

Why a Classical High School?

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by

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Abstract

Classical education, a centuries-old way of educating youth, is experiencing a Renaissance. This paper explores the basic foundations of classical education: use of the trivium, the rationale for honoring history, the superiority of language-based learning, the purpose of a liberal arts education, the studying of Latin, and the pursuit of virtue. Although classical education can and should be implemented at a very young age, this paper particularly addresses the benefits of such at the high school level. Not all students have the opportunity to attend classical schools in the elementary and middle grades, but their lives can still be enriched by enrolling in a classical high school. Much research exists to support the teaching of Latin (a common feature of classical schools), but scant research exists in support of classical education as a whole. Reasons for this absence of data are explained. The academic successes of two classical high schools in Colorado are presented. This paper has been written to help explain classical education, particularly at the high school level, to anyone considering its merits.

Introduction

Classical education is not new. Instituted centuries ago, it reached its zenith in America in the 18th and 19th centuries. Some schools have held on to their classical foundation through the 20th century, but these schools have served small populations. In the later part of the 20th and now in the infancy of a new century, classical education has and is experiencing a Renaissance. At all levels—elementary, middle, and high school—classical education is being rediscovered. Why is the old way now found appealing?

What is Classical Education?

Educational theory is as multi-flavored as cartons of ice cream at the supermarket. Just as there is *double chocolate* and *fudge chocolate* in the ice cream section of the freezer, so within any one educational theory there are a variety of manifestations. Although classical education is no different in this respect, its supporting pillars generally include the following six elements:

1. Use of the *Trivium*

Few would disagree that children are best educated according to cognitive development. In the classical sense this foundational doctrine unfolds by applying three stages to an individual's approach to learning. Children up through the elementary grades readily grasp facts and simple truths, and their approach to learning can be described as concrete. This is the *grammar* stage of the trivium. As children enter puberty, they begin to question what they are

taught and begin to see the cause and effect relationships of knowledge. This analytical approach to learning is the *logic* or *dialectic* of the trivium. As they mature and enter high school, these learners have the ability to think deeper and more thoroughly, and their approach to education is abstract. Enter the *rhetoric* stage. Using their knowledge gained during the grammar and logic phases, these students begin to draw their own conclusions and express them with originality. Advocates of classical education, Gene Veith and Andrew Kern, explain, "...every type of learning requires knowledge (grammar), understanding (logic), and creativity (rhetoric)...Every academic discipline requires mastery of its trivium. For instance, the grammar of science is comprised of its foundational facts: basic models, essential discoveries, and standard procedures. The logic or dialectic of science is the mastery of scientific method and experimental design. The rhetoric of science represents original research that addresses an unknown."¹ They further explain, "The trivium applies in nearly every educational sphere because it accounts for the entire range of what education is supposed to do: The learner must acquire information, grasp it intellectually, and use it purposefully....Each element in the trivium is essential to education. Factual knowledge (grammar) is useless without understanding (logic). Knowledge and understanding mean little unless they can be expressed and applied (rhetoric)."²

2. Honors the Contributions of the Past

Deeply respectful of the past, particularly of western civilization, classical education draws from history methodology and purpose. Not seeking to return to the past nor blindly glorifying it, classical education strives to learn from antiquity in order to understand contemporary issues and to apply its rich reverence for wisdom and virtue. For example, our American system of government was inspired by the realm of antiquity. University of Colorado professor of Western Civilization, E. Christian Kopff, summarizing social critic Albert Jay Nock, writes, "...there are a number of very good reasons why a liberal arts education in our society must be grounded in the study of the languages, literatures, history, and philosophy of ancient Greece and Rome. First, the cultures of the ancient Mediterranean provided the basis of American education from the Colonial and Revolutionary periods through the nineteenth century, and indeed into the first half of the twentieth....Anyone who reads Jefferson's literary commonplace book or who peruses the correspondence of Jefferson and Adams will realize just how deeply imbued America's revolutionary leaders were with knowledge of antiquity."³ Why not study the same subjects (making allowances for modern knowledge, of course) under the same methodology as the historical figures which have enriched our lives? Kopff continues, "We talk much today of valuing creativity. If such an attitude is to be more than talk, we must face the fact that creativity is found in tradition. An educational curriculum founded on Greek and Latin gave us Jefferson and Adams, Burke and Samuel Johnson, not to mention Aquinas and Calvin, Michelangelo and Bach, Copernicus and Newton."⁴ Terrence Moore, first principal of the highly successful Ridgeview Classical Schools in Ft. Collins, Colorado, summarizes, "So important has classical education been in the history of the West that it would only be a slight exaggeration to say that the

march of civilization has paralleled the vibrancy of classical schools....Ridgeview remains classical by upholding the same standards of teaching, of curriculum, and of discipline found in the schools of old.”⁵

