

The Veritas Vision: How Our Mission is Seen Through What We Do

The mission of Veritas School is the cultivation of wisdom, virtue and godliness in our students, staff, families, and community through a classical and Christ-centered education. But just how is this mission carried out? What, specifically, is our vision of how to fulfill this important endeavor? The following are some of the ways in which what we believe about education is reflected in specific decisions and practices in our classrooms and around the school.

What we believe: True education should be directed toward the telos, or purpose, of the cultivation of persons in wisdom, virtue and godliness. It is not primarily a transfer of data to prepare for a specific task or function in the current economic order. Education is the formation of people toward a particular end, not primarily the development of self-expression. We all must conform ourselves to the model of Christ, to learn to love what we ought to love, and to dislike what we ought to dislike. We desire to prepare students for, as John Milton put it, “all the offices” of life, whatever their future various callings may be, and they will be various.

What we do: Therefore, we strive to keep uppermost in our minds how proposed courses of action will support this. For example, while our students take standardized exams of various kinds and we report our results on them, we don't measure our success by them. We keep them in proper perspective. SAT scores and A.P. exams cannot be our reason for something—either for continuing a practice or for doing something different. Rather, our *Portrait of a Graduate*, which describes the kind of student we are seeking to shape, should guide these discussions. Is a proposed action in active support of (or at the very least consistent with) our *Portrait of a Graduate* and our mission? This is the question that must be frequently asked and answered.

What we believe: Teaching is mentoring, and is essentially a master-apprenticeship relationship. Students learn how to be learners, and about how to be all the things we desire of them, by watching their teachers.

What we do: Therefore, we emphasize in our hiring and faculty development our *Characteristics of Teaching Excellence*. This set of descriptors for what makes an excellent teacher particularly encourages teachers to grow as learners themselves, and to pay careful heed to their role as models for students.

What we believe: Imitation in academics is a powerful force. Students learn how to do things with excellence by looking at and trying to imitate excellent examples.

What we do: Teachers make frequent use of models in literature, writing, art, music, etc. For example, we emphasize the progymnasmata (various exercises designed to develop skills in many kinds of writing) rather than free-form, purely 'creative' writing.

What we believe: The liberal arts are for all. Music, art, languages, math, and science are human endeavors, and the study of them is a chief means toward becoming fully human.

What we do: Therefore, we have some, but not many, electives. We have made a commitment to include all of the arts for all students. So, all students take music, K-12. All students study art. All students take four years of math, science, and a foreign language.

What we believe: The best curriculum is that of what might be called the ‘Great Poieses’ (works, creations, productions) of Western Civilization in literature, ideas, maths and sciences, music, art, drama, etc. (This does not mean, of course, that other civilizations are not worthy of study. On the contrary, by equipping students to understand their own civilization from the roots up they are better prepared to do the same with others later. Their education should not end after Veritas or university, after all—which is another idea we firmly believe in.)

What we do: So, we focus on reading fewer but greater works, reading the best we can at age-appropriate levels, and teaching students why these things are worthy of their understanding. We read Homer and not *Hunger Games*. We do things that are challenging and that some people may believe can't be done by 'normal' kids, and we do them with normal kids every day, because we believe that they are good in themselves and that they are good for the students.

Additionally, students study Latin beginning in elementary school because it provides a tool for understanding the civilization of the west. Latin has the added benefit of expanding English vocabulary, supporting the learning of grammar in general, and providing a foundation for learning other foreign languages.

What we believe: Education ought to be Christ-centered, shaped by a biblical worldview integrated into all of life, since Christ is Lord of all of life.

What we do: Therefore, biblical thinking is integrated into all areas of study. Teachers strive to help students to think biblically, that is, in a way that is informed by biblical principles and by the biblical narrative. Classes (particularly in upper grades) frequently engage in worldview evaluation and analysis. There are frequent prayers, hymn singing, and devotions throughout the day, not just in Bible or Theology class.

What we believe: Grammar, logic, and rhetoric are distinct subjects, but also are valuable tools for learning, and approaches to teaching.

What we do: As a result, in the elementary grades we place an emphasis on memory (the main tool of the grammar stage), teach logic as a class and as a skill to be applied beginning in middle grades, and emphasize speeches, debates, and essay writing in high school. Our curriculum reflects this, as English grammar is specifically taught in elementary grades, and students take Logic and Rhetoric as specific courses in the secondary grades. Rhetoric equips students to be persuasive and effective, but in keeping with our *Portrait of a Graduate*, we emphasize that this is to be done in the presentation and defense of truth, in conformity to wisdom, virtue, and godliness, and not to manipulate the audience for selfish ends.

What we believe: Participating is more valuable for students than mere spectating.

Opportunities for participation for *many* students is more important than special opportunities for a few.

What we do: So, we have after-school activities such as choirs, drama, cross country, speech team, etc. We added these over the years in order to provide opportunities for students to participate in a variety of activities. In the classroom, lecturing in secondary grades is used in only a very limited way. Instead, we emphasize Socratic and ‘Harkness’-style (seminar) discussions, and frequent questions.

What we believe: The desire for, and willingness to work toward, excellence should be the norm for a school. Our school culture values high quality and high expectations in academics, activities, and behavior.

What we do: Therefore, we tend to attract families and students who love learning, and our student culture is such that it is “cool” to be smart. The expectation is that students want to do well, and want to treat others well while doing it. We do what we do with those families in mind who desire a classical, Christian education for their children, and for students who really want to learn.

Uniforms are not an end in themselves, but are one way we have chosen to support the work of students, in that they minimize (though they don’t eliminate) the distractions related to fashion, conspicuous consumption, modesty, etc.

What we believe: God has created us to live in a word-centric way. Scripture is the word of God and is the standard for faith and practice. Christ, of course, is the Word, and so is the center of all things, but as humans we also have language at the core of our being.

What we do: Students frequently engage in giving speeches, presenting assemblies, and participating in debates (e.g. the annual Junior-Senior Debate). There is frequent writing, as well as reading and discussion of the best (rather than the merely popular), literature. Students memorize poetry. In secondary grades, written tests are the norm and multiple-choice tests are—and ought to be—relatively rare. There is some, but little, use of visual media—video, PowerPoint, etc. Our classrooms are characterized not by ‘click and watch’ but by ‘read, listen, think, and engage’.

And, of course, the understanding and memorizing of the words of scripture have a central place in our curriculum.

What we believe: All education, whether it is acknowledged or not, shapes the student in some way. Through our *Portrait of a Graduate* we attempt to be self-conscious about what our goals are in this shaping process.

What we do: Our Protocol program of assemblies and activities, was designed to emphasize putting others at ease and concretely showing love to others, to support our *Portrait of a Graduate*. We encourage the practice of good manners, and good behavior around campus. Our House program (in which we organize our secondary students into cross-grade groups) is intended to support the *Portrait of a Graduate* through service projects and other activities in order to build a strong sense community.

Much more could be said about each of these areas, and the list above is just the beginning of what could be a much longer cataloging of our beliefs and actions. Of course, not everything at Veritas flows smoothly and inevitably from our mission; probably much of what we do is cultural rather than missional. For example, assigning letter grades or percentages to describe student learning strikes me as a distracting, anti-classical compromise with modernism that I hope will one day fade away and be replaced by written and face-to-face assessment and evaluation. (And if I were the emperor of education, and not merely a lowly school head, I would so decree.) In spite of these sorts of shortcomings, we nevertheless strive to constantly measure what we do by how it contributes, directly or indirectly, to our mission. In this way the vision of the Board, faculty and staff of Veritas for classical, Christian education is seen in how we live out that desire.