

**CHARACTER
EDUCATION**
S E R I E S



BUILDING A LOVE FOR WHAT IS NOBLE AND LASTING: GREAT HEARTS ACADEMIES

by Lindsey M. Burke



The R Street Institute's Character Education Series is a collection of case studies that highlight particular programs around the country that are finding unique ways to fuse character education into their curriculums and pedagogies. Although each of the programs is unique and has its own nuanced approach, in the aggregate, these studies show that the desire for schools—at all levels—to strive for excellence and to produce good people and citizens is alive and well—and growing.



Foreword

Great Hearts Academies, a 30-school network in Arizona and Texas, grounds itself in two audacious premises. First, it believes that a Great Books education—based on the intense and close reading of the classics of the Western intellectual tradition—should be open to everyone. Second, it contends that such an education produces not only scholars, but better people. In this second installment of R Street’s series on character education, Lindsey M. Burke offers ample evidence that Great Hearts is actually realizing these premises.

In its network of open-admission charter schools, Great Hearts produces students who do not only perform well on standardized tests, but also display a deep familiarity with challenging texts ranging from *Paradise Lost* to *The Federalist Papers*. Additionally, it accomplishes this while explicitly centering its curriculum around virtue ethics.

Perhaps most impressive of all, Great Hearts has proven that such an education is in high demand. Consider this: the country’s largest Great Hearts school, St. John’s College, educates slightly under 1,000 students between its two campuses, while Great Hearts has 30 sites with 19,000 currently enrolled students and 14,000 more on waiting lists. Not only is Great Hearts providing a highly intellectual curriculum to everyone, but it is also proving that there is real market demand for the type of product it offers.

— Eli Lehrer,
President, R Street Institute

Introduction

Great Hearts Academies—a network of classical charter schools operating in Arizona and Texas—is democratizing access to a rigorous, liberal arts education. Character and virtue are not simply a portion of the network’s model; they are the foundation upon which the schools are built. Today, some 19,000 students attend a Great Hearts Academy and 14,000 more remain on the waitlist, eager to learn from exemplary classical texts and to immerse themselves in a tradition of philosophy and rhetoric.¹ A combination of friendly, regulatory environments and philanthropic support can bring this model of building “great minds in great-hearted leaders” to students across the country.²



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¹ [“Great Hearts Academies United States Map,” Great Hearts Academies, last accessed Aug. 11, 2020.](#)

² [“Frequently Asked Questions,” Great Hearts Academies, last accessed Aug. 11, 2020.](#)



History and Purpose

All children should have access to a classical, liberal arts education if they want it. That is the proposition of Great Hearts Academies, a network of public charter schools co-founded by attorney and businessman Jay Heiler along with teacher and coach Daniel Scoggin. At first, there were doubts that a market for classical education even existed. But, in 2003, with the opening of Great Hearts' Veritas Prep in Phoenix—and the resultant wait list after the school's impressive, initial state test scores were released—such skepticism subsided. Now, Great Hearts is the largest network of public charter schools with a classical education foundation and mission. Great Hearts America, the charter management organization (CMO) that oversees the growth and finances of all the Great Hearts charter schools, sees it as their primary objective to develop a network of schools focused on the classical content and habits of mind that develop students of virtuous character.

The first Great Hearts charter schools began inauspiciously. A small group of parents founded a single charter school in Arizona in 2003 with 130 middle school students; its first cohort of 23 students graduated in the spring of 2007.³ Great Hearts opened its first campus in Texas in 2014, and today has 30 academies spread across Arizona and Texas. Taking classical education to scale has made Great Hearts a model unlike any other. Its success in doing so is turning heads—and hearts—toward a renaissance of classical education in the American southwest.