3. Language-Based

The written and spoken word is the medium by which much information is transferred from source (e.g. teacher, texts, etc.) to student. Requiring more mental discipline and eschewing mental passivity is a language-based transfer of information. Susan Wise Bauer, author of a comprehensive curriculum guide to classical education, asserts that learning, “...is accomplished through words, written and spoken, rather than through images (pictures, videos, and television). Why is this important? Language-learning and image-learning require very different habits of thought. Language requires the mind to work harder; in reading, the brain is forced to translate a symbol (words on the page) into a concept. Images, such as those on videos and television, allow the mind to be passive.”⁶ Thus, a hallmark of classical education is lots of reading, writing, and speaking—not just the quantity of it, but the quality of it. Particularly in history and literature classes, classical schools often require the reading of original texts which can be deeper in vocabulary and linguistic thought than contemporary literature or specially formulated textbooks. The Socratic Method is often used where by verbal interchange between teacher and student is the means by which knowledge is realized. Douglas Wilson, founder of the successful classical Logos School describes the importance of language in a classical school, “In high school students move on to the level of rhetoric. Now the emphasis is on self-expression, independent thought, creativity, and originality. The mode of teaching shifts: from lecture and drill (grammar) and argument and questioning (logic) to true discussion of differing opinions. Class activities include debates, mock trials, individual presentations, and lots of writing.”⁷ Finally, classical high schools commonly require a 25-30 page senior thesis which must be presented and defended to both friendly and hostile faculty panels.

4. Liberal Arts Curriculum

Seeking to impart a foundation by which one can relate and function in today’s world, classical education originates with a Liberal Arts or general curriculum. Veith and Kerns elaborate, “The word ‘liberal’ derives from the Latin *libera*, meaning freedom. For the ancient Greeks and Romans, a liberal education was necessary for a man to be free. Slaves would receive vocational training, but free citizens required an education that enlarged the mind and cultivated the soul. Classical education aimed at the apprehension of the true, the good, and the beautiful.”⁸ So much for the ancients! Although the world is a very different place now, people must still grasp and use knowledge, and the need for what is true, good, and beautiful has never been more acute. Of the classical school, say Veith and Kerns, “Its territory is all human knowledge, from the arts to the sciences, history to mathematics. It does not claim a narrow field of specialization or market niche for itself.”⁹ Ridgeview’s school handbook describes its liberal arts program to consist of “language and literature, math,

history and government, the sciences, music and art—in a coherent and orderly program. The curriculum runs from the rudiments of basic literacy and math skills to the higher orders of thought and expression.”¹⁰

5. Latin

“Latin? It’s a dead language!” is the characteristic remark uttered about this fifth element. Almost in the grave as a spoken medium, Latin has more of a living presence than many realize. Professor Kopff points out, “One reason to study this so-called ‘dead language’ is to learn the vocabulary of English....Of all English words, however—over a million in the latest dictionaries—more than half are of Latin origin, and those of Greek origin take up much of what remains.”¹¹ He continues, “Nor if that first language is English, did we choose that serious discourse in important disciplines—law, politics, ethics, the physical sciences, and the humanities—is conducted in a vocabulary heavily Latinate and generously peppered with Greek words.”¹² Wilson describes further reasons for studying Latin which include, “increased competence in English, an appreciation for literature, an understanding of the infancy of Western Civilization, practice in the analytic method, and providing a foundation for the study of modern languages.”¹³ Wilson adds that scholarship in Latin, “with its complex conjugations and declensions, requires mental gymnastics that strengthen the mind.”¹⁴ Verbal scores on the SAT dramatically improve when students study a foreign language, and the language that provides the most bang for the buck, not surprisingly, is Latin. See the Appendix for these SAT scores.

