**Our Anchor, Our Hope: Why Our First Year at NCA**

**Has Made All the Difference**

By Kristina Cowan

“Wow, that was fun!” my sixth-grader says as he darts from the halls of Naperville Christian Academy and bounds my car.

“What was fun?” I ask. I assume he’s referring to an exchange with his friends.

“The school day, Mom. It was great. A lot of fun.”

Middle school is many things. When I consider my journey through it, fun ranks low on the list of descriptors. But my son and his third-grade sister are in a school far different from those I knew in my K-12 years. Since kindergarten, they’ve been classical-Christian students. A hallmark of the classical-Christian journey is that learning is fun. It’s also challenging, engaging, and enlightening.

We transferred to NCA this year, after six years at another classical-Christian school. Change under any circumstances is a challenge. We recognized that it was God’s will for us to leap ahead in faith in the middle of the pandemic. That didn’t make it less daunting. But as only the Lord can do, he stitched our worries into the seamless fabric of His good will. Our first year has been remarkable: The school’s warm embrace not just of my children, but of my husband and me, has been an anchor and a source of hope.

The twin pillars we’ve come to know and love at NCA are the faculty and the curriculum. Each of my children’s teachers raises the bar, summoning them to the highest points of discovery. At these pinnacles, children do their best. The teachers encourage them to delve deeper and revel in what they’re learning. In the process, my kids are ever growing into who they’re meant to be in Christ. An education that grants you the freedom to grow and learn in Christ, the origin of all knowledge and wisdom—is anything better? NCA teachers have a matchless ability to accomplish this feat while they demonstrate what it means to be kind, dedicated to the truth, and selfless.

The curriculum, rooted in the trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, grants children the firmest possible academic footing. From Latin to history to math, the building blocks of their knowledge will be unshakable. It’s a joy to watch the process bear fruit. It’s on clear display, especially in my sixth-grader. He has begun to harness the power of everything he learned in grammar school, hitch it to the vehicle of logic, and craft logical arguments when he speaks and writes.

Thanks to their time at NCA, once my children reach adulthood, they’ll be equipped to do far more than survive in our increasingly secular and shallow culture. Ideally, God’s armor will be as much with them as the color of their eyes. It will guard and guide them as they help point our nation back to God, and serve as the hands and feet of Christ. I can think of nothing more important.

**An Unwavering Commitment to Virtue and Character**

Like a brilliant gem, the multi-faceted nature of a classical-Christian education (CCE) snags the eye. You can’t look away. Once you’ve watched your children experience it for any length of time, your heart and mind are hooked. Among its hallmarks, a dedication to virtue stands out.

The leading definition for virtue is “moral excellence; goodness; righteousness.” NCA’s teachers excel at shepherding students along the path of virtue. That means—to borrow an adage from fiction-writing—showing *and* telling. Teachers’ actions show what it means to live out virtues like courage, honesty, and kindness: how they conduct class, communicate with students, and through assignments, especially in literature. Their words often tell about such virtues, in class discussions and one-on-one time with students.

[Winston Churchill wrote](https://winstonchurchill.org/), “Courage is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities, because, as has been said, it is the quality which guarantees all others.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Mustering courage is challenging. In 2021, that’s truer than ever, for children and adults. We might be daunted by saying or doing something that another person—especially a friend—will find disagreeable. My son is learning to have courage when he shares his beliefs, and to back them up with logical arguments.

He’s also learning that, sooner or later, someone will disagree with him. Making room for these differences, and equipping kids with the courage to share them, distinguishes NCA from other schools. Students learn to be open to other viewpoints, even if they disagree. They’re discovering what free speech really is, and how fundamental it is to pursuing the truth. By upholding courage—and thereby free speech—NCA’s remarkable teachers pave the way for honesty, particularly intellectual honesty.

Honesty breeds joy and kindness. When a child has the freedom to be honest in the classroom, it fills the learning process with joy. Joy-filled children, like adults, are more likely to be kind, and to recognize kindness. My son remarks regularly about how kind his teachers are. He, in turn, extends kindness to his classmates, and even to his sister.

In their commitment to virtue, NCA teachers plant seeds that grow the fruit of their students’ spirits. By doing so, they’re building the most important thing: Their character. This building is based on a partnership with parents. NCA teachers work with us to train up our children in the ways we all want them to go, because we know that once they’re adults, they won’t turn from these ways.