³ ["Updates and Changes to the Great Hearts Curriculum," Great Hearts Arizona, June 18, 2019.](#)



Creating Students of Virtue and Strong Character

Character and virtue are essential to the Great Hearts mission to “build great minds in great-hearted leaders.”⁴ Seeking “the true, the good and the beautiful” is at the heart of the classical, liberal arts education Great Hearts schools seek to provide.⁵ Their model steepens students in the Great Books and exposes them to expert instruction from teachers who use the Socratic method—a pedagogic approach premised on guiding questions instead of lectures. The Great Books are defined in the classical education realm as those works that comprise the foundational texts of Western civilization: classic works of literature, philosophy, poetry, history and the natural sciences. Examples include: *Antigone* (Sophocles), *Agamemnon* (Aeschylus), *The Republic* (Plato) and *Metaphysics* (Aristotle), along with *Paradise Lost* (Milton), *Don Quixote* (Cervantes), *Democracy in America* (Tocqueville) and *Faust* (Goethe).

Great Hearts’ mission is “held together by a north star that we all seek a life of virtue,” which is defined by the network as “excellence.”⁶ That mission is grounded in the belief that education “is not just about forming smart scholars, but about forming flourishing, great-hearted human beings,” and an understanding that “students’ character and talents can spark a renaissance in civic life in which a search for what is good is the essential starting point.”⁷ Rather than having “character curriculum,” Great Hearts views character development as suffused across everything they do, from the books they read to the pedagogy they employ.

⁴ [“Frequently Asked Questions.”](#)

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ [Great Hearts Annual Report 2017-2018: Our Story: The First Fifteen Years](#), Great Hearts America, 2017-2018.

⁷ [Great Hearts Annual Report](#), p. 14.

“The centrality of character development in the mission of the schools is clear.”

Robert Jackson, Chief Academic Officer



As public charter schools, Great Hearts Academies are publicly funded and open to any students in the state. As classical charter schools, specifically, they are laser-focused on imbuing their student scholars with a deep appreciation of the foundational texts of Western civilization.

Robert Jackson, the chief academic officer of Great Hearts America and director of the Institute for Classical Education, explains: “The centrality of character development in the mission of the schools is clear.”⁸ He speaks of Great Hearts as conveying a heritage—a tradition of philosophy and rhetoric. He further emphasizes the use of language to persuade and to bring about a vision for improving and bettering the world in which we live. He talks of philosophy—of teaching students to know the world because it is knowable, and teaching them to ask the right questions.⁹ This is a critical component of the classical approach—teaching students to seek answers to the same long-standing questions that centuries of great minds have explored. As such, the classical approach aims to show students that they are the heirs to the legacy of Western civilization, and they have a responsibility to carry it into the future.

⁸ Author interview with Robert Jackson (phone), April 16, 2020.

⁹ Ibid.



Defining Virtue

Jackson describes the development of student character in Aristotelean terms as a long lineage of habits that are formed.¹⁰ He continues with how Great Hearts' defines virtue:

Virtue is an ongoing process of engaging in habits that are virtuous. This carries beyond the classroom; for example, to the athletic field and places of work. It is about developing the personal attributes—such as patience and persistence—that are required to see things through in the pursuit of excellence. Character development is also grounded in curiosity, [...] philosophic wonder and the friendships formed in uncovering information together.¹¹

Hence the network's approach to learning that utilizes text-based inquiry and classroom discussion. This kind of virtue formation is at the heart of Great Hearts' understanding of character.

Part of Great Hearts' mission is making classical education available to all students, regardless of socio-economic status. For centuries, a classical education was primarily accessible to only those students able to enroll in elite, often private, schools. Great Hearts, however, is democratizing access through the tuition-free public charter school model and aspires to have its schools' populations reflect the demographic makeup of the communities in which they are located.¹² In Arizona, for example, students from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Black, Latino and Asian) comprise about 40 percent of school enrollment, and between 16 to 18 percent of students qualify for Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRL). Similarly, 30 percent of the population in Arizona identifies as Hispanic or Latino, and 14 percent of the population in Arizona is below or around the poverty line.¹³ Approximately 10 percent of Great Hearts students have special needs and are served through Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) or similar 504 plans. Around one percent of students are English Language Learners.¹⁴

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Robert Jackson, "About the Institute for Classical Education," [Institute for Classical Education, 2018.](#)

¹³ "Arizona: Quick Facts," U.S. Census Bureau, last accessed Aug. 11, 2020.

