



CLASSICAL

CHARTER SCHOOLS

SOUTH BRONX CLASSICAL LATIN INSTRUCTION

Some Context

South Bronx Classical Charter School opened in August 2006 as a high-performing charter school serving Kindergarten to eighth grade students. We offer a classical curriculum in a highly structured setting, and both the curriculum and the setting are designed to give our students, designated “scholars,” the chance to develop as free-thinking individuals and citizens of impeccable character who are ready to excel at college-preparatory middle schools. Notably, South Bronx Classical is one of very few schools that have closed the dreaded achievement gap, typically defined as the difference in test scores between black and white students.

Probably no aspect of the school garners more interest and discussion than our “classical” curriculum. As our students grow and excel, and as fundamentals are increasingly mastered, we begin to teach more of the classical aspects of education. The first and most notable of these is Latin instruction, starting in third grade. Other aspects of the classical nature of our school include, for example, daily debate instruction starting in 4th grade, and character education, taught in all grades on a weekly basis.

Why Latin?

To be sure, mastery of English takes priority at SBCCS. Latin instruction is not a large part of the school, with scholars in third grade and up getting 30 minutes of instruction per day. However, just like the dash of basil in mom’s tomato sauce, Latin has proven to be a small yet key ingredient in our school’s success. There are many reasons for promoting Latin in inner-city elementary schools. One is to vocabulary acquisition: 90% of English words over two syllables are derived from Latin¹. Also, Latin prefixes and suffixes add color and precision to our native tongue. And Latin abounds in the medical, scientific, and the technical fields.

Interestingly, facilitating English vocabulary acquisition, initially seen as the main benefit of Latin instruction, has been eclipsed by its ability to facilitate English grammar instruction. Most Americans learn basic English in their day-to-day activities as a child. However, being able to communicate at a more advanced level requires explicit grammatical instruction, something that rarely happens or happens poorly in many public schools across the nation. Often students in fact end up acquiring English grammar skills by learning a foreign language. This is certainly the case with the Latin program at SBCCS. As a school with over 60% Hispanic kids, Latin provides a real

¹ Concordia College, “Why Study Classical Studies at Concordia?” <http://www.cord.edu/Academics/Classics/whystudy.php>
Accessed: June 14, 2012.

Valerie Strauss “Latin: A Language Alive and Well” <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A16275-2005Apr26.html>
Accessed: June 14, 2012.

advantage to our English Language learners. The connection that our scholars make, even at 8 years of age, between their native Spanish and Latin clearly demonstrates the advantage of bilingualism.

Then there is another, less direct but no less valuable, benefit associated with Latin instruction. Our scholars call the nation's poorest Congressional District their home. Latin offers an opportunity to indulge in a little elitism, to enjoy the feeling and fact of participating and excelling in something challenging and "world-class."

Notably, Latin has made a dramatic comeback over the past 40 years as a foundation and facilitator of language arts. Some programs have been particularly successful in inner city elementary schools, most notably in Philadelphia, Washington D.C., New York, Kansas City, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, and Oakland.² Latin's beneficial effect on students' verbal aptitude is well documented. The increased level of literacy is highlighted by the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), documented in studies by LaFleur (1981, 1982), and reported by the National Council for State Supervisors for Languages.³ Tests conducted by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) from 1988 to 1997 show that students of Latin outperform others on the verbal portion of the SAT.⁴

Latin curricula often feature stories set in the outer reaches of the Roman Empire. Students experience life in Roman Egypt, Spain, Gaul, or Germany and learn how these cultures interacted with mainstream culture of Roman Italy. Their removal from the world of today allows students to rethink social questions and human dilemmas and to consider cultural issues and ethnic differences from a new perspective.

An alternate point of view, not always articulated aloud, is that learning Latin is not an appropriate goal for inner-city children, either because they are simply unable to learn it or because Latin is not part of their culture or is part of a culture they might resist. This argument is usually advanced by those with little experience in either Latin or the inner city. As noted above, SBCCS scholars outperform their white counterparts. Further, they can be seen to demonstrably embrace the scholarship. Stories abound of our scholars excitedly noticing Latin phrases or roots on billboards, signs, or in general reading. And they often astound docents at the Metropolitan Museum of Art with their knowledge of Greek and Roman mythology.

Our Approach

Our program is unique for many reasons. First, as noted above, we teach Latin in a poor urban environment. Second, we teach Latin as a regular course beginning at third grade, far younger than many schools whether private, charter, or public. Finally, we do not have a separate Latin teacher, but instead ask our regular classroom teachers to teach the language. For these reasons we developed a proprietary curriculum able to adapt to the unique challenges of our student body. This doesn't necessarily mean "dumbing it down," but rather we adjust how we teach Latin to work within time constraints and scholars' incoming skills and knowledge.

In our third to fifth grades, we teach a self-created curriculum that draws upon *Minimus* and *Latin for Beginners*. *Minimus*, published by Cambridge University Press, uses Classical pronunciation and a non-sectarian pedagogical

² Abbott, Martha G. and Virginia M. Barrett. "Inner-City Latin Programs Raise Reading Scores" <http://department.monm.edu/classics/cpl/PromotionalMaterials/Inner-CityLatinPrograms.htm>

³ National Council of State Supervisors for Languages "The Role of Latin In American Education" <http://ncssfl.org/papers/index.php?latin>

⁴ Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, Inc "The Latin Advantage" <http://www.bolchazy.com/al/latadv.htm>

approach, with teacher-led lessons. The foci in *Minimus* are vocabulary acquisition and Roman culture for background. With both books, our scholars learn vocabulary and sentence patterns not by rote memorization, but by seeing key words and phrases repeated frequently in the stories and exercises and often illustrated with diagrams or pictures. The South Bronx Classical scholars particularly like the cultural and historical lessons in both texts, as they provide a much-needed, non-egocentric perspective to learning history, allowing our scholars to learn about a culture that is highly foreign yet intriguingly familiar.

In our third grade, scholars can translate simple sentences (e.g., *Magistra docet discipulos*) and obtain nearly 100% mastery in translating the 60 most common Latin words. By fourth grade, our scholars delve into Roman family life, education, work life, clothing, and military, and learn to translate another 60 words. Fifth grade Latin weaves introductory grammar, conjugation, yet another 60 Latin words, and Roman history. By the end of fifth grade, our scholars can translate basic English sentences such as “Suddenly I got hungry and ate bread and fruit.” into the Latin *inopinate esuriens panem malaque comedi*.

For our sixth to eighth grades, we have developed a curriculum centered around the classic *Ecce Romani* textbook. However, in these higher grades, the focus shifts toward translation as well as grammar. At the end of sixth grade, our scholars begin taking the National Latin Exam, translating entire paragraphs into Latin while they continue to learn about Roman government, family life, and famous people. By the end of the middle school years, SBCCS scholars are ready to excel in Advanced Placement Latin and further Latin instruction. Of course, they will also be well prepared to move to learning modern Romance languages such as Spanish and French.

How do we evaluate the program’s success? School-wide, our results indicate we have developed a culture, curriculum, and structure with which scholars have met with success. Specific to Latin, quizzes and tests are used to assess scholar learning in comparison to the state’s standards for languages other than English. Thus far, overall, our scholars are learning Latin very well, meeting and exceeding the state standards based on our own assessments. (Note that New York began administering a Latin Regents Exam in 1934 but abruptly cancelled it in 2009, which makes official external assessment more difficult.)

Bibliography

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