



Understanding Academic Excellence

Covenant Christian School

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Introduction

Our school's Vision for Education states that "Covenant Christian School is a Christian elementary school in the Reformed tradition, committed to providing a Christ-Centered, Grace-Filled and Academically Excellent education to our children." Over the next three years, each of these elements will be the subject of a Parent Education Night. This year, our first Parent Education Night will focus on understanding what it means for Covenant School to seek to be academically excellent.

Vision for Education

In order to explore what it means for Covenant Christian School to be academically excellent, we need to take a very brief look at each of the three parts of our vision.

Christ-Centered

At the core of our school, we find a Christ-centered biblical worldview. At Covenant School we seek to help children form a worldview consistent with biblical truth. We emphasize that biblical truth is found in all of creation. In addition, we understand that there is a link between our understanding of a biblical worldview and our understanding that each student is created in the image of God.

Littlejohn and Evans, authors of the book "Wisdom & Eloquence," capture our perspective on this when they write that "If we are to exhibit a Christian worldview before our students, it must include them. Our theology needs to extend to our notions of children and especially of children as students. This mind-set recognizes each student's value as one who is created in the image of God, and it encourages the creative energy that stems from each child's image-bearing quality. This worldview mindset engages each student as a child of God in need of discipleship."

Grace-Filled

The ethos of our school is critically important. Littlejohn and Evans define ethos as "the essence or 'feel' of the school as a community of faith and learning". In particular, they write that "Ethos is the inarticulate expression of what the community values. It includes the quality of the relationships within the school, the traditions, the professional comportment, the approach to classroom management, the out-of-class decorum, the aesthetic personality of the school reflected in the student and faculty dress codes, the visual and auditory imagery, and the physical plant itself. And ethos is interfused with the academic culture including curriculum, pedagogy, faculty preparation, and student learning. Ethos is the way in which the school expresses (or doesn't) truth, goodness, and beauty through the experiences of every person who enters our halls."

The ethos of Covenant Christian School is based on our understanding and application of grace. The application of grace is what we value in our relationships with one another. In particular, we seek to have a community where forgiveness, humility, patience and Christ-like love are

exhibited. We have worked hard to understand and apply grace in our school and, as Littlejohn and Evans point out, our happy students are a partial reflection of a good ethos.

Academically Excellent

Our school's vision statement regarding academic excellence first notes that our school will provide each student with the tools that are necessary for academic success. Students at Covenant will be given opportunities to use these tools inside and outside of the classroom. These tools include such things as analysis, computation, critical thinking, decoding (breaking down words in order to better understand them), memorization, moral judgment, penmanship, phonics, problem solving, reading comprehension, research, public speaking, synthesis, and writing.

In addition, our vision recognizes that each child is unique and called by God for a particular purpose. This understanding naturally leads us towards a broadly understood liberal arts, non-“vocalized” curriculum. Further, we believe that in order for our students to follow God's call upon their lives, their studies must be rigorous, incremental in nature, integrated, and inclusive of exploring and dialoguing with original texts.

The Academically Excellent School

Expanding on our school's understanding of what it means for us to be academically excellent, we believe that the following elements must be present in our studies:

Based on the liberal arts and sciences. Littlejohn and Evans state that “Liberally educated people, whose intellectual skills are transferable to the learning of any subject or craft, are increasingly important in an economy in which the average adult changes careers multiple times over the course of his life.” Thus, we seek to provide an education for our children that moves away from that which is narrow or “vocalized.” A broad liberal arts and sciences education recognizes the importance of the pursuit of truth, goodness and beauty, and places our faith in God squarely in the center of who we are. The presentation of the liberal arts curriculum must be taught in a way that is sensitive to the way in which our students learn.

Integrated. At Covenant School we seek to present the full range of our curriculums in a manner that reveals their inherent interconnectedness. Breaking down the traditional subject boundaries truly reflects the reality and the excitement of the world in which we live. Rather than solely organizing our studies in discrete but disconnected subjects (i.e., here is Math, here is Science, here is Grammar, etc.), we are working towards arranging our studies into integrated quarterly units. These units are being developed by our faculty and members of our school board's academic committee with ongoing implementation.