¹⁴ ["Frequently Asked Questions."](#)



Digging Deeper: Character and Virtue at Great Hearts

According to CiRCE Institute founder and president Andrew Kern, while not always easy to define, classical education is based on three principles: that truth is, that truth is knowable and that truth can be communicated.¹⁵ In its practical application: “The arts of truth-seeking define [classical] curriculum and pedagogy.”¹⁶ Virtue and character are derived from truth, which is defined in the classical education space as the attainment of excellence in four specific domains: moral virtue, intellectual virtue, physical virtue and spiritual virtue. Kern continues:

Moral virtue [...] is the ability to do what is right and to avoid what is wrong. Moral virtues include faithfulness, purity of heart, diligent labor, courage, etc. The cardinal moral virtue is justice [...] Intellectual virtues are the virtues of understanding. We all have the ability to perceive Truth, but some refine this ability into a virtue. Intellectual virtues include the effective use of language, logical reasoning, the ability to identify likenesses and differences, and so on. The cardinal intellectual virtue is wisdom. Physical virtues include speed, strength, coordination, and so on [...] Finally, spiritual virtues can be summarized by the words “Faith, hope, and love” oriented toward God.¹⁷



***“ Why the word virtue?
It has a deeper historical
meaning. It means
excellence, strength
and courage. ”***

Daniel Scoggin, co-founder

15 Andrew Kern, “What is Virtue?”, Memoria Press, July 1, 2012. For additional information on the CiRCE Institute, see: <https://www.circeinstitute.org>.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

Great Hearts' conception of virtue is closely aligned. For Great Hearts, virtue boils down to one word: Excellence—specifically moral, intellectual and athletic excellence—derived in part from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. These moral virtues are captured in the "fundamental habits and dispositions of human excellence" which include:

- Strength
- Courage
- Moderation
- Piety
- Magnanimity
- Goodness
- Beauty
- Truthfulness¹⁸

But as Great Hearts co-founder Daniel Scoggin asks: "Why the word virtue? It has a deeper historical meaning. It means excellence, strength and courage."¹⁹ Virtue is moral, intellectual and physical excellence combined. That trifecta guides Great Hearts and "speaks to our completeness as human beings."²⁰ Intellectual excellence is the pursuit of truth; moral excellence is the pursuit of goodness; and physical excellence is the pursuit of beauty (understanding and appreciating it).²¹

As Scoggin explains:

Great Hearts academies do not deploy a 'character curriculum.' Students are formed by the culture of the school, implicit and explicit, and each student's choices to lead within it. Liberal education consists of cognitive, emotional and moral education—thinking deeply about noble things, and living well together. We believe, like Plato, that the highest goal of education is to be good, intellectually and morally [...] We are the character. There aren't a bunch of character posters on the wall.²²

This focus on character development and school culture is most apparent in Great Hearts' approach to curriculum and instruction.

¹⁸ Lecture by Daniel Scoggin, "Great Hearts 6 Loves: #1," Great Hearts, Feb. 15, 2019.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.



The Process of Character and Virtue Development

Instilling Great Hearts' students with virtue and good character is achieved through its use of a Great Books curriculum coupled with Socratic discussion. According to Scoggin: "Strictly speaking, Socratic discussion is about the most important humane and philosophical topics: it is about moral virtue, political philosophy, the nature of knowledge and the essence of art [...]"²³ In this way, the Socratic method goes hand-in-hand with the Great Books curriculum that the schools use.