6. Virtue as the Underpinning

One could no more strip classical education of its pursuit of virtue than one could take a meaty bone from a ravenous dog. Knowledge is never pursued for its own sake, but is sought after to add meaning to life, to discover truth, to build and reinforce the habits of perseverance, courtesy, integrity in scholarship, and personal humility (discovering that one doesn’t already know it all can be a hard lesson for a teenager!). Drawing on the work of David Hicks in *Norms and Nobility: A Treatise on Education*, Veith and Kirk observe, “Because modern education theory draws heavily on the legacy of modern scientific philosophy...it has ignored anything that cannot be measured. By definition, the infinite is beyond measurement, as are ethical truths, creativity, and human worth.... education policies built solely around attempts to measure and quantify learning...will fail because they exclude those intangible qualities of personality and character that make up the human spirit.” The goal of the modern school, says Hicks, “is to prepare the student for a materially efficient existence—for selfish and tangible personal ends....From the ancient world through the Renaissance...the major goal of learning was not a mere amassing of information or the attainment of job skills, but the cultivation of virtue.”¹⁵ But just how is this accomplished in practical ways? Dr. Moore explains the Ridgeview approach, “When students become capable of discussing virtue, we do not present them with moral conundrums that seemingly have no right or wrong answers. Instead, we confront them with the great stories of self-command and self-sacrifice found in

literature and history. These narratives show that actions have consequences, and that there is a clear difference between right and wrong. Just as we encourage students to emulate the intellectual virtues of writers and scientists, so we lead them to emulate the moral virtues of heroes and heroines.”¹⁶ Whatever the subject matter, the classical teacher is always in pursuit of virtue on behalf of his or her students. Hicks would say, for example, that the classical science teacher constantly asks, “How does scientific truth touch my students’ lives and increase their understanding of themselves and their purposes?” and that, “A resolution of values must attend the study of science. Scientific analysis must be framed within normative inquiry if science is to serve life, not destroy it.”¹⁷ “Education is a moral enterprise,” insists Dr. Moore, “The history of classical education is quite simply a history of the conjunction of learning and morality.”¹⁸

The Classical High School

Watching all spring and summer his plants mature and sprout fruit, is the farmer in anticipation of the harvest. In theory, the high school years for a classical student are akin to the farmer’s harvest. The planting, watering, sunning, and waiting have readied the plant to realize its existence. So the classical high school student, in the trivium rhetoric stage, is ready, or nearly so, to use all that has been learned in prior schooling. For example, during the grammar stage in this student’s life, she may have been required to recite from memory Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. In the logic stage, she may have been asked to write an essay describing what effect the speech had on the nation at the time. Now in the rhetoric stage, she may be asked to make a speech describing a politically troubled region of the world and theorize on the effects the Gettysburg Address would bring about if embraced by the peoples of the region. The rhetoric stage manifests itself in scientific research, the writing of essays and speeches, music composition, the understanding of current events within an historical context, the production of computer code, mock trials and debates, basic structural engineering projects using mathematical concepts, etc.—always with its foundation the learning accomplished in the grammar and logic stages. The liberal arts education lays a foundation for more specialized learning in college, trade school, the family business, the military, the ministry, or even home-based endeavors such as parenting.

As much as teenagers and young adults are surrounded by technology, current events, the day-in-day-out of family and friend relationships—in short, the essence of life lived in the present—they also live with the results and consequences of generations past. Present day people both ride the coattails of geniuses like Curie, innovators like Carver, leaders like Moses, and wallow in the wake of monsters like Hitler, viral epidemics as the Black Death, disasters like the Titanic. Classical education demands not only the learning of history’s facts, but strives for the discovery of truth and purpose in history’s tapestry. High school students are poised to apply that truth and purpose to their present world and to themselves. Understanding their world and their place in it sets the stage for a life of responsibility and meaning.

The Classical High School without Classical Elementary and Middle Schools

What can be said of the student enrolling in a classical high school but without the benefit of a trivium-oriented elementary and middle school education?

First, students educated in *Core Knowledge*¹⁹ elementary and middle schools can do very well in a classical high school. Because Core Knowledge schools stress the importance of learning subject content, many of these students have been given a “grammar” stage education, although it may never have been labeled as such. Many of these Core Knowledge schools exist in Colorado; the St. Vrain Valley School District contains four.