We seek to ensure that history, science, math, the arts, and biblical truth all inform our students' exploration of all of God's creation.

Cyclical. Students should revisit certain subject material on a cyclical basis in order to ensure that the subject is covered in more depth as the student develops greater cognitive ability. For example, students are exposed to information regarding the founding of our nation in First Grade but come back to cover that subject more fully in Fifth Grade.

Foundational. Some information is foundational to a student's grasp of the whole curriculum and must be committed to memory. For example, a solid grasp of phonics would be considered foundational to Language Arts and a solid grasp of basic math facts would be considered foundational to Mathematics.

Rigorous. The education provided at Covenant focuses on all students learning at high levels under quality instruction. Assessment tools both standardized and classroom based allow students to demonstrate that they are learning at high levels.

Consistently evaluated and modified. Our curriculum must be regularly evaluated and modified based on our school's vision and student/faculty needs (i.e., literature selected for study, math leveling, etc.). This is not to imply that our curriculum will change; it simply means that our curriculum will be evaluated to ensure that our students are receiving the best education.

Measurable. Given certain educational goals, there must be means (or measurements) for determining whether those goals have been met. Curricular goals for individual parts of Covenant's program were put in place as the curriculum was determined. In other words, during the school's first eight years, goals for individual parts of the curriculum were noted. However, we recognize that now that our school's curriculum has matured, we need to begin reevaluating our goals and the tools which we will use to measure whether these goals have been met. A task force has recently been established to look at this issue.

Differentiated. We recognize that all students have differing gifts and come into the classroom with divergent levels of readiness for learning. Through differentiation, our teachers seek to identify how best to reach each student with the information to be communicated and ingrained.

Designed with the end in mind. During the development of the curriculum at Covenant School we have continually kept the end in mind. Our curriculum has been designed so that our students will be ready for wherever the Lord takes them after their time at Covenant.

The Liberal Arts Curriculum at Covenant School

A well-rounded liberal arts curriculum at Covenant School covers Language Arts, Mathematical Arts, and True Sciences.

Language Arts

Covenant School takes a traditional approach to implementing the Language Arts curriculum which includes:

Civics. We seek to give our students an understanding of citizenship which includes, but also goes beyond, the formal structure of government. In particular, we seek to help our students understand government and their role in the governing process, while also desiring that our students would understand the fullness of their citizenship. In this, we seek to help our students understand their role as a citizen to care for others, to understand the depth of difficult issues, and to engage in civil discourse. Formal instruction in these areas is found in Fifth and Sixth grades as our students work through the history of our government's development.

Composition. Our students develop writing skills which include both creative expression and the communication of information. Writing is obviously a very important skill and one that is complex to teach. Beginning in First Grade, our students are provided with regular opportunities to write and to receive feedback on the structure and content of their writing.

English Grammar: Understanding the structure of language through the teaching of grammar facilitates a greater understanding of the English language and its nuances. In addition, a solid grasp of English grammar supports our students as they begin to learn a foreign language.

History: We provide a chronological approach to the teaching of history. We see history as providing the "backbone" to our curriculum. History serves as the context in which many

subjects may be taught. In addition, we believe that our students not only exist in the context of a historical timeline but they that can “make and shape history” as well.

Latin: We study Latin at Covenant because it increases the ability of our students to acquire the complexities of the English language while engaging with a classical language.

Literature: Littlejohn and Evans declare that the secret to a great liberal arts education is to “Read, read, read and then read some more!” Good literature opens up our world and strengthens our “cognitive [the mental processes of perception, memory, judgment, and reasoning], cultural, social, spiritual, and epistemological [the origin, nature, methods, and limits of human knowledge] development.” We know that great readers are developed through the reading of great books. Our students are encouraged to read great books through our literature curriculum, and, in addition, their skills are strengthened as our teachers read great books to our students. Being read to allows our students to build their listening skills, develop their imaginations, and learn to love good stories.

Logic: Formal logic instruction is included as a part of our Mathematics curriculum. We recognize the need for our students to develop skills in analysis and argument (respectful!). Developing these skills is an important part of every aspect of our curriculum.