Jerilyn Olson, Great Hearts vice president of faculty development, continues:

[Socratic method] works because it starts with a shared text or shared experience and drives inquiry through observation and carefully planned questions. It builds capacity in students for problem solving and proof. It is a method that trusts in the existence of truth and the human ability to pursue truth.²⁴

That quest to develop students of virtuous character is also grounded in the Great Books that grapple with answering questions such as: What is justice? What is knowledge? What is proof? And, critical to character development: What is my duty to myself, my family, my friends?²⁵



“It is about moral virtue, political philosophy, the nature of knowledge and the essence of art.”

Daniel Scoggin, co-founder

²³ ["Understanding the Socratic Method at Great Hearts," Great Hearts Academies, June 28, 2017.](#)

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ ["The Great Books at Great Hearts," Great Hearts Academies, June 28, 2017.](#)

Curriculum— Grounded in The Great Books

The Great Hearts curriculum is designed to imbue students with the intellectual capacity for “precision, insight and eloquence,” which are cultivated through the reading of Great Books, “exploring imaginative worlds,” conducting experiments and students producing fine art of their own.²⁶ During their high school years alone, students spend more than 1,000 hours in seminar discussions, and read approximately 200 works of literature and philosophy, along with more than 100 poems.²⁷



Early Years

Socrates’ observation that “wisdom begins in wonder” guides the coursework of Great Hearts’ youngest scholars, beginning in kindergarten.²⁸ The Great Hearts annual report states: “We must teach the young to love what is greater than themselves so they can come to understand who they are.”²⁹ Literacy and the capacity to read deeply is fostered in students through exposure to exemplary texts that are part and parcel of the Great Hearts curriculum. In the earliest years, that means reading fairy tales that hook children and encourage them to develop a love of reading. As Jackson describes it, that means beginning with a sense of “wow;” of children exploring uncharted worlds through books.³⁰ Fairy tales, he notes, “are full of moral conundrums and challenges,” which help children understand right and wrong.³¹ From *The Velveteen Rabbit* and the *Frog and Toad Collection* to *The Boxcar Children* and *Charlotte’s Web*, children cultivate a love of reading through engaging, entertaining books. As they move up through later elementary school, books like *Where the Red Fern Grows*, *The Hobbit*, *A Wrinkle in Time* and *Aesop’s Fables* further their connection to great literature.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ [Great Hearts Annual Report](#).

²⁸ [“Classical Education for Our Time,” Great Hearts Academies, Sept. 19, 2020.](#)

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Jackson interview.

³¹ Ibid.

Students are increasingly introduced to more challenging texts over the course of their education. Great Hearts is keen on finding the very best texts they can. As Jackson explains: "Literacy, is not just functional; it is about exposing students to the masters, the very best writers and thinkers."³² Students make their way through *Julius Caesar*, *Beowulf*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, along with numerous others, from the sixth to eighth grades. Middle school is also the time for extensive poetry reading; Emerson, Tennyson, Keats, Frost and Donne become familiar names to students during those years. Students also take three years of Latin in middle school.

By the time students reach high school, they are reading our founding documents. They read *The Federalist Papers* and the writings of Tocqueville, and the works of ancient Roman and Greek authors. As Jackson explains, the high school reading list is about maintaining the "perennial arguments that have come down to us through this tradition" and have stood the test of time.³³ In addition to these foundational documents, students read The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, seminal court cases like *Marbury v. Madison*, *Dred Scott v. Sanford* and *Plessy v. Ferguson*. They read The Monroe Doctrine, The Emancipation Proclamation and The Gettysburg Address. These documents are couched among a core reading list that includes: *Democracy in America*, *The Second Treatise of Government*, *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey* and *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. Students make their way through Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and Virgil's *The Aeneid*. Dostoevsky, Herodotus and Milton round out the core curriculum.

