

## CHARACTERIZING PUBLIC CLASSICAL SCHOOLS: PROMOTIONAL LANGUAGE IN MISSION AND VISION STATEMENTS

JESSICA L. RICHARDI

Department of Educational Studies, Coastal Carolina University

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0259-9868>

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### ABSTRACT

Little is known about primary and secondary public classical schooling in the United States despite a history of over 30 years and the increasing influence of classical organizations on individual states' curriculum. The lack of information is ascribed to the lack of salient literature on the implementation of the classical approach in public school contexts. To begin to characterize classical public schooling, the researcher conducts a comparative content analysis of mission and vision statements from 47 classical and 50 non-classical public schools. Pointwise mutual information (PMI), an association metric, is used to meaningfully differentiate the promotional language employed by the classical and non-classical school groups to appeal to prospective families in a competitive public education market. Results indicate that classical public schools advertise curricular emphases on challenging academics and character formation, demonstrating an intriguing connection to the available literature on classical education despite the focus of that literature on private and religious contexts for learning.

**Keywords:** advertisement, classical education, content analysis, pointwise mutual information, promotional language, public education, trivium

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Classical education is a contemporary American model for K-12 curriculum and instruction. Behind the model is a movement of like-minded educators and parents who believe, for one reason or another that typical public and private schools are failing to educate American youths. The classical education movement was inspired by the ideas of renowned English author Dorothy Leigh Sayers (1893-1957). The first "classical" school opened in Moscow, Idaho in 1981. Since then, the movement has gained momentum and hundreds of classical schools—public, chartered, and private—now dot the U.S. landscape (Richard, 2022), and there has been notable growth since the Covid-19 pandemic (Mahnken, 2023). Institutions which promote classical learning, like Great Hearts America and Hillsdale College, are behind much of this growth and have been expanding their influence across multiple states. Hillsdale College, for example, has worked with the governors of Tennessee and Florida to found new public schools and alter state curriculum (Ceballos & Brugal, 2022; Smith, 2023). Parents who have never heard of classical learning may find their children exposed to it whether they wish it or not.

Though classical education has been around for over 40 years, scholarly literature on this model is extremely limited. Most written work on classical learning is popular in nature and covers

use of the classical approach in strictly religious or homeschooling contexts. Little has been written about K-12 classical schooling in the public sphere, and currently, it is not known how classical public schools differ from their counterparts. School mission and vision statements provide the means to shed light on what makes a classical school “classical,” since they effectively function as advertisements and windows onto the values of the schools which create them (Aib & Shehzad, 2023; Fritz, 1996; Gurley et al., 2015; Hoang & Rojas-Lizana, 2015; Morphew & Hartley, 2006). This study compares the content of mission and vision statements produced by classical and non-classical K-12 public schools. Results will contribute to the limited body of foundational knowledge about classical education for future research, building toward a reliable definition of the classical learning model and a better understanding of how it differs across various educational contexts.

## 2.0 CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

In 1947, respected author and scholar Dorothy Leigh Sayers delivered an address at Oxford University. In the speech, later published as an essay entitled “The Lost Tools of Learning,” Sayers expressed concern for the state of education in post-war England; specifically, she feared the consequences of poor communication and critical media literacy skills amongst her contemporaries. She recommended a return to the foundational disciplines of the trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) as they were taught in the medieval period. (Sayers was herself a medievalist.) Sayers also believed that the trivium disciplines, as progressively more complex and advanced stages of learning, correspond to the natural stages of child development and recommended that appropriate learning activities be designed to facilitate learning in each stage (Sayers, 1948).

Sayers’s Oxford address was published in 1948 and picked up by the American conservative magazine *National Review* in the following decades. It eventually inspired the foundation of the first self-identified classical school in Moscow, Idaho in 1981 (Richardi, 2023). Its founder, an evangelical pastor named Douglas Wilson, published a book in 1991 outlining his vision for what he had dubbed a “classical education,” combining his own fervent religious imperatives with Sayers’s unique idea for a trivium-based curriculum in the modern world (Richardi, 2023). Wilson’s book raised the profile of this new educational paradigm and seeded the growth of the classical learning movement first in the private, and later in the public, sphere (Lindquist, 2019).