**Dying to Self**

Even as NCA gives my children tools to live by, it’s also helping them die—to the baser sides of themselves. In her NCA testimonial, former upper-school principal Ann Nikchevich writes, “My Google search brought up fifty-one Bible verses pertaining to dying to self. Every true thought and idea is derived in some way from the depths of our Creator. Any curriculum that discounts truth will fail to lead students out of themselves.” NCA sparks within its students a habit they’ll need to pursue as long as they walk the earth: setting aside their selfish pursuits.

Among my favorite verses about dying to self are Galatians 5:24-25: “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit’s leading in every part of our lives.”

As my kids learn to pin their selfishness and sin onto the cross, they’ll be free of dead weight. This freedom throws open the door of opportunity. They now have room to grow and get stronger, to live by and through the unmatched power of the Holy Spirit. As believers, we recognize the Spirit as our closest friend in this often-dark mortal shuffle. I like to believe that my kids’ closest friends are my husband and me. Yet once they flee the nest—and even before—I know that the Holy Spirit will serve them far longer and better than we will. Pointing them in that direction now will prove an eternal gift.

Ann writes that NCA graduates, able to see beyond their selfish aims, “will be in a unique position to begin positively affecting our culture.” She cites author Andy Crouch’s guidance. “Crouch maintains that Christians must not be content to simply critique and condemn the culture we find offensive and wrong. Neither should we throw up our hands, conforming to it or copying it, but we should become creators of new or revived culture to supplant the negative, broken and harmful.”

Our children will influence America’s increasingly bankrupt culture—and the wider world—by *creating* culture. The roots will rest in part on what they learn at NCA: the truth of the Gospel; the reality that Christ is the source of all that’s good and beautiful. Their K-12 education is empowering them to reach into the lives of others and shower them with the generous redemption of the cross.

**Why Language-Focused Education Matters**

To shape our image-driven, internet-saturated world, our children need a sharp command of language. Thankfully, classical-Christian education is language-focused, not image-and-technology driven. Author Susan Wise Bauer says the two demand vastly 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. In front of a video screen, the brain can ‘sit back’ and relax; faced with the written page, the mind is required to roll its sleeves up and get back to work.”

My kids’ minds are hard at work. They’re steeped in the ancient practice of memorization—an art and a science all but lost in modern education. In his book, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, [Nicholas Carr](http://www.nicholascarr.com/?page_id=16) writes, “[B]y the middle of the twentieth century memorization itself had begun to fall from favor. Progressive educators banished the practice from classrooms, dismissing it as a vestige of a less enlightened time. What had long been viewed as a stimulus for personal insight and creativity came to be seen as a barrier to imagination and then simply as a waste of mental energy. … Don Tapscott, the technology writer, puts it more bluntly. Now that we can look up anything ‘with a click on Google,’ he says, ‘memorizing long passages or historical facts’ is obsolete. Memorization is ‘a waste of time.’”

Memorization isn’t a waste of time. It’s emphasized across all subjects and grades at NCA. Starting in kindergarten, students memorize and recite timelines, poems, and historical facts. With the help of songs and chants, the information plants itself in the children’s brains—and never seems to leave.

If most other K-12 schools have abandoned memorization, why does the classical-Christian model hold fast? Two reasons, both raised by Carr, spring to mind—no doubt there are others. William James said in an 1892 lecture to teachers, “the art of remembering is the art of thinking.” Though many would argue this view is antiquated, Carr sees it differently. The current belief that it’s “liberating” to offload memory to search engines is wrong, he says:

“When we outsource our memory to a machine, we also outsource a very important part of our intellect and even our identity. William James, in concluding his 1892 lecture on memory, said, ‘The connecting *is* the thinking.’ To which could be added, ‘The connecting *is* the self.’”

Culture takes a hit when human memory falters. “Culture is more than the aggregate of what Google describes as ‘the world’s information.’ It’s more than what can be reduced to binary code and uploaded onto the Net. To remain vital, culture must be renewed in the minds of the members of every generation. Outsource memory, and culture withers.”

Memorization builds memory muscle. That muscle bolsters my kids’ understanding of culture, and their ability to pass it on to future generations. It reinforces their true identity—the one they have in Christ, which is more important than anything. They don’t realize it now, but memorization is indirectly preparing them to do the Lord’s work once they leave the safety of NCA’s sacred halls. That will make all the difference.

**Using Technology Wisely**

The rising generations haven’t known a time without technology at their fingertips, from search engines to gaming to social media. If we—as their parents, teachers, mentors—don’t hold the bar high, and oblige their minds not to shrink from challenges, we’ll do them and the future a disservice.

Carr’s research has shown that our swelling reliance on the internet rewires the way our brains work. For all of its conveniences, the web distracts us and saps our creativity. We have less time to read printed books. Even if we start them, our depleted attention spans prevent us from finishing. Though we’ve learned how to skim for information online, we’re losing the ability to dive deep into great literature and do the critical thinking life demands.