Great Hearts does not give short shrift to mathematics. As Jackson points out, it is something man has contrived, so it has its own kind of grammar.³⁴ And because it's "manmade," it provides an opportunity to show students what the language of math can do.³⁵ The curriculum tends to stick with theoretical mathematics, rather than its applications, but the schools have recently added a senior-level coding course. The overall approach, however, is geared toward the discipline of mathematics as its own world of wonder.³⁶

Students spend approximately two hours each day in the Great Books, understanding not only history and literature, but how grammar, logic and rhetoric work. And critically, the arts are more than an ancillary part of the curriculum. Arts are exemplary of the liberal arts at large, and excellence in the arts is an invaluable element of human excellence, which is the goal of virtue education.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

Jackson further notes Great Hearts' emphasis on skill mastery: on prosody, pitch, notes and timber.³⁷ Students are taught not just to know skills, but to become habituated to them. This approach builds off the sentiment contained in Aristotle's writings millennia ago, which is often paraphrased as: "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."³⁸

Great Hearts does, however, downplay electives and choice in coursework. Students can choose between Latin or Greek but, beyond that, they study a fixed, deep curriculum. As Jackson explains: "The time that we have is precious, so we've structured a curriculum around the Great Books, math, science, arts and language, and that fills every day."³⁹

Although the curriculum is established, it is not set in stone. The Great Hearts curriculum team recently undertook a two-year review of the high school curriculum to investigate ways to strengthen the program. As part of that process, curriculum leads interviewed teachers and headmasters, along with parents and alumni, and met with leaders in some of the best classically based high schools across the country. In addition to settling on roughly two hours per night as an appropriate amount of homework and introducing an expanded writing program coupled with public speaking, the team provided a new, expanded collection of "Senior Course Options." While students continue in their senior year with Humane Letters and Fine Arts, they are now given the opportunity to choose three from among the following five options: The American Rhetorical Tradition, Logic and Coding, Physics II, Calculus II and/or a fourth year of a modern foreign language.⁴⁰

The curriculum creates a rigorous standard, but Great Hearts tries to keep the workload manageable. Homework is kept to a minimum for younger children—less than 30 minutes per evening for elementary school students. By middle school, students can expect about an hour of homework per night.⁴¹ Headmasters ensure students aren't overworked, and they make certain there is space for athletics, drama and other extracurriculars.

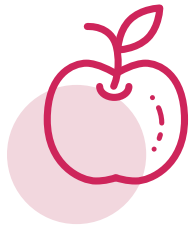
37 Ibid.

38 Caelan Huntress, "My favourite quote of all time is a misattribution," *Medium*, Aug. 24, 2017.

39 Jackson interview.

40 "Updates and Changes to the Great Hearts Curriculum."

41 Jackson interview.



Pedagogy: The Art of Teaching in a Classical School

Content is only part of the story. Teachers must have subject matter expertise and gain experience using the Socratic method. Great Hearts has a relatively young teaching faculty, and Jackson estimates that probably no more than 30 to 40 percent of the faculty have been there more than five years. Attrition rates hover around 15 to 20 percent; Great Hearts retains 80 to 85 percent of their teachers each year.⁴² Among those who leave, many go back to graduate school. Although teachers at the elementary level tend to have degrees in elementary education, middle and high school teachers are expected to have subject matter expertise.

Prior to teaching at Great Hearts, new faculty engage in several weeks of training over the summer to introduce them to the culture of the schools and the Socratic method of instruction. New teachers are also paired with more seasoned educators and headmasters, and use model lessons in their first year of instruction. Additionally, classroom observation is an ongoing component of teacher evaluation.

Just as there was skepticism early on about whether there was a market for classical education, there was also concern among some that the schools “would not be able to find the ranks of classically-minded teachers to staff such a network of academies.”⁴³ Although finding teachers with a classical background has not been without its challenges, colleges such as St. John’s College and Hillsdale College have provided a strong classical teacher pipeline. Additionally, Great Hearts has developed partnerships with the University of Dallas (UD) and Templeton Honors College at Eastern University to train teachers. This has helped with both the teacher pipeline and their ability to train internally in conjunction with institutions of higher education that understand the classical model.