Dorothy Sayers’s quirky idea to resurrect the trivium appears to have become canon after Douglas Wilson sang its praises in 1991. Most sources on classical schooling today agree that use of the trivium is a defining feature of classical curriculum and pedagogy (Bauer & Wise, 2016; Bortins, 2010; Calhoun, 1999; Clark & Jain, 2019; Hart, 2006; Perrin, 2004; Robinson, 2013; Veith & Kern, 2015), with the trivium disciplines of grammar, logic, and rhetoric mapping directly onto the elementary, middle, and high school grades respectively. However, trivium-based curriculum design may not be universal among classical schools, though they consistently elevate effective communication skills – one outcome of a trivium-based education – as an important, if not primary, goal of K-12 curriculum (Richardi, 2022).

Classical education is a liberal arts education in the Western European tradition (Caldecott, 2012; Hart, 2006; Joseph, 2002; Perrin, 2004; Robinson, 2013; Veith & Kern, 2015). Advocates place great value on the Western intellectual and philosophical traditions (Bauer,

2016; Bortins, 2010; Clark & Jain, 2019; Gamble, 2009; Hart, 2006; Kopff, 2014; Perrin, 2004; Veith & Kern, 2015; D. Wilson, 1991); the “Great Books” of the Western canon are of special interest as a means to access that tradition (Adler & Van Doren, 2006; Bauer, 2016; Gamble, 2009; Hart, 2006; Perrin, 2004; Wilson, 1991). Most classical educators recommend the study of Latin as a foundational discipline (Kopff, 2014; Perrin, 2004; Sayers, 1947; Simmons, 2002; Veith & Kern, 2015; Wilson, 1991), another idea derived from Sayers herself (Sayers, 1948). Classical schools themselves may also emphasize essential knowledge in core disciplines such as English, mathematics, history, art and science, many going so far as to adopt the Core Knowledge© curriculum developed by essentialist E.D. Hirsch (Richard, 2022).

Sources mention the embarkation on a lifelong pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty as an important goal for K-12 education (Gardner, 2012; Littlejohn & Evans, 2006; Turley, 2014; Veith & Kern, 2015). Civics education suffused with a patriotic sensibility is a concern reflected in the literature, as well, and especially by certain classical organizations, Hillsdale College (through its Barney Charter School Initiative) and Responsive Education Solutions the most prominent among them. Classical schools also describe virtuous character formation and articulate expression as valued curricular goals (Richard, 2022).

In terms of pedagogy, classical learning proponents emphasize the memorization of material through drill or recitation, especially during the grammar stage of learning when, as Dorothy Sayers recommended, facts are best accumulated (Barnes, 2014; Bortins, 2010; Gibbs, 2019; Littlejohn & Evans, 2006). Many believe that regular schools today too often eschew the memorization of facts in favor of more fun, edutainment-type activities (Bortins, 2010; Littlejohn & Evans, 2006; Veith & Kern, 2015). In addition to memorization activities, classical schools express a preference for discussion and debate as learning strategies (Richard, 2022).

Inferences made about public classical schooling from the available source material must be taken with a grain or two of salt, however. With few exceptions, the published works cited above focus on homeschooling and private religious instruction (Bauer & Wise, 2016; Bortins, 2010; Spencer, 1996; D. Wilson, 1991); some even denounce public education altogether and express doubt that the classical approach can be successfully implemented in the public sphere (Hegseth, 2022; Veith & Kern, 2015; Wilson, 1991, 2003). Texts which do treat classical learning in secular contexts are not based on empirical research in classical schools, but on individual authors’ personal understandings of the ancient and medieval liberal arts traditions (Hart, 2006; Joseph, 2002; Perrin, 2004; Robinson, 2013). There is little evidence to suggest that the information they provide accurately reflects the institutional perspectives of classical schools (Richard, 2022). More work is needed to characterize public classical education and to learn to what extent it resembles the models put forth by its published advocates. Mission and vision statements are an as-yet untapped resource to better understand classical education in the public arena.

