

What about High School?

“Youth are heated by Nature as drunken men by wine.” -Aristotle

“I would that there were no age between ten and twenty three... for there is nothing in between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancientry, stealing fighting.”

-Shakespeare (The Winter’s Tale; Act III)

Is the value of classical Christian education as compelling for a high school student as it is for a kindergartener? What happens when your cute classically-educated kindergartener has turned into a gangling 8th grader itching to be at a larger school where they can be on a more competitive soccer team, play in a more prestigious school orchestra, and take AP German?

The definition of value is costs versus benefits. And suddenly, in high school, some new costs appear on the horizon when choosing (or staying at) a classical Christian school. A smaller school means a smaller selection of friends, and fewer specialized courses, and less competitive teams.

But do these new costs outweigh the benefits of classical Christian school in the high school years? Is your 9th grader formed as an individual to the extent that issues such as being surrounded by an antagonistic worldview are no longer a problem? The answer from brain science is a resounding “no.”

1. Brain Formation in Adolescence

Abigail Baird, a researcher at Vassar College and part of the Dana Alliance for Brain Initiatives says that “We’re finally getting our adult minds around the fact that adolescence is a time when everything explodes, physically and neurally. We see that explosive growth and the gawkiness on the outside—kids shooting up with long, clumsy arms and legs. But there’s that same gawkiness in the brain, too. Everything is changing and it’s changing really, really fast.”¹

“The fact that so much is changing and growing in the teenage brain is actually really optimistic,” says Baird. “Because, if everything is up in the air, undecided, and still developing, imagine all the good we could do if we understood exactly how and why. We’d have this great opportunity to jump in and straighten things out where needed.”²

But imagine instead of jumping in and straightening things out where needed... the people surrounding your teen are jumping in and directing them in other directions?

Teens are beginning to develop advanced reasoning capabilities, to understand ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions, analyze complex issues, initiating a unique period of opportunity—and vulnerability. Middle teen years (14-18) are when teens begin to solidify their own moral code and how they interact with the world. “Adolescence has qualities that make it developmentally distinct from childhood. As a result of these distinct qualities, moral

¹ Sukel, Kayt. Vulnerabilities and Opportunities: New Insights into the Adolescent Brain. Dana Alliance for Brain Initiatives. March 8, 2012.

² Sukel, Kayt. Vulnerabilities and Opportunities: New Insights into the Adolescent Brain. Dana Alliance for Brain Initiatives. March 8, 2012.

character can be transformed between childhood and adulthood... In other words, by understanding and eventually controlling the influences acting on the adolescent, adult moral character development can be set on the correct path.”³

2. What Does the Data Say?

Earlier in this series (part 4), we discussed data from the Cardus Education Survey of nearly 2,500 US high school graduates between ages 23 and 49 who identified as Christian, measuring more than 40 aspects of civic, spiritual, and academic life. The report attempted to isolate the effect of the school type on these factors (controlling for family influence, socio economics, etc.). The report found the following *based on high school attendance* - not based on a legacy effect of earlier Christian schooling.

The report found private Protestant high school graduates:⁴

- Gave more to their churches and other religious groups.
- Volunteered more in their churches.
- Believed more in moral absolutes, and the infallibility and authority of the Bible.
- Believed more that premarital sex and divorce are wrong.
- Felt their school better prepared them for a vibrant and religious spiritual life.
- Are more thankful for what they have in life.
- Had greater direction in their life.
- Divorced less.
- On every measure of traditional religious beliefs, Protestant Christian school graduates show significantly more adherence to the church teachings than their peers.

The conclusion of the Cardus report is that private Protestant Christian schools played a “vital role in the long-term faith of their students.”⁵

3. Classical Christian vs. Traditional Christian High School

³ Hart, Daniel and Carlo, Gustavo. Moral Development in Adolescence. University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Faculty Publications, Department of Psychology. September 2005. Pg 224.

⁴ Pennings, Ray and Wiens, Kathryn. Cardus Education Survey: Phase I Report (2011). Aug. 16, 2011.

⁵ Pennings, Ray and Wiens, Kathryn. Cardus Education Survey: Phase I Report (2011). Aug. 16, 2011.

Perhaps the issue for your family is not classical Christian versus public school, but classical Christian versus traditional Christian high school. Is the educational quality at a classical Christian high school worth the smaller size and fewer academic options? The answer in most cases is yes - because a classical education is more rigorous.

As mentioned earlier (part 5 of this series), traditional Christian schools are not known for their educational quality. The class of 2015 for the Association of Classical Christian Schools (the governing body for classical Christian schools in the US) outperformed other religious schools by 191 points on the SAT, and all independent schools by 138 points.⁶ (For reference, 191 points is the difference between the average SAT score at the University of Virginia and Christopher Newport University.⁷)

Perhaps you are wondering whether students have received enough of a classical foundation by eighth grade to last a lifetime? By eighth grade, a student will have completed the grammar and logic phases of classical Christian school. They will have the building blocks of knowledge and language, and will be able to reason logically. But it is only in high school—the rhetoric stage—that everything comes together.

Cognitively speaking, this stage is where abstract thought reaches its zenith. In this stage, the unknown can be explored because the known is understood; the hypothetical can be introduced and grasped with the mind. The mental jump can be made from the natural to the spiritual, from the practical to the theoretical. Self-expression finally comes into its own in the language arts; “hard” sciences and advanced mathematics are more easily mastered; history can be applied to economics and political science; and Bible study can turn to apologetics.⁸

Conclusion

Sticking with a small classical Christian school in the high school years is a difficult decision for many families. Maybe your child has thrived, but the grass is beginning to look greener at the traditional Christian high school in your town with its multiple AP classes and abundant extracurriculars. Perhaps even your public high school is starting to seem like a great option because of its science labs, great college placements, and unbeatable price.

It is hard to stay the course, but high school is the time to double down on your classical commitment, not to give up on it. The rewards of staying the course are a solid intellectual and personal foundation that will last teens the rest of their lives.

⁶ Association of Classical Christian Schools. Measure It - Ideal Education, Practical Results. Statistics for the Class of 2015. Available at: <https://classicalchristian.org/measure-it/>. Accessed Oct. 25, 2017.

⁷ College Simply. 2014 Data. <http://www.collegesimply.com/guides/1420-on-the-sat/virginia/>

⁸ Classical Christian Homeschooling. On The Trivium. Accessed 1/3/2018. Available at: <http://www.classical-homeschooling.org/trivium.html>