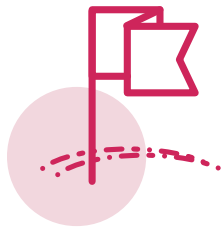
Some teachers also pursue master’s degrees in classical education through UD and Templeton Honors College at Eastern University. In 2016, UD launched a Master of Humanities degree with a concentration in classical education in a formal partnership with Great Hearts; teachers receive a tuition discount on the a 36-credit-hour program, which includes a practicum.⁴⁴ In June 2017, Templeton Honors College at Eastern University launched a Master of Arts in Teaching degree with a concentration in classical education geared toward Great Hearts teachers that is “truly classical in its philosophy, methods, and goals.”⁴⁵

42 Ibid.

43 Daniel Scoggin, “Interview by Andrew J. Zwerneman: Great Hearts, Great Story: An Interview with Daniel Scoggin,” *Cana Academy*, Jan. 19, 2018.

44 University of Dallas, “UD, Great Hearts Academies Announce Partnership,” Press Release, June 9, 2016.

45 “Letter to Great Hearts Headmasters,” Templeton Honors College at Eastern University, Nov. 28, 2016.



Measuring Success

In 2001, two years before the first Great Hearts academy launched, Congress passed and President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)—the sixth reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—that included major changes to school accountability. Whereas Great Hearts’ focus is on a classical liberal arts education that emphasizes literature, the arts and even the language of mathematics, NCLB—and the standards-based reform movement of the 1990s that propelled it—had a concentrated focus on math and reading achievement as demonstrated on federally mandated state standardized tests.⁴⁶

Critics of NCLB expressed concerns about the law’s narrow focus and its emphasis on “drilling for multiple-choice tests.”⁴⁷ The Common Core State Standards Initiative (Common Core) supported a decade later by the Obama administration also faced similar critiques about the amount of instructional time dedicated to reading informational texts and nonfiction, rather than great works of literature. This shift forced many English classes to read excerpts from plays and novels, rather than literature in its entirety.⁴⁸

NCLB, standards-based reform, state standardized tests and efforts such as Common Core leverage outcomes on standardized tests—in particular math and reading assessments—to demonstrate student academic achievement. Although student scholars at Great Hearts must take the same state standardized tests as students in district public schools, their outcomes are a modest piece of the networks’ evaluation metrics, rather than the foundation.


Great Hearts measures success by seeing their graduates leave school oriented toward ‘truth.’ This is admittedly harder to capture than a student’s ability to apply the quadratic formula on a standardized test. Great Hearts’ success, Jackson notes, “will show up 10 or 15 years from now when we see the types of lives [our graduates] live.”⁴⁹ That does not mean they disregard standardized test outcome data; college admissions rates, ACT and SAT scores and state assessments, among other metrics, are used to inform progress. But Great Hearts is more interested in the data that show they have cultivated students’ hearts and minds.

46 Thomas S. Dee and Brian A. Jacob, “The Impact of No Child Left Behind on Students, Teachers, and Schools,” *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, Fall 2010, pp. 149-207.

47 Linda Darling-Hammond et al., “Evaluating ‘No Child Left Behind,’” *The Nation-New York* 284:20 (May 21, 2007), p. 11.

48 Sandra Stotsky, “Common Core Standards’ Devastating Impact on Literary Study and Analytical Thinking,” The Heritage Foundation, Dec. 11, 2012.

49 Jackson interview.



“We sometimes call this critical thinking, but the ancients called it wisdom.”

Daniel Scoggin, co-founder

They want students to graduate with a sense of obligation to pass on what they have learned and not only to give back, but to seek the beautiful and produce the beautiful.