## 2.1 Mission and Vision Statements

In recent decades, the public education market has been made more competitive by the affordance of school choice, and K-12 schools must jostle for their share of this market by differentiating themselves from competitors (Wilson & Carlsen, 2016). The publication of a mission and vision statement is one way to accomplish that. A mission statement describes

what an organization wants its stakeholders to believe it is doing (Johnson, 2014, n.p.) and signals to specific constituencies that it shares values in common (Morphew & Hartley, 2006). A vision statement describes an institution's direction, primary concerns, and criteria for defining success (Gurley et al., 2015). For stakeholders, a school vision statement provides a window onto day-to-day school operations (Fritz, 1996).

Both mission and vision statements offer a view to how K-12 classical schools present and promote themselves to prospective families in a competitive educational market. They are akin to advertisements; school mission statements in particular have been found to use rhetorical moves associated with promotional genres like advertisement as they seek to promote specific educational experiences and outcomes (Aib & Shehzad, 2023). Being similar in their capacity to communicate with stakeholders, in this study, both mission and vision statements are treated as advertisements. A comparison of the distinctive topics occurring in classical and non-classical mission/vision statements will shed light on how public classical schools' marketed qualities differ from those of their non-classical counterparts.

## 3.0 METHODS

### 3.1 Data Collection

Tools and data on the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) website were used to identify schools suitable for this study. Keywords such as "classical" and "trivium" were entered into the Public School Search Tool to produce a list of classical K-12 institutions. NCES Common Core Data, which includes most public schools in the country, was utilized along with a random number generator to create a sampling frame of non-classical schools. To be included in the final classical and non-classical samples, schools had to meet two criteria: 1) maintain a website; 2) publish a unique mission and/or vision statement on that website.

Ultimately, 47 classical schools were selected for analysis. Once 50 non-classical schools had been selected, school mission and vision statement texts were gathered and saved as individual documents, and each document uploaded to a data analysis program with both qualitative and quantitative capabilities.

### 3.2 Content Analysis

Content analysis is a method for making inferences about texts, their originators, or their audience based on the manifest or latent content within (Krippendorff 2013, Weber 1984, Drisko & Maschi, Holsti 1969). It is well established as a useful methodology to explore the content of mission and vision statements in education (Adebanke Olusola et al., 2022; Mukwena, 2020; Slate et al., 2008; Stemler & Bebell, 1999). A content analysis specifies a sampling unit, context unit, and recording unit. A sampling unit is a bounded textual unit selected for inclusion in a content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004); context units are larger segments of textual matter delimiting the information to be counted as a recording unit (Krippendorff, 2004); the recording unit itself is the smallest unit of content to be counted (Berelson, 1971). In this study, school mission/vision statements served as both the sampling unit and the context unit, and the word as the recording unit. The word is the smallest recording unit (Berelson, 1971) and was chosen here for its precision and potential for denotative objectivity (Budd et al., 1967).

Before the analysis commenced, a Standard English stop word list was applied to the collected mission and vision statements with several additions made by the researcher. Words such as “mission,” “vision,” “school,” “academy,” and “classical” were struck from the analysis due to their low semantic value as part of introductory phrases and school or district names.

Aside from these adjustments, the researcher took an inductive approach to the analysis (Drisko & Maschi, 2015; Mayring, 2014), the purpose of which was to gain knowledge from the data without imposing preconceived notions or pre-generated categories upon the sampled texts (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1279). Terms representing topics of import among the sampled schools were allowed to emerge naturally from the data. The use of computer software with both quantitative and qualitative analytical capabilities lent greater reliability and thoroughness to this process (Drisko & Maschi, 2015, p. 126).