Penmanship. Our students need to be able to communicate in writing in a standard and legible manner. Our penmanship curriculum helps our students to do just that while reinforcing the beauty and order of language.

Presentation. We recognize that for many people one of the most difficult things they can do is to speak in public. By starting at an early age (remember show ‘n’ tell?), and continuing through Sixth Grade, we seek to have students who are comfortable and confident in speaking publicly. While informal opportunities exist throughout the school year, formal presentations are made by each student once each quarter beginning in First Grade.

Reading. In order to develop very good readers, Covenant teaches phonics, fluency and comprehension skills beginning at an early age. Through a solid understanding of phonics students are able to use letters to understand and manipulate sounds. In addition, our curriculum is designed to build fluency (accuracy, speed, and expression) skills. Finally, we work to help students develop comprehension strategies which help them understand and enjoy what they read.

Research. Traditionally, research skills have not been associated with elementary age children. It was thought that children did not have the necessary skills to conduct research and report its results. However, recent work in this area shows young students are indeed capable of conducting and interpreting research, and that there are many benefits to our students in their doing so. Benefits to our students include developing their creative gifts, enriching their critical thinking, enlarging their analytical capability and improving their presentation skills.

Spanish: While there are obvious practical applications for our students in learning the Spanish language, there is another advantage as well. It is important that our children begin to understand the breadth of God’s people and His creation. Learning a foreign language provides insights into the culture of other peoples.

Spelling. Despite the advent of spell check, being able to spell is an important skill for our students. With phonics as our foundation, our students develop excellent spelling skills. It is important to note that developing a firm understanding of phonics is considered a prerequisite to

the development of good spelling skills. Once letter sounds are understood, translating these to paper becomes a natural next step. Our Foundations phonics curriculum (Kindergarten through Third Grade) integrates these skills for smoother acquisition.

Technology: We recognize that we live in a world in which technology plays an important role. But, perhaps more importantly, we live in a world in which technology is continually changing! So, while we seek to expose our students to the thoughtful use of technology, we do not place a great deal of emphasis on it. Generally speaking, we limit our use of technology to the learning of keyboarding, Internet research skills, presentation of materials, and occasional word processing.

Vocabulary. Obviously, an extensive vocabulary is critical to academic success. Through our phonics, spelling, literature and vocabulary curriculums, our students encounter and master a broad vocabulary.

Mathematical Arts and True Sciences

Arithmetic: Our Saxon curriculum is designed to build student math skills in an incremental and cumulative manner. It is not unusual for our students to preliminarily feel that they have “mastered” a particular math skill and desire to move on to the next. But we recognize (and our curriculum reinforces) that our students must truly master their math skills in order to be fully ready to continue in the subject. The Saxon curriculum contains a high degree of review during grades First through Third and jumps in difficulty for students in Fourth through Sixth.

Bible (theology). Bible at Covenant is generally not separated from other subjects but instead is integrated into the full curriculum through “teachable moments.” However, in integrating our curriculum we do cover basic Bible content through all grade levels and provide in depth Bible study (Luke is studied throughout Fifth Grade) and apologetics (Sixth Grade).

Geography. Our students study geography to understand their neighborhood, community, region, nation and world. In addition, our students seek to grasp the impact that geography has had and continues to have on history and culture; therefore, geography is highlighted along the historical backbone of the curriculum.

Music. Music is seen as a critical element of the curriculum at Covenant. While music is important in its own right, an understanding of the fundamentals of music supports the learning of math (and visa versa). Further Littlejohn and Evans state that the “importance of music to the curriculum cannot be exaggerated” noting that an early exposure to music facilitates learning in a wide range of areas. Covenant will be adding Band to our curriculum this month.

Physical Education and Dance. Physical Education at Covenant focuses on two areas. First, PE seeks to teach our students how to play traditional playground games. Second, we seek for our students to understand the rules and fundamentals of play of most popular (and some not so popular) sports. Dance at Covenant is taught during PE periods and is seen as a means of furthering our understanding of truth, beauty and goodness.