High levels of proficiency on state assessments are one thing; maintaining a tradition that began with Aristotle and fosters human flourishing is another. As Scoggin described in a 2018 interview: “We are realizing that the best hedge against the vicissitudes of fortune will always be the permanent: clear thinking, wisdom, and character, which a classical education is ideally structured to inculcate.” He continued:

Indeed, we can’t know what and where jobs will be a few years from now, but history and human nature tell us that thoughtful leadership will be required. In every age of uncertainty, we should double down on the enduring ends of a classical education—the ability to deliberate carefully, see multiple sides of an issue and exercise sound, decisive judgment. We sometimes call this critical thinking, but the ancients called it wisdom.⁵⁰

The raw numbers are, however, impressive. Across all schools, 97 percent of the Great Hearts class of 2019—which included 498 graduates—attended college immediately after graduation, and 80 percent of those students received merit-based college scholarships. The average SAT score of Great Hearts graduates is 1267 (199 points above the national average) and students have an average ACT score of 27 (6 points above the national average). Great Hearts produced five national merit finalists and 13 National Hispanic Scholars in 2019.⁵¹ Additionally,

⁵⁰ “Interview by Andrew J. Zwerneman.”

⁵¹ Great Hearts America, “[Graduating Class of 2019 by the Numbers](#),” Press Release, Aug. 12, 2019.

Great Hearts students outperform the state averages on the AzMERIT test—Arizona’s state test.⁵² In 2018, the *Phoenix Business Journal* named six Great Hearts schools among the top-20 charter schools in the Phoenix metro area, and student SAT scores put five Great Hearts academies in the top-15 public high schools in Arizona.⁵³

Moreover, at a time when education policy is abuzz with questions about how to improve civic literacy, Great Hearts may have an answer. Across the country, just 24 percent of eighth grade students performed proficiently on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics exam, the results of which were released in April 2020. That figure is not significantly different than it was 20 years earlier, in 1998.⁵⁴ Like everything at Great Hearts, instilling civic literacy is accomplished by reading the masters. Students read and digest *The Federalist Papers* and engage in discourse on the early American Republic. They read Mark Twain, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Washington Irving to understand the American experience. They situate it in the broader, historical context that informed the founding, including deep reading of Roman and Greek authors. The Philanthropy Roundtable listed Great Hearts among its top classical and charter school approaches to bolstering civics education.⁵⁵

52 “Frequently Asked Questions.”

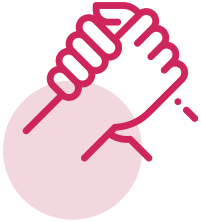
53 Great Hearts America, “Graduating Class of 2020 by the Numbers,” Press Release, Sept. 19, 2020.

54 National Assessment of Educational Progress, *NAEP: Report Card: Civics, Achievement-Level Results*, U.S. Dept. of Education, 2018.

55 Adam Kissel, “High-Impact Civic Education Projects: A Guide for Donors,” *Philanthropy Roundtable*, Summer 2019.



Expansion and Replication: A Moral Imperative



The Right Conditions

Expansion is part of Great Hearts' moral imperative to serve more families.⁵⁶ When making the decision about the cities to which they might expand, Great Hearts considers regulatory and credentialing environments, in addition to the philanthropic support and local community commitment to opening a new school. Leadership gives serious consideration to whether the laws and regulations in a particular area allow them to implement the Great Hearts model with fidelity. They also consider whether there are overbearing teacher certification requirements that prioritize paperwork credentials over classical training. Education policy scholars have long-acknowledged Arizona's friendly regulatory environment, having fewer barriers to market entry for new charter schools and fewer state regulations for those that open. That has supported charter school growth generally and has given Great Hearts in particular space to execute their model.⁵⁷ As Jackson notes: "Generic measures and [...] shibboleths tend to cramp our style."⁵⁸



Philanthropic Support

Expansion is also conditioned in part by philanthropic support. As public charter schools, Great Hearts academies have several main sources of revenue, including per-pupil revenue generated through the Arizona and Texas state funding formula, and federal funds provided through Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the National School Lunch Program. As charter schools, however, they do not benefit from local property tax revenues and, as a result, receive approximately \$2,400 less per pupil than their district school counterparts. Great Hearts estimates this equates to between \$48,000 to \$72,000 less per classroom than the public schools

⁵⁶ "Interview by Andrew J. Zwerneman."

