

# Curriculum Corner

September 20<sup>th</sup>

## Literacy Essentials



We've been so happy to see you all engaging with RightStart Math by attending the zoom training and beginning to play math games with your children. We'd like to offer some additional information and resources concerning a key component of our academic curriculum: *Literacy Essentials*.

*Literacy Essentials* is a program that integrates four subjects – it includes phonics, reading, spelling, and handwriting. The program marries these together into an integrated whole that equips children with the tools that allow for mastery of the English language. Because excellent literacy skills are critical for any higher-level learning, we have invested in this systematic program for our students. Over the summer, the school flew in an expert to train our teachers over four days so that they can teach your children to be expert readers, spellers, and writers.

With *Literacy Essentials*, students do not simply memorize hundreds of sight words or guess at words in books based on the pictures. Rather, students learn the underlying logic of the English language so that they can decode any word they encounter. In the process, they deeply understand English spelling and develop proper handwriting.

With this in mind, we want to advise you that *Literacy Essentials* work may look different compared to what you and your children have been used to at other schools. Regular spelling lists, sight words, and handwriting practice are not regular homework in this program. *Literacy Essentials* is meant to be implemented with much less homework than other contemporary reading, spelling, and writing programs. This is because the work is being done at school by our teachers—we aren't pushing practice work on you during your precious

family time at home! Even with a lower homework load, schools have found *Literacy Essentials* to be highly effective, especially with students who have previously struggled with reading and spelling.



## November 1<sup>st</sup>

### Nature Study: Cultivating Wonder for God's Creation

Staying true to the traditional understanding, Nature Study is the discipline that encompasses the sciences such as biology, physics, chemistry, and the like, with the goal of deeply understanding the natural world. At STA, we integrate study of the sciences into a comprehensive vision of reality as God's creation—which He makes intelligible to us as His image bearers. This reality does not diminish the importance of scientific knowledge, but rather impels us to behold nature in a way that is at once deeper and more comprehensive, but no less rigorous, than modern scientific materialism.



Nature Study trains the student above all to see nature through the eyes of love and to respect its inner integrity. This is the critical foundation on which all further specialized study in the sciences is based. At STA, we emphasize the observation, classification and rendering of living things (ask your child about his or her Nature Journal). Based on their observations, we lead students to make important connections and synthesize their knowledge across different aspects of science. For example, students may connect the differences in the design of birds' wings to the amount of force necessary for each bird to achieve the kind of flight it needs to thrive in its environment. This is not simply a teaching exercise. Rather, we aim to combat the failure in many contemporary scientific fields where researchers pick and choose data points that fit a preferred conclusion. By focusing on authentic observation, our students learn the habit of attention and careful study to truly understand the nature of reality.

After students have engaged in the study of living wholes, they move to the study of their parts through the study of anatomy, physiology, physical science, and related disciplines. From this foundation students proceed through the relevant sub-disciplines in science—chemistry, geology, astronomy, etc., with special attention to how these various aspects of nature combine to make Earth a home suitable for life, but also in a way that prepares the student for the study of these subjects in high school.



Students will complete their studies at Aquinas with a keen eye for nature, a deeper wonder and love for the natural world, a greater awe at the mystery of living things, and a deep appreciation of how the world, in providing a home fit for life, reflects the wisdom and generosity of its Creator.

**November 22<sup>nd</sup>**

## Why Study Latin?

Latin is a feature among classical schools but it is common to wonder why that is -- after all, Latin is a "dead" language and seems to be "impractical" to modern eyes. While learning Latin has many measurable benefits such as improved skills in grammar, vocabulary, and logic, these are not the primary reason why Latin has been a crucial part of education long after it "died" as a language. Indeed, fluency in Latin was a prerequisite for entry into this country's universities until the end of the 1800s! The goal of such fluency in Latin was not merely the ancillary benefits to an English vocabulary. Rather, the classical goal was for students to be able to take part in the ongoing Great Conversation in Latin by being able to read, understand, and communicate ideas with fluency and accuracy. We disregard this goal at our peril, since it is clear that educational attainment and general wisdom has not improved since this goal was abandoned.

At STA, we embrace the beautiful and joyful curriculum, *Latin Through Stories*, developed by the [University of Dallas](#) for children in 1st through 4th grades, with its linguistically rich approach. *Latin Through Stories* presents all words in meaningful sentences, not lists of vocabulary items and noun declensions or verb conjugations in isolation. Beginning in 5th grade, students transition into *Lingua Latina per se Illustrata*, which continues the naturalistic approach of *Latin Through Stories*, appropriate for maturing minds. With this program, our students will not only learn a lot of vocabulary and grammar in context, but they will also naturally acquire an ear for the language and get a natural feel for Latin sentence structures – this is particularly important in a language like Latin with word order so much more flexible than English.

By gaining this fluency in Latin, our students will not only gain the utilitarian advantages in vocabulary and logic, but also the capacity to enter into the Great Conversation with Cicero, St. Augustine, Sir Isaac Newton, and countless other great minds! In addition, of particular importance to our shared faith, STA students will be able to deeply understand our liturgical traditions in their original language — Deo Gratias (Thanks be to God)!

**December 13<sup>th</sup>**

## The Power of Great Literature

At STA, we are dedicated to the pursuit of wisdom, of truth, and of Christian virtue as the proper and primary ends of an authentic education of the whole person. We know that our Creator made all human beings, regardless of age, with a natural desire for that which is true, good, and beautiful. The way that we teach Literature at Aquinas invokes wonder, establishing a foundation for engaging conversations with students and thoughtful interactions with beautiful texts. These great and very good books guide students to think about and love the true, the good, and the beautiful. What better way to immerse young people in the love of wisdom than through this kind of literature-based curriculum!

Our approach to Literature is to focus on whole books that have stood the test of time. In deference to traditional wisdom, our Literature selections are at least 50 years old. This is not because old books are automatically good, but because we can't know if a book is truly great or even good until a few generations have found it worthy to be passed on. Whole books, rather than excerpts, are critical for developing a sense of order and prolonged attention capabilities. Indeed, [recent reports out of universities](#) indicate that students who did not read whole books in school lack the capacity to do so later on.

The study of language and stories through Literature is an introduction to basic human questions. Great works of literature provide the material as kindergarteners delight in the tales of Beatrix Potter, fourth-graders discuss C.S. Lewis's *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and eighth-graders wrestle with the moral questions of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. In class, teachers and students discuss not just what makes these books good and beautiful but also what makes them true. Through an introduction to great books, students learn how to question a story and be questioned by it. With the right literature, even young students consider the 'worthiness' of a character's choices, the consequences of their actions, and the importance of truth. They are asked to consider whether a story or a character is fair or just, whether it is beautiful and why.

Through the study of Literature at Aquinas, we establish a standard of excellence and promote the command and love of language. We nurture the ability to think about and discuss stories along with a capacity to remember and sustain attention, cultivating a love for what is noble