Secondly, if classical education has stood the test of time, if it aligns naturally with the cognitive development of children, if it provides a framework for accomplishing what education is supposed to do (acquire, understand, and use information), if it provides a liberal arts education which springboards to greater specialization, and if it promotes virtue in a society clamoring for relief from social decline--why not jump in whenever the opportunity presents itself? Make no mistake—classical education is rigorous. Whether stepping into it at kindergarten or grade 10, the demands are real. Anyone intellectually adopting the foundations of classical education would need to seriously consider it for themselves or their children. Once one finds his or her knowledge-seeking soul being fed at the banquet of classical education, he or she will make whatever adjustments are necessary in daily routines and habits to stay at the table and be filled.

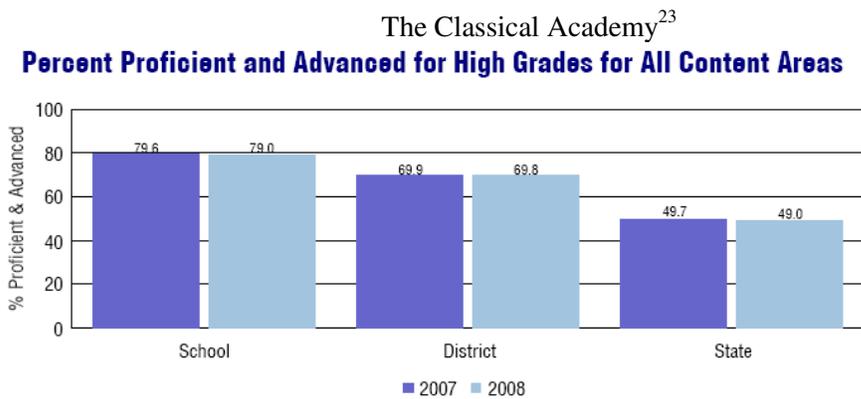
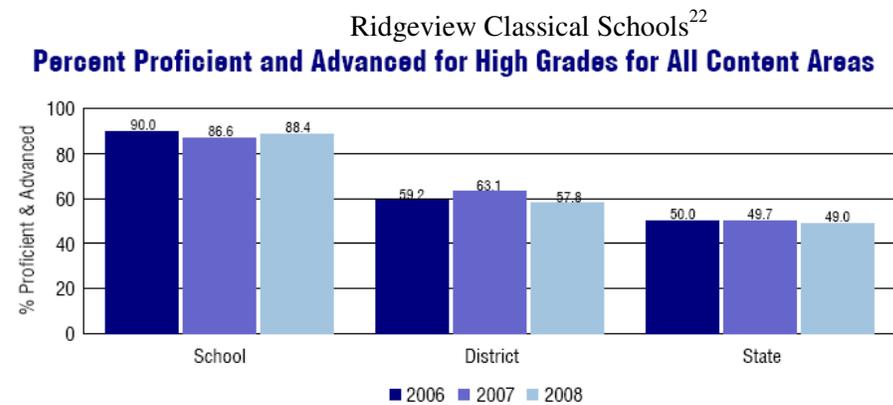
Lastly, the pursuit of virtue is the glue holding all this together. Classical education places a premium on virtues such as perseverance, honesty, self-control, and courage. Regardless of pre-high school educational experience, it is difficult to imagine a student, *having embraced these virtues for himself*, not doing well in a classical high school. Equally, classically-focus faculty and administration hold themselves to virtues complimentary to those of the student: patience, fairness, diligence, compassion. Classical education works when student and school harmoniously apply virtue to their respective endeavors.

