways, identifying themselves as a Christian academy is a response to the contemporary education model which claims neutrality - something Hopkins believes simply doesn't exist.

"We want to be intellectually honest," said Hopkins, "to identify our own worldview." In essence, the school lets its students know the filter through which the information is reaching them, allowing them to decide for themselves how to interpret the data once armed with this understanding.

"We're not looking for dogmatic or

doctrinal consistency. We just want to raise up a bunch of kids who know how to think, can articulate what they think and are okay with not agreeing with everybody all the time."

Along with courses such as math, science, literature and biblical studies, Augustine Classical Academy also puts a strong emphasis on the arts.

"That includes drama, studio art, instrumental instruction and choir. Everybody does all of those things during school hours - none of those are options," said Hopkins. "We're absolutely convinced in their value, and we love the culture it creates in the school. And," he added, "a little bit of Shakespeare in life is great."

The Augustine Classical Academy is not certified by the Board of Regents - students will not receive a Regents diploma from the school - but Hopkins indicates that in this era, colleges are becoming less and less concerned about such technicalities.

"All the feedback we're getting from the few seniors that will graduate this spring (and feedback from other schools) is that it's really immaterial," said Hopkins. Colleges are recognizing the diplomas for what they are worth, and students are finding their way in to top-ranked schools without a certified Regents Diploma.

To learn more about the school, please visit their website at [www.augustineca.org](http://www.augustineca.org), or call (518) 541-2089 to schedule a visit.



photos by Robert Ewell Photography

Students at Augustine Classical Academy begin their educational development with grammar. This first cognitive phase is later followed by the dialectic and the rhetorical phases.

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Saturday

DECEMBER 3

FAMILY DAY

*"Breakfast with Santa"* (reservations required)  
Seatings: 8:00, 9:30 & 11:00 a.m.

*"Sundaes with Santa"* (reservations required)  
Seating: 12:30 p.m.

*"Santa's Workshop"*  
8:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.  
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\$5 Seniors  
\$3 Children over 10  
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Reduced Admissions \$3 Adults

Friday

DECEMBER 2

2:00 p.m. - 6:00 p.m.

Saturday

DECEMBER 3

11:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m.

"Breakfast with Santa"  
"Sundaes with Santa"  
"Santa's Workshop"

(see times and details to the left)

Sunday

DECEMBER 4

11:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.

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