This is not what I want for my children.

NCA doesn’t want it, either. My children don’t use devices in class. They won’t for a while. I don’t worry about their technological dexterity, because they get ample screen time at home.

Technology is useful, to be sure. As adults, our children will face advances well beyond what we’ve seen. Some will rely on it for their livelihoods. It’s our job, then, to teach them to use it wisely. Studies at NCA are rigorous. They demand time, focused thinking, and effort. As the children meet the challenges, they often find joy. It’s as if the work they do multiplies their curiosity.

Language, memory, and critical thinking—these are among NCA’s top priorities for its students. When children articulate themselves well in writing and speaking, when their memory is strong, and when they can think deeply and critically, they’ll make better decisions as adults. That includes keeping technology in its proper place, as a useful tool, not as something ordering their lives.

**A Long, Wide View of History**

NCA’s method for teaching history is simple: As [Susan Wise Bauer writes](https://welltrainedmind.com/a/a-classical-approach-to-history/?v=7516fd43adaa), the classical approach is logical—“from beginning to end.” The Ancients, from 5000 to 400 A.D., mark the beginning, followed by the Medieval and early Renaissance, 400 to 1600, into the late Renaissance and early modern period, 1600-1850, and wrapping up with modern times, from 1850 to the present.

This global view of history furnishes students with the big picture. While American history is important, for instance, the United States is a relative newcomer on the world stage. A lot happened elsewhere before America took shape. Those happenings spurred the birth of our nation. The classical curriculum sets that into perspective. Students learn the story of America and the stories of many other civilizations and nations. As ever, NCA beckons students beyond themselves—beyond where they live and what’s familiar.

Original sources in literature, philosophy, and theology—along with resources like Bauer’s *The* *Story of the World* series—are used to show how ideas and their consequences have played out over time. [The Association of Classical Christian Schools says](https://classicalchristian.org/social-studies-vs-history-and-philosophy/?v=a44707111a05) there’s an emphasis on “the cultural and religious influences present throughout history and understood in philosophy and literature.”

Such an approach lends depth and insight to the way students are taught. Once again, as a parent, I see it producing fruit. My children already make connections and discern historical patterns that often repeat. As they continue to practice this, it will deliver untold value over the course of their lives.

The original sources are a rich and diverse collection, because classical-Christian education embraces secular classics and the Bible. This is in keeping with evangelical tradition. Author and professor Louis Markos points to the medieval Catholic and classical pre-Christian world, where evangelicals “realized that by wrestling with the classics, they could gain a more holistic vision of how God has worked in history and thus become more effective ambassadors for Christ in a modern and postmodern world.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

In taking a long, wide view of history, the classical curriculum once again draws students away from their human inclination to be self-absorbed. [Bauer writes](https://welltrainedmind.com/a/a-classical-approach-to-history/?v=7516fd43adaa), “A common assumption made by history programs seems to be that children can’t comprehend (or be interested in) people and events distant from their own experience. So the first-grade history class is renamed Social Studies and begins with what the child knows—first herself and her family, then her community, her state, her country, and only then the rest of the world.

“This intensely self-focused pattern of study encourages the student of history to relate everything she studies to herself, to measure the cultures and customs of other peoples by her own experience. If you begin your child with herself and only then move outwards, you can easily give her the impression that she is the center of the universe, and that history which doesn’t directly coincide with her particular wants and preoccupations is unnecessary.

“The goal of the classical curriculum is entirely different. The student learns the proper place of her community, her state, and her country by seeing the broad sweep of history from its beginning and then fitting her own time and place into the pattern.”

**Beyond the Classroom**

My children are flourishing at NCA. It brings the best of spiritual nourishment, academic training, and mental discipline. It’s raising up generations of strong, smart, principled human beings, readying them for a time we parents one day won’t be here to see. As if that’s not reason enough to study here, the school promises more. It upholds the notion that communities of Christ-followers achieve the greatest heights when they harness everyone’s gifts and skills. At NCA, that means parents are crucial players in the school’s success.

Each member I’ve met makes NCA a warm, welcoming place that surpasses the common concept of an educational institution. It becomes a second home for students and parents alike, an extension of each family into the body of Christ. Though the school has firm roots here in our time-bound world, its life-changing work reaches well into eternity.

1. *Strand Magazine*, July 1931. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “The Rise of the Bible-Teaching, Plato-Loving, Homeschool Elitists: How Evangelicals are Becoming the New Champions of the Pagan Classics,” *Christianity Today*, September 2019, Volume 63, Issue 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)