

RISE TO THE MOMENT OF TRUTH  
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Opinion

# Allen Mendenhall: Three cheers for Ivy Classical Academy!

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 12.06.24



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In a culture increasingly enamored with the ephemeral and ungrounded, the new Ivy Classical Academy (ICA) – which held its ribbon-cutting ceremony in late October – dares to remember that the true purpose of education transcends the merely utilitarian or instrumental. Located in Prattville, it professes that the cultivation of the intellect must be inextricably linked to virtue and that the riches of Western civilization must be passed to the next generation, not discarded in pursuit of illusory progress.

ICA is the sole representative in the state of the distinguished Barney Charter School Initiative at Hillsdale College. As part of this esteemed alliance, it enjoys access to the curriculum, training, and consultative support of Hillsdale’s highly respected K-12 Education Office.

ICA earns its first cheer for bringing a thriving national movement to Alabama. As Mark Bauerlein recently wrote for The Federalist: “The growth of classical education schools is astonishing. The numbers keep rising; there is no sign that the movement is beginning to plateau. Schools open, networks are created, charters are authorized, and kids fill the seats.”

As Alabama’s first classical charter school, ICA aspires to set a precedent. According to Dr. David Withun, ICA’s founding Head of School, “It is our hope that Ivy Classical Academy becomes a blueprint for other schools to follow in how we teach, what we teach, and the kind of young people who graduate from our school.”

The second cheer goes to the school’s dual focus on intellectual rigor and moral character. “The mission of Ivy Classical Academy is to ‘train the minds and improve the hearts of young people,’” Withun explained to me by email. “We want our students to be thoughtful, articulate, and knowledgeable. Perhaps even more importantly, we want our students to be virtuous people who are good citizens, friends, and members of their community.”

Classical education, Withun stated, is both distinct and rooted in tradition. “Until fairly recently, classical education has been the model of education that has been practiced all over the world,” he said. “A classical education takes up the tradition of thought, art, and knowledge about the world and life that has been accumulated and passed down and hands it on to the next generation.” This approach, he suggested, allows students to build on the wisdom of the past rather than starting anew with each generation.

But classical education is about more than knowledge; it also shapes character. Withun underscored that the school’s culture and curriculum are deliberately designed to help children develop virtuous habits. “As Aristotle wrote more than 2000 years ago, it is only

through forming virtuous habits in children that we can produce virtuous adults,” he said. “We especially emphasize the virtues of justice, courage, temperance, wisdom, compassion, and wonder.”

Students at ICA explore these virtues both in theory and through their studies in history, literature, and other subjects, using what they learn as a foundation for discussions about practical applications. “We discuss these virtues with our students regularly and refer back to them when talking about their behavior and the expectations we have of them,” Within said.

Within acknowledged that misconceptions about classical education persist but believes ICA can help clarify the confusion. “If classical education and Ivy Classical Academy are to become a model for other schools throughout Alabama, we will have to prove through our success what classical education can do for Alabama’s children.” By showing results and articulating its methods clearly, ICA aims to influence not just its own students but the broader educational landscape of Alabama.

The third cheer celebrates ICA’s affiliation with Hillsdale College. For generations, Hillsdale College has embodied the virtues of a liberal education, and its charter institutions pursue those virtues with resolute fidelity. Anchored in Hillsdale’s leadership standards, curriculum design, instructional integrity, school culture, and governance, these schools seek to nurture the essential virtues and habits of mind that drive true academic success.

At the core of Hillsdale’s educational philosophy is the conviction that K-12 schooling is not merely preparation for the workforce but a period of intellectual and moral discovery. Students at ICA, therefore, undertake a thorough immersion in the liberal arts and sciences, navigating literature, mathematics, history, and the natural sciences; they survey Latin, fine arts, and physical education, guided by a curriculum designed to foster a deep and enduring understanding of self and society.

Highlighting literacy, numeracy, and the core pillars of classical education, ICA will ensure that its students are prepared for advanced studies and grounded in the ethical and intellectual habits that sustain civic life. A rigorous and comprehensive ICA education will equip young minds with the tools to discern, judge and contribute, preparing them to flourish beyond the classroom and embody the virtues upon which our civilization – and any civilization – depends.

ICA isn't merely a school. It's a deliberate riposte to the capricious educational trends that have supplanted wisdom with fleeting utility.

By wedding the timeless disciplines of the liberal arts to individual virtue, it represents a quiet but resolute rebellion against the hollow progressivism that has long vitiated American education. Here, amid methodical instruction in Latin and literature, mathematics and moral philosophy, lies a profound conservative hope: that the renewal of our republic might be kindled in the disciplined minds of its youngest citizens.

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