A word frequencies tool provided crucial quantitative information such as term frequencies, document frequencies, and ranks for all words appearing at least ten times within the total 97 documents. Pointwise mutual information scores for terms occurring in both classical and non-classical statement groups were then calculated in order to differentiate the two groups. Pointwise mutual information (PMI) is an association metric which compares the relative frequency of two outcomes occurring together to the probability of either outcome occurring on its own (Bestvater, 2022). Its purpose is to “split a data set into two categories...and identify words that co-occur with one of the two categories at a higher rate” (Bestvater, 2022, n.p.). In this study, PMI score differences provided a more meaningful comparison of the classical and non-classical texts than would be possible with word frequencies alone. Finally, representing a qualitative element of analysis, the terms most distinctive to each document group (as determined by the PMI calculation) were contextualized via keywords-in-context (KWIC) and collocates tools, and interpreted by the researcher within the context of the available literature on classical education.

#### 4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Pointwise mutual information (PMI) compares the relative frequency of two outcomes occurring together, such as a specific word occurring in a specific document category (Bestvater, 2022). If two document groups are compared, a term more likely to occur in a given category (in other words, more distinctive to that category) will score higher in calculations within that document group than in the other. The terms most distinctive to the classical and non-classical document groups are listed below (Table 1).

**Table 1: Top 25 Most Distinctive Terms per Document Group**

Classical Group	PMI Difference	Non-Classical Group	PMI Difference
virtue	-	opportunity	2.910732662
foundation	-	positive	1.910732662
scholar	2.89662226	safe	1.325770161
knowledge	1.789707056	support	1.325770161

develop	1.767339243	create	1.289244285
serve	1.674229839	success	1.289244285
program	1.504304837	learner	1.232660757
character	1.467778961	empower	1.232660757
arts	1.411195433	succeed	1.133125083
education	1.378773955	productive	1.133125083
think	1.352301744	potential	0.9107326619
challenge	1.226770862	graduate	0.9107326619
development	1.089267338	staff	0.9107326619
believe	1.089267338	achieve	0.7852017798
value	1.089267338	engage	0.7587295685
citizen	0.963736456	career	0.718087584
curriculum	0.963736456	environment	0.6742298388
excellence	0.7413440347	educational	0.5628093585
rigorous	0.7413440347	promote	0.4956951626
foster	0.6742298388	social	0.4956951626
become	0.6038405109	instruction	0.4956951626
build	0.5746941653	quality	0.4956951626
parent	0.5043048374	inspire	0.4253058347
critical	0.5043048374	experience	0.3961594891
academic	0.38882762	personal	0.3961594891

**Note.** Terms are ranked from most distinctive top to bottom.

The sampled non-classical schools were more likely to promote success (succeed, graduate, achieve, career) and positive educational experiences (positive, safe, support, inspire). The positivity advertised by the non-classical group comes through in valence. Eight terms on the non-classical word list have a distinctly positive valence: safe, success, succeed, empower, inspire, positive, and productive (Sinclair & Rockwell, 2016); another five have a positive connotation within the context of K-12 education (opportunity, graduate, potential, achieve, engage, and quality). Only two terms on the distinctive classical list have a positive valence (virtue and excellence). Readers process positively-valenced words most efficiently (Crossfield & Damian, 2021; Wang et al., 2023) and positive mission statement valence increases audience buy-in (Desmidt & Prinzie, 2009). The non-classical schools in this study may prioritize broad access to or acceptance of their missions and vision statements, while the classical schools use

a different, targeted discursive strategy to appeal to a desired subset of students or families (Wilson & Carlsen, 2016).