Success of Classical High Schools

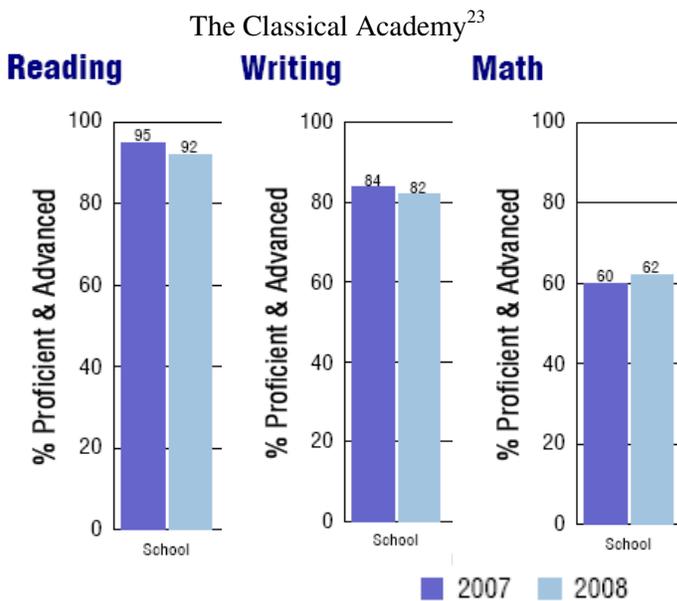
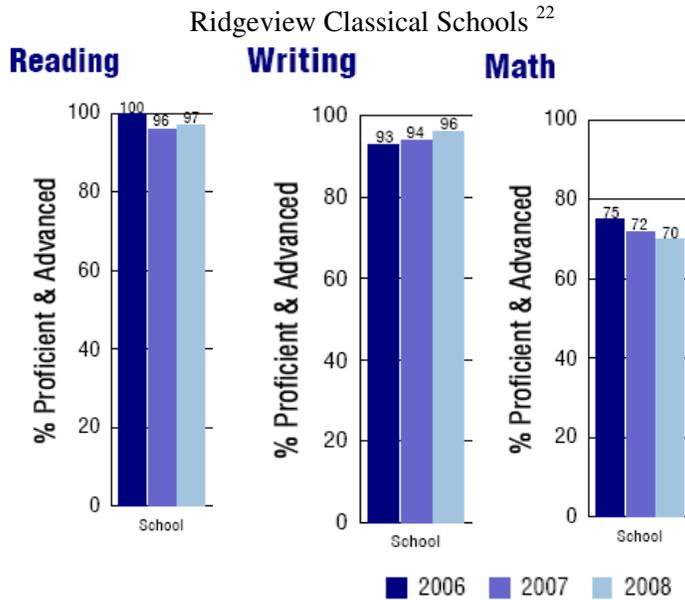
When considering school or educational program success, the freight is usually paid with test scores. This is reasonable, but any school administrator, teacher, parent, or student will contest that much more is gained in school besides one’s percentile rank or composite score. Indeed, in a classical school what is not easily quantified—the acquisition of virtue—is very important for the individual *and* the greater society. As classical schools by their very nature highly value the acquisition and demonstration of knowledge, conventional wisdom suggests that these types of schools would be fertile ground for education researchers. Unfortunately, research on the efficacy of classical schools lags. This may be due to the following:

- Classical education, according to Dr. Kopff, does not interest modern educational theorists.²⁰ Thus it is not studied. Confirmation of Kopff’s statement was confirmed by a search of the massive ERIC educational database.
- The true merits of a trivium-based classical education are cumulative. With a mobile society, it is rare for students to attend classical schools from kindergarten through grade twelve, and thus efforts to study these students are hampered.
- Much of the nation’s classical education currently takes place in parochial, Christian, and home schools. Public school researchers are hesitant to study and apply non-public schooling results to public schools. Is such hesitancy the result of legitimate philosophy or obdurate bias against alternative school paradigms?

In any event, the state of Colorado has two public classical high schools: Ridgeview Classical Schools (RCS) in Ft. Collins and The Classical Academy (TCA) in Colorado Springs. Data from the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) show students attending these two schools perform well. As for academic performance, both RCS and TCA have received for grades 9-12 *Excellent* rankings for each of the past two years of available data, the 2006-07 and 2007-08 school years. Academic rating is determined by CSAP proficiency levels for all content and grades, and average COACT scores for 11th grade reading, writing and math. In 2008, CDE began tracking the academic *growth* of students over a two-year period and designated each school *Low, Typical, or High*. Both RCS and TCA achieved a growth rating of *High*.²¹ The schools also perform well in relation to their respective districts and the state:



The following graphs show trends for the two schools for the reading, writing, and math components of the CSAP test:



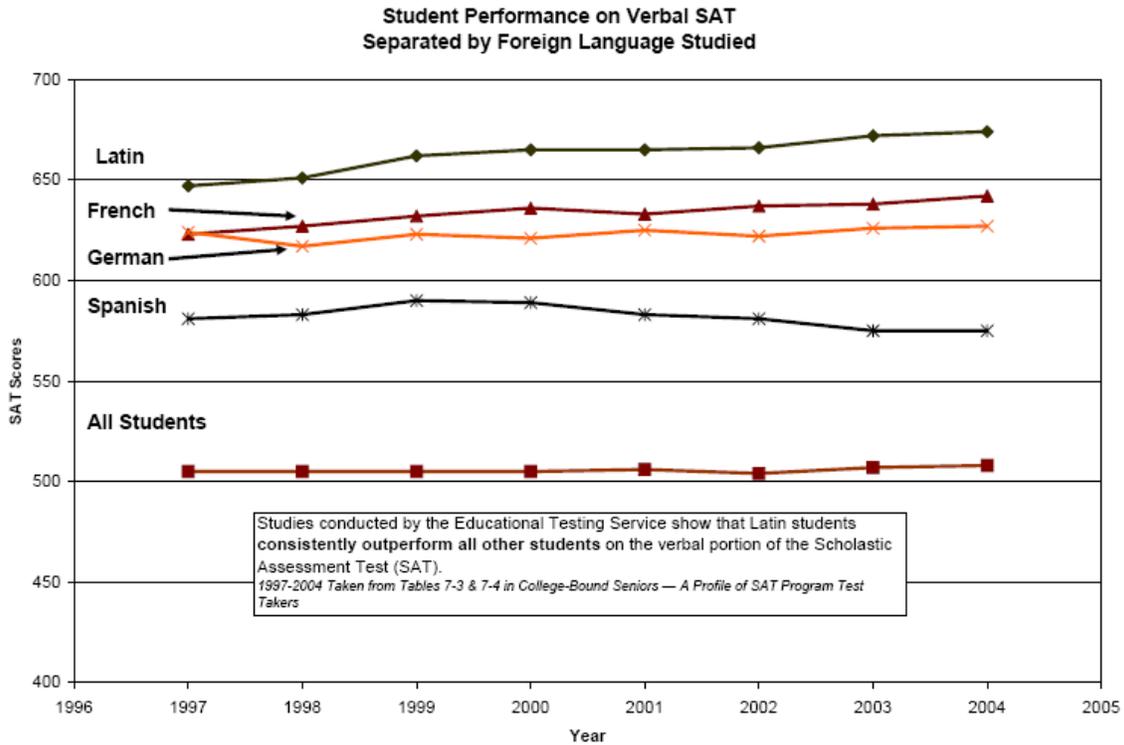
Conclusion

Classical education is a viable way to educate youth. It does what publicly-funded education demands: acquire, understand, and use knowledge. Its general curriculum provides a foundation for greater postsecondary learning. Boldly borrowing bygone methodologies, it prepares students to live in the present and encourages them to pursue education for purposes beyond the paycheck. Indeed, classical education goes beyond taxpayer mandates: it endeavors to create a citizen.

Appendix

(Draft—Shelley still working on verifying sources)

The Effect of Latin on Academic Achievement



SAT Scores 2000-2007

Studies conducted by the Educational Testing Service show that Latin students consistently outperform all other students on the verbal portion of the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT).

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Latin	665	665	666	672	674	681	672	678
All Students	505	506	504	507	508	508	503	502
French	636	633	637	638	642	643	637	637
German	621	625	622	626	627	637	632	632
Spanish	589	583	581	575	575	573	577	574
Hebrew	623	628	629	628	630	620	623	622

1999-2005 Taken from Table 6 in *College-Bound Seniors — A Profile of SAT Program Test Takers*. 2007 data taken from 2007 *College-Bound Seniors-Total Group Profile Report*.

Endnotes

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2. Ibid., pp. 13-4.
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4. Ibid., p. 111.
5. Moore, TO. "A classical education for modern times" in: *Ridgeview classical schools handbook 2009-2010*. Ft. Collins, Colorado: Ridgeview Classical Schools, 2009. p. 16.
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