Science: Our science curriculum is designed to help our students to “think like scientists”. In doing so our students spend time in scientific observation, experimentation, data collection and interpretation, and presentation of findings. In addition, our curriculum seeks to interact with scientific findings, and provide our students with an understanding of biblical truth in the context of science.

Visual Arts. The visual arts are critical to our students' understanding of what is good, true and

beautiful. Littlejohn and Evans note that “Instruction in drawing and art appreciation improves muscle coordination and perception skills.” Art instruction at Covenant School centers on the learning of fundamental art techniques and the work of great artists, and is integrated to a large degree into the curriculums of grades Third through Sixth.

Instruction

In order to have an academically excellent school we need to provide excellent instruction. In order to bring this desire to reality, we seek to provide:

The right people. We seek to hire the right people to serve at Covenant School. We have certainly been blessed by the quality of the folks who serve us currently at the school.

Teacher development. Each year teachers engage in internal and external training to help them further develop their teaching skills. In particular, during this year, teachers have worked toward understanding and implementing an integrated curriculum. In addition, during the month of February, teachers will be trained on the provision of differentiated instruction in the classroom.

Tools for instruction. The school is developing tools for instruction that will assist our teachers as they carry out their responsibilities. In particular, use of the school’s outdoor classroom and acquisition of appropriate technology have been helpful in this area. In addition, our teachers are each supplied with a laptop computer that supports their teaching.

At this point it would be helpful to say a few more words about our school’s outdoor classroom. It is generally recognized that it is important for children to have the opportunity to explore the outdoors. At Covenant Christian School, we view students exploring the outdoors as children considering God’s creation. This conviction makes exploring and understanding the outdoors critical for our students.

Our outdoor classroom broadens our students’ educational opportunities, and thus, supports them as they explore how God has created them. In particular, we believe that our outdoor classroom:

- Supports our hands-on, integrated curriculum. For example, each September, our Sixth Grade students visit Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds in Mansfield, Missouri. During their visit they learn about the science of seeds, meet with young entrepreneurs, and eat lunch in a cafe which features food grown at Baker Creek. While there, our students select heirloom seeds to plant in our school “farm”. Because our students study World War II they choose seeds from vegetable plants that would have been used for a World War II Victory Garden. They plant their Victory Garden each spring.
- Extends our classrooms beyond four walls. One of the reasons we are excited about our outdoor classroom is that our physical classrooms are relatively small. Not only are they small, but our classrooms are mostly located in the lower level of Covenant Church with few, if any, windows to provide natural light. Essentially, our outdoor classroom serves to expand the physical size of our classrooms.
- Enhances our academics: Art, Drawing, History, Language Arts, Latin, Literature, Mathematics, Science and Spanish are all enhanced through our outdoor classroom space.
- Promotes long-term observation. In an age of instant gratification, we are glad to have the opportunity to share the joys of anticipation with our students. Our students can and will observe seeds developing into radishes (and other fruits and vegetables) over a period of weeks and watch as trees and our prairie grow and develop over a period of years.

- Grants a greater understanding of how student efforts impact the environment. The outdoor classroom provides opportunities for us to discuss how small things can impact the environment. In particular, they will see plant and animal life enhanced and, as a result, see our own lives enhanced.
- Provides for management of natural resources. Caring for the environment is seen as a means for teaching stewardship of God's creation.
- Provides opportunities for our students to work together to accomplish their goals, building social as well as technical skills. Our students have been given opportunities to help construct our outdoor classroom. This has helped to build their woodworking and gardening skills as well as helping to build community.

Quality facilities. We seek to provide facilities that will allow us to carry out instruction. This does not always mean that we have the "flashiest" facilities, but that we use the space that God has provided us, in creative ways to carry out the vision of the school.

Teacher evaluation. Under the leadership of our school board, a teacher and Head of School evaluation process has been put in place which will strengthen our school.

Further Reading

The Blessing Of A Skinned Knee: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Self-Reliant Children by Wendy Mogel

The Dumbest Generation by Mark Bauerlein

Total Truth by Nancy Pearcey

The Well-Trained Mind by Susan Wise Bauer

Wisdom & Eloquence by Robert Littlejohn and Charles T. Evans