

Teaching from a Biblical lens

Arma Dei Academy, a new faith-based school in Colorado, focuses on having a vigorous education and maintaining Christian values.

By Adrian Garcia

It was 7p.m. on a Tuesday and the pews of a Living Way Fellowship were empty. However, within the church's basement a small group of people bowed their heads in prayer as they began the meeting. This wasn't a prayer group or Bible study class but instead an informational meeting for Arma Dei Academy.

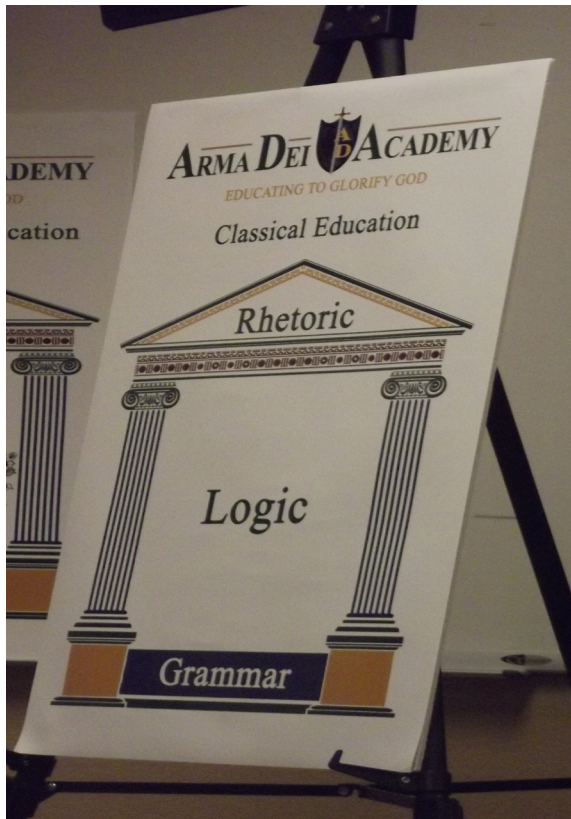
In the basement of the Highlands Ranch church parents, faculty, board members and guests gathered to discuss the new faith-based school. The main goal of the informational meeting was to have new students apply for an education program founded upon a Biblical worldview.

"Some say that a biblical worldview and life is just the lens we put on to look at life, said Robbi Marshall, a consultant for Arma Dei Academy. "Actually our worldview affects all we do."

Currently only nine students, spanning grades 2nd through 7th, attend the academy that was started last August. Marshall wrote: "This isn't unusual for an academy's first year."

However, Arma Dei Academy is unusual among most Colorado schools. While most schools take their names from famous men, their location, or indistinct nouns, the academy takes its title from the Latin language. The English translation is "Armor of God"; a phrase from the Biblical book of Ephesians which reads: "Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes."

The name is not the only distinguishing factor for the academy. It goes without saying that the faith-based aspect separates the academy from schools within Colorado's public education system. It would be unusual to walk into a public school and see Bibles lining bookshelves, crosses



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Arma Dei Academy is based on a trivium. The three part process teaches students at a grammar level, followed by a logic level and finally the rhetoric level.

hanging, and scriptures painted on the wall. This, however, is the atmosphere the nine students are surrounded by as they attend classes in the lower level of Living Way Fellowship.

"I student taught in a very-low income school, so this is a completely different environment," said Amy Gonzales, the school's math and science teacher. "Here you can say, 'Are you really going with God right now by what you're saying and how you're acting?' In a public school you could never say that."

Gonzales also said the students were eager to learn and their parents were involved and accessible. She was excited

to be able to work in this environment for her first year teaching.

Marshall explained to an audience of about 15 people how Arma Dei Academy is unlike public education because the program introduces subjects systematically. "It's not haphazard or piecemeal like many of the educations that we got, it didn't always connect together."

The academy also plans to stand out from other faith-based schools within the state. Greg Vigil, chairman of the Arma Dei Academy Board told those in attendance on Tuesday, December 4, why he pulled two of his children from other faith-based schools nearer Castle Rock, Colo.

"We were able to find the Christian education, but it wasn't always vigorous. We could find the vigorous education, but it usually wasn't Christian," Vigil said.

The four families that make up the academy's board didn't want to comprise either strong academics or the faith-based approach. After researching and visiting other Christian schools within the U.S. they ultimately decided a classic Christian education was best for their students.

"This is no small undertaking; none of us came from a background of running a school of this kind. It's been a walk of faith, but by His grace here we are," said Vigil.

Arma Dei Academy is a member of The Association of Classic and Christian Schools. The association consists of more than 200 schools throughout the nation. In addition to guiding schools to maintain an unyielding focus on Christian principles, the association also promotes a three tiered system, called a trivium, for learning. The trivium focuses on grammar, logic and rhetoric while teaching the traditional subjects like math, science and history.

Before 5th-grade the students are called "grammar students." Marshall said this group "learns to read so the rest of their lives they may read to learn."

At about the 2nd-grade, students begin learning Latin from Panagiota Pantou, Ph.D. The program teaches Latin to better understand other languages, primarily English. The long term goal for the students is that one day they will be able to read source documents in their original Latin version; the idea is nothing will be lost in translation.

