

Students return to the classics at new school

By Jessica Young
Staff writer

Near the blackboard in a Wheaton classroom, kindergartners stand with impressive posture reciting lengthy Bible verses from memory and barely tripping over words like "yield" and "equity."

All shoes are tied, shirts tucked in and plaid jumpers meticulously straightened. In the corner, about a dozen identical navy L.L.Bean backpacks are neatly perched.

The teacher, Lauren Spano, refers to her students as ladies and gentleman, and the group responds accordingly. Cordial politeness and etiquette rules are the name of the game even for the kids who need a gentle reminder not to fidget once their daily exercise is completed.

Tucked away in College Church near Wheaton College's campus, the Clapham School has quietly been striving to produce well-bred, highly educated and religiously devoted children during its first year as a start-up academy.

"We tried home-schooling and public facilities, but we were finding there was no reinforcement of what we were doing at home," said Carolyn Litfin, who sends her second-grade son and kindergartner daughter to Clapham. "They need discipline and structure, and we wanted to be deliberate about training their manners. But we also really wanted them to have more spiritual cultivation and high academic standards."

Clapham's unconventional curriculum exposes students to phonograms, logic, debate, chess and Latin derivatives early in their educational careers.

Based on the tenets set forth by Charlotte Mason, a British educator in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Clapham's methodology makes it one of four schools in the Chicago area that adopted the classical teaching mode.

Doug Reynolds, co-founder of the Wheaton location, said the stress on old-school grammar and access to an incredible literary list of 1,500 books are keys to much of the scholastic success of his students. "The Velveteen Rabbit," "The Chronicles of Narnia" and the original "Madeline" series all are among the identified masterpieces.

"I love reading about Curious George and Clifford, but more well-written challenging choices with richer vocabulary and moral lessons are what we encourage," Reynolds said. "It's a more time-tested approach. Historically, there's an emphasis on Western civilization and what has been learned over the centuries. Rhetoric, the Socratic method. ... It's not so much we're a gifted school — it's just how students respond to the curriculum."

Reynolds said the classical education trend has re-emerged in the last 15 years, and students have consistently tested 20 to 30 percent ahead of national norms. They learn how to articulate themselves with

confidence and precision in spoken word and written form.

Thirteen families have committed more than 20 of their children to a Clapham education; there is a kindergarten roster, a combined first- and second-grade room and a fourth-grade group. Reynolds hopes to double enrollment next year.

After living in New York City and London, where the classical system is more customary, Reynolds and his wife tried to shake the seed planted by their travels by sending their son to a public kindergarten.

But it didn't seem to fit. Now both of their children attend Clapham and love the rigorous and religious format.

So far, they have served dinner to homeless people during a service project and been riveted by discussions on the Old Testament book of Numbers, which Reynolds said even few adults are fascinated by. Both are opportunities the kids wouldn't likely have at a public school.

"It has influenced the way we have dinner conversations and what we talk about in the car," Reynolds said. "Not everyone

Who to contact

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is going to be attracted to this model, and parents are not outsourcing their child's education to us. We don't just pay lip service to our mission."

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