PMI calculations demonstrate that the public classical schools in this study are marketing a strong commitment to academics (represented by the distinctive use of terms like curriculum, program, academic, and rigorous) and to character formation (virtue, character, value, citizen). The two most distinctive classical terms, virtue and foundation, were totally unique to the classical corpus and represent these two themes. What is especially notable about these results is that they fall in line with published literature on classical education, despite that literature's focus on private, religious, and homeschool applications of the classical approach.

In the classical corpus, references to virtue were collocated with high concepts such as truth, beauty, wisdom, liberty, and responsibility. The term character was also found to be more distinctive to the classical corpus; the classical schools in this study wrote of "character development," "character education," and "character enrichment" in their statements; context and collocates indicate that they aim to produce students of "impeccable," "exceptional," "virtuous," "moral," and "sound" character. Repeated references to values, and specifically democratic values, reinforces the connection between classical schooling, moral socialization, and citizenship through character building which is also present in the literature. Classical learning advocates have written much on character formation, believing that the classical approach is uniquely equipped to model and instill habits of virtue, sound morals, and democratic values (Adler, 1981; Gardner, 2012; Littlejohn & Evans, 2006; Veith & Kern, 2015; Wilson, 1991), and in a previous study, both public and private classical schools were found to highlight character development as a curricular priority (Richard, 2022).

The distinctly classical term foundation occurred most often in the phrase "foundation of knowledge." Muse of the classical movement, Dorothy Sayers, had herself written of the importance of laying a foundation of knowledge during the grammar stage of learning as a necessary step toward acquiring more complex skills in the logic and rhetoric stages. Indeed, sources on the classical approach are replete with references to such foundations (Bauer, 2009; Bortins, 2010; McCoy, 2021; Robinson, 2013) and this is the source of the classical bias against edutainment and in favor of memorization.

References to arts in the classical mission and vision statements appeared exclusively within the context of the phrases "arts and sciences," "liberal arts," and "liberal arts and sciences," which described the classical schools' curriculum. This is also in line with the literature, which firmly characterizes a classical education as a liberal arts education in the traditional sense that it is broad, or unspecialized (Adler, 1983; Ausland, n.d.; Gose, 2023).

References to excellence were sometimes general, such as the "pursuit of excellence," or the demonstration of excellence, but often described academic performance and scholarly disposition specifically (e.g., "excellence in scholarship," "academic excellence"). The words critical and thinking were nearly always paired with just two exceptions in references to analytical and creative thinking. The ability to evaluate and critique arguments, especially written or oral arguments, is a desired outcome of the classical curriculum also expressed by advocates and which originated with Dorothy Sayers (1948). The distinctive terms rigorous and challenge were used in reference to sampled classical schools' curriculum, programming, pacing, subject matter, learning materials, and also occurred in descriptions of classical

education more broadly. The representation of the classical approach as distinctly challenging is common in the literature (Bauer, 2016; Bortins, 2010; Hart, 2006; Simmons, 2012; Veith & Kern, 2015), and a previous study has shown that classical school websites on the whole tend to emphasize academic excellence and intellectual rigor (Wilson & Carlsen, 2016).

A look at the contexts and collocates for distinctive classical verbs such as build, foster, become, and develop provides further insights into the educational products classical schools wish to market in their mission and vision statements. What do they intend to build? What skills or attributes will they foster and develop in their students? What will students become? The classical schools in this study pledge that students will become lifelong and independent learners, responsible leaders, socially responsible and productive citizens, contributors to local and global communities, effective communicators, and critical thinkers of good character. These intended outcomes gel with the schools' focus on challenging academics and character development.

