

Starting this fall, St. Michael's to adopt a 'Classical' curriculum



The fifth grade class at St. Michael School, where a classical Catholic curriculum, including Latin, will be phased in over the next few years starting this fall. | Photo courtesy St. Michael School



July 5, 2017 08:08AM

By Anna Maria Della Costa Sun staff writer

STONINGTON — A new curriculum that boasts a stronger emphasis on language, reading and writing will be introduced at St. Michael School beginning this fall.

St. Michael, a school that educates kindergarten through eighth-grade students, is instituting a Catholic Classical Curriculum that will be phased in over the next several years.

“Education has become very skills-oriented to the point where it’s moved away from some content,” Principal Doris Messina said. “This mode of education focuses on both.”

She also wrote in a press release: “The curriculum will become integrated and historically based. Students will study the great ideas of Western Civilization. Democracy, science, art, and literature will provide the impetus for understanding how the past influences and unifies our culture. Great classical literature and primary sources will be utilized, allowing students to discern the original intent of the writers and the truths of the documents.”

St. Michael School will be the first school in the Diocese of Norwich and in the local area to become a Catholic Classical School, a model that is not only attracting schools throughout the country, but also drawing students back to a Catholic education, Messina said.

“I went to a school in Maryland that is doing this, and fourth-graders were performing ‘Antigone,’ ” Messina said of the tragedy Sophocles wrote in or before 441 BC. “The big part of this is introducing the curriculum to the younger children.”

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Starting in the fall, the new curriculum means the study of Latin will be expanded to every grade, including kindergarten, and what Messina calls “more classical literature” will be introduced in the school’s language arts program.

Messina, who just finished her 11th year as principal, said teachers are still deciding what books will be used, but she would like to see literature like “The Wind in the Willows,” the “Little House” series and “To Kill A Mockingbird” come back into the curriculum.

“I’d like to see us use Shakespeare,” she said. “There is some really good literary works that we’ve gotten away from that we’re bringing back. Children want to learn. We want them all to grow and be excited about learning.”

The classical model of education was the model of Catholic education until the first half of the 20th century, and Messina said it’s proved to produce some of the highest SAT scores of any curriculum. It prepares students not just for high school, college or a career, but to become lifelong learners who are informed, engaged and faith-filled members of society.

A Classical Curriculum uses age appropriate methods of teaching: In the early grades, children are ready and able to memorize and be taught large amounts of information. In middle school, students’ ability to reason develops, so logic and reasoning skills are taught. “Students will learn to debate and think critically, evolving reasoning skills to aid them not only in math and science, but to excel in life as they encounter problems and decisions,” Messina wrote.

“St. Michael School prides itself on its rigorous and challenging curriculum,” she said. “We have well-qualified teachers who care about their students. Our graduates excel in high school and beyond, and we have standardized test scores that are well above the national averages.

“But, as a school, we always continue to look for ways to improve, to make our school and curriculum better for our students.”