Young grammar students in green-and-blue-plaid skirts with white socks reaching just below their knees or neutral-colored slacks, blue vests, and collared shirts learn the basics of other subjects (including the Bible) through rhyme, rhythm and repetition.

"The grammar level lays the foundation of learning, and it needs to because about grade-5 the student begins to transition into the next level of learning which is known as the 'logic stage,'" said Marshall.

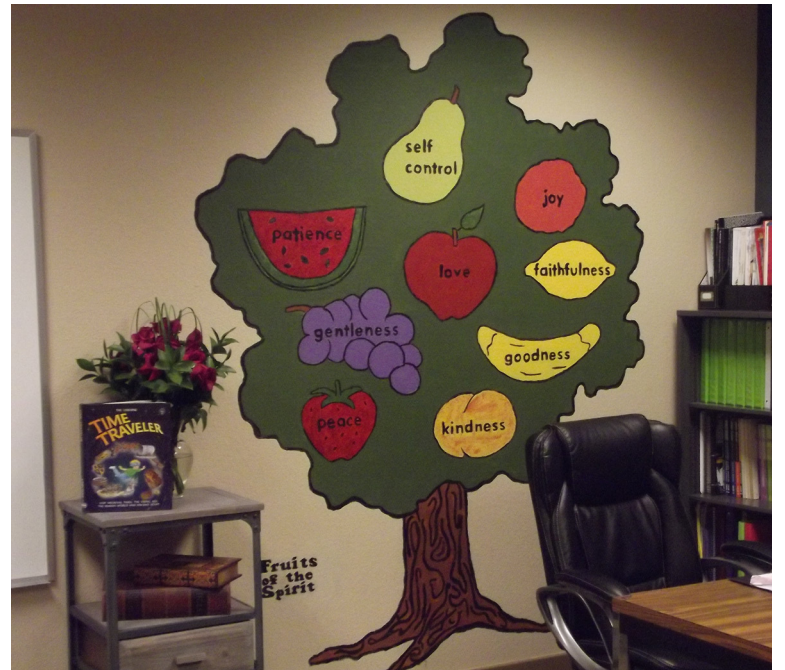
Logic students no longer take information at face value and begin to look at gray area and exceptions to the rules. In response the program teaches them "how to argue" by teaching valid and invalid arguments, cause and effect, and fallacies. The program also teaches the students to see connections between the subjects at this age.

The final stage of the trivium is the "rhetoric stage" or the art of expression. The program focuses on teaching this level of student how to express his or herself fluidly, with grace, elegance and persuasion.

Classical Christian education's trivium is not a new concept; it dates back to middle ages. However the ACCS considers this approach "timeless" and superior to today's model of education.

The association formed after the 1991 book, "Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning by Douglas Wilson," was published. The goal was then, and is now, to help individuals form faith-based schools around the trivium and principles in Wilson's book.

According to Kathy Muni, the lead teacher of the academy, the trivium works. Muni who helped start a faith-based school in Florida, said she has seen the program work and



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A painting on the wall of a classroom in Arma Dei Academy depicting "Fruits of the Spirit".

cited studies that found ACCS graduates do better on the SATs in every subject compared to the general population.

"Christians used to lead the way in science and every area, and we should be doing that again," Muni said.

Muni moved to Colorado one-week before school started. She, like Marshall, is well versed in the history and benefits of a classic Christian education, as well as, the secular view of Christian education and principles.

"The best way to dispel criticism is do what you're doing well and doing it right," Muni said.

Muni has put her own children through the classic Christian education program. She says unlike with some Christian schools, the ACCS students aren't "put in a bubble" that tries to keep the world out.

"What we do here is carefully, because it's dangerous stuff, expose [students] to pagan ideas so that they've already dealt with it," Muni said. "You have to train kids to be strong on the inside for Christ, with understanding, not just 'I believe it because my mom told me.'"

Students are evaluated based on the Stanford Achievement Test. Muni said the school won't teach to the test like many public schools but instead teach based on the trivium and "let the chips fall where they may."

One area the lead teacher admitted the classical Christian schools tend to do poorly is social studies because the program focuses on history instead.

Muni said, "Our emphasis is on God's hand in history as opposed to the studies of people."

Arma Dei Academy has an application process that evaluates students' abilities academically, their attitude and behavior, and the child's family.

"Families are assessed based upon family support and a family faith that truly aligns with us. We are interested in like-minded people, said Soraya Cartwright, vice president of the academy's board. "We believe when you put like-minded people together miracles happen."

Tuition for kindergarteners is \$4,300. For students 1st-grade to 8th-grade the tuition is \$8,600. The tuition fees include books and learning materials and the academy has various discounts and scholarships set up to help with the cost of the school. One such discount is "multi-child discount" of 5 percent.

At the end of the informational meeting Vigil once again had attendees bow their heads and pray for the students and future of Arma Dei Academy.

"Thank you for the folks who came out tonight, dear Lord, to hear about this," he said. "We just pray that in some way you touch them, dear Lord, and they know that there's a different choice for their students to reeducated in the world that can be, meaningful, enduring and lasting."