Notably, the classical schools in this study were more likely to refer to students as scholars rather than learners in the non-classical statement corpus, and this quirk may just summarize these schools' perspectives on learning in K-12 contexts. "Scholar" is an older, Latinate word implying erudition or profound understanding (SCHOLAR Definition & Meaning, n.d.), while "learner" simply indicates a pupil at any level of knowledge. Classical schools are selling a commitment to developing both a scholarly acumen and disposition, and projecting the belief that the purpose of a formal education is to build intellectual skills rather than social, cultural, or emotional competencies. The classical schools' decision to downplay typical milestones and contexts of success (e.g., high school graduation or college-career readiness) is in alignment with a view promulgated in the literature and represented by the passage from a popular book on classical learning:

Knowing that the purpose of education is to nurture the soul, classical schools struggle with the American obsession over grades, quantifiable results, and pinpoint measurement of students...How does one measure the nurturing of the soul via Scantron bubbles? What number value can be placed upon a student's growth in wisdom and virtue? (Veith & Learn, 2015, p. 118)

According to advocates, a K-12 classical education is meant to equip the student for a lifelong journey of personal enlightenment and enrichment. As a beginning and not an end in itself, classical learning ought not to be measured by the standards popularly used today, such as test scores, college enrollment, or workforce readiness (Eben, 2023; Gage, 2023; Veith & Kern, 2015). In this study, sampled classical schools' promote academic rigor and character formation in rejection of the results-oriented perspective so disdained by promoters of the classical approach.

What is missing from the classical mission and vision statements in this study may be as important as what is present. The classical schools did not mention use of the trivium to guide curriculum design or instruction, nor did they mention the Western literary or philosophical tradition. In published literature on classical education, these are billed as the sine qua non of classical approach (Bauer 2016; Bortins, 2010; Calhoun, 1999; Clark & Jain, 2019; Gamble, 2009; Hart, 2006; Perrin, 2004; Robinson, 2013; Veith & Kern, 2015; Wilson, 1991). This study provides support for the author's previous findings (Richard, 2022) that public classical



schools do not teach in lock step with sources on the classical approach; instead, they appear to mine what they wish from that material and leave the rest to classical private, Christian and home schools.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

Since its inception in the 1990s, public classical schooling has flown under the educational research radar. It is a phenomenon about which we know very little— even less than we know about Christian applications of the classical approach, which are at least represented in popular books and blogs intended for religious and homeschooling parents. The purpose of this study was to begin to characterize public classical education by determining what distinguishes it from regular public schooling. In their capacity as advertisements in a competitive educational marketplace, mission and vision statements were selected as a means to discover how classical public schools differentiate themselves from their non-classical counterparts.

The direct comparison of mission and vision statements through pointwise mutual information (PMI) has presented a clear contrast between the classical and non-classical public school groups in this study. Among the classical schools, rigorous academic programming and sound character formation emerged as distinctive selling points to prospective families. The non-classical public institutions instead promoted positive experiences and successful results. The “products” advertised by the classical schools in this study feature prominently in the available literature on classical education: a meaningful result considering that that literature was not created to aid in the foundation of public classical schools and in some cases, is dismissive of the very idea that classical education can work in the public sphere. The results of this study suggest that public classical schools take some cues from this literature – some, but not all. The conspicuous absence of references to the trivium and the Western canon, which published advocates consider to be cornerstones of the classical approach, is striking. It provides further evidence that autonomous public classical schools have constructed and maintained their own unique perspectives on what it means to enact a classical approach in K-12 learning contexts (Richardi, 2022).

Caution is warranted in generalizing these results. The sample size was smaller than ideal for PMI calculations, and some influential classical charter networks, like those affiliated with Hillsdale College, were left out of this analysis so as not to skew the results through outsized representation. Their perspectives are not presented here and deserve to be analyzed in their own right, since their parent organizations wield a great deal of influence on the direction of the public classical education movement. Their tendrils of curricular influence have breached the movement itself and made inroads into regular public education through curriculum licensing and state contracts, not only increasing the relevance of research on classical learning, but making it crucial to maintain the health of public education as a whole. It is this author’s hope that the results of this study will provide a jumping-off point for other researchers either curious or concerned about the continuing spread of the classical education movement and its effect on the institution of public schooling in the U.S.

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