Back to School Speech Emphasizes the Habit of Excellence
"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then is not an act but a habit". Aristotle 384 B.C.-322 B.C.

For the purpose of this speech, I am going to use my definition of <u>academic</u> excellence as being, "An immediacy of needing to do something right, of being compelled to excel".

Our motto, AMDG (All For the Greater Glory of God) is the reason the school exists. The search for Truth encompasses the 7 strategies for classical academic excellence. These are:

1. **Classical trivuum** is our model for education; the grammar, logical and rhetoric stages really work as an organizing philosophy behind a curriculum;

2. Of utmost importance is parent involvement in how each day went for their child; their guidance and determination to hold the students' accountable for strong integrity and effort is essential for success;

3. Obedience and an ability to persevere to the end of a job done right are the telltale signs of success in school; the famous test is: "When you tell your child to do his/her chores, do they?";

4. If you create a language-rich home, extremely limit TV, videos, computer games and keep a library of books which expose your children to literature and non-fiction across a multitude of years, you will create critical readers;

5. Your child should be well-versed on and retain a multitude of math facts and math concepts (that this needs to be your **expectation** for them: math facts learned, whatever it takes);

6. Imitation, repetition, memorization, and emulation are the key learning methods;

7. Learning is an active occupation; you're not going to learn by waiting to be told how and when to do something.

A more interesting approach than someone's treasured but trite list might be to discuss just one practical question. This example question will let us see how the immediacy for the need to excel plays out in real life. The question is whether some students simply can't learn math by algorithms (fancy word for steps—albeit in Math, there could be several algorithms by which the problem can be completed).

The two sides of the argument can be represented by modern educators who say that some students can't learn math by algorithms and classical educators who might concede that other interventions might be necessary as well, but that ultimately students can learn math by steps.

The issue really has 3 dimensions. What motivates a student to learn? What makes someone open to learning the rules/capable of

understanding another's rules/ another's conceptual understanding? And, cognitively, how do different people learn?

The first question, motivation, can have as many answers as there are students. For the sake of simplicity, let's just say that students either realize that their confidence will be boosted and they will feel good if they succeed and that their past experience either confirms or puts suspicion on the way that so called help by others would help or frustrate their efforts (read confidence vs. closing the door).

The second question holds some hope out if that pretty decisive first question is answered in the negative. Being **open** to help in learning is pretty abstract, but I think it could be concretized. Before I started teaching (on the way to my first assignment in Mississippi), I met a college president who told me not to be afraid of silence in the classroom. After all, it's students who we want to do the thinking, not necessarily ourselves. This is what he was thinking. I witnessed this later with two of the best teachers in Wichita, where often silence ruled their room (when they were not lecturing). In these days of constant stimulation, what makes someone be able to work silently? Everyday situations at home could be one of the great mind openers. Not having a computer, not having tv and not having on-demand entertainment (or severely limiting all three, or using the technology against the grain) could lead to a child developing an ability to think on his/her own. Students might pick up a book; examine something in the back yard, whatever. The point is that they are laying the groundwork to become an active thinker. In this situation, creating boredom for your child is good. Of course, you as a parent have to plant the seed to fill it and to make it possible to be fulfilled with your desired activities.

Socrates said that one should "know thyself" which can be extended to like thyself or have the drive to accomplish something by yourself. The modern math proponents are not foolish; they're on to something: hoping Johnny will understand his math on his own terms makes sense pedagogically. It is just that "on his own terms", as we well know, just doesn't lift him to the level of excellence that borrowing others' discoveries and rules can help lead one to, albeit sometimes through his/her own blood sweat and tears.

Classical educators would say that students must learn everything according to the Truth of its laws of the discipline. We take pride in providing the real backdrop that will allow students to know they ARE ONTO TRUE AND MEANINGFUL UNDERSTANDING. OF course, we have to be willing to give the student whose cognition is dependent on kinesthetic or concrete terms (or visual or auditory) all the interventions that he/she needs in order to succeed. Memoria Press has some great developments on this front, as do the other classical home school organizations and leaders.

But, and this is big, we still have that questions as to how does someone promote, nurture, form a child to be able to gain the confidence to be motivated to truly follow the algorithm (or for some students create a successful one of their own)? The answer, of course, is that all possible parental and teacher formation, encouragement, guidance, challenging, etc. must be called into play.

Absent so far in our discussion is the fact that there is a whole life beyond academics for each one of our students. Their spiritual life comes first and then their academic formation and then formation socially. One of the great things that I like to see formed in students by their parents is wonder. I remember going to California when I was 9 and seeing the Redwood Forests. You could drive a car through those trees. That was the coolest experience for me. It made me wonder about many things. I might not have been ready for the algorithms, but it planted the seed for motivation to be later on. These types of activities beyond the academic world create the personality for the student, the well-balanced presence in the world to be able to enjoy it. While not connected to academics directly, the two are very interconnected.

In conclusion, I have never met a child who didn't succeed beyond our wildest imaginations if the teacher and parent retained their optimism about teaching that child to do things the right way. This needs to happen in all aspects of the student's life. The walk was sometimes long and arduous, but the result was always gratifying beyond belief. In a classical school, I am even more optimistic about the great ends we could achieve.