⁵⁷ Matthew Ladner, "Arizona's Success with Charter Schools Is a Model Other States Would Be Wise to Follow," *National Review*, Nov. 8, 2019.

⁵⁸ Jackson interview.

operating nearby.⁵⁹ The charter school system is also at another substantial funding disadvantage relative to its traditional district system counterparts: it does not receive any public funding for facilities construction, maintenance or leasing of schools. School construction and maintenance is financed primarily through the tax-exempt bond market and through foundation and corporate charitable contributions.⁶⁰

Although the schools are publicly funded, taxpayer resources only cover approximately 83 percent of the schools' expenses—as a result, they look to private, charitable donations to provide a portion of their revenue.⁶¹ The Great Hearts schools benefit from a sister organization, The Great Hearts Foundation, a nonprofit established in 2017 to increase philanthropic resources for Great Hearts Academies and the students and families they serve. The Foundation is critical to Great Hearts' goal of expanding enrollment to 50,000 students by 2025—a goal that can only be accomplished through the creation of new academies supported by substantial, philanthropic investment.⁶² To date, philanthropists provided \$6 million to open six Great Hearts schools in San Antonio; philanthropists in Fort Worth, Texas, pledged \$12 million to bring Great Hearts to the area; and Florida is on their expansion radar, contingent on sufficient philanthropic support.⁶³

Finally, expansion and replication rely on building faculty out of seasoned, classically trained teachers who are willing to go to other states and expand the network. Part of that evolution is the Institute for Classical Education, which seeks to grow the classical, liberal arts movement. As part of the Great Hearts Foundation, the Institute for Classical Education hosts conferences, including the annual National Classical Education Symposium, which brings together historians and liberal arts scholars, teachers, education analysts and philanthropists working on the development and advancement of liberal arts education. They also publish *Virtue*, a regular magazine that includes essays and interviews by and with scholars in the classical education movement.


59 ["Frequently Asked Questions."](#)

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

62 ["Great Hearts Foundation."](#)

63 Max Eden, ["Great Hearts, Great Minds."](#) *City Journal*, Autumn 2019.



*We believe, like Plato,
that the highest goal of
education is to be good,
intellectually and morally.*

Daniel Scoggin, co-founder

Conclusion: Looking Back To Move Forward

Walking the hallways of Veritas Prep, one of the Great Hearts Academies, one can't help but feel a sense of awe at the quality of instruction and work taking place within its walls. Students engaged in lectures in a high school French course with not a single word of English spoken. Socratic seminars being led by teachers as ideas bounce back and forth between students enthralled with classic texts. The hallways lined with beautiful, skillfully crafted works of art, hand drawn and painted by students from kindergarten through their senior year. Great Hearts has reinvigorated classical education and democratized access to it. It leverages the public charter school model to bring a rigorous liberal arts education to students from any walk of life who want it. Its leadership strives to forge creative partnerships with universities that have retained a commitment to classical education. And its students and alumni are the beneficiaries.

Great Hearts' mission, "to cultivate the minds and hearts of students through the pursuit of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty," is resonating with families, students, and the thousands of hopeful scholars on their waitlist to attend.⁶⁴ Policymakers can help expand access to classical education by removing barriers for new charter school start-ups, keeping regulations at a minimum, and allowing the schools, parents and the market to determine and drive accountability. Philanthropists can support the effort through their continued contributions to these centers of excellence.

State and federal policymakers have paraded numerous educations down the policy path for over a half century. Great Hearts has found success by taking the far longer view: looking back centuries to those education practices that have instilled character and virtue in individuals since the time of Aristotle, Socrates, Plato, Herodotus and so many others. While it may be 'all Greek' to government officials, its merits are perfectly clear to students and families.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

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Lindsey M. Burke is the Will Skillman Fellow in Education and director of the Center for Education Policy at The Heritage Foundation.



R STREET INSTITUTE

1212 New York Avenue, NW, Suite 900
Washington, D.C. 20005
(202) 525-5717 feedback@rstreet.org
www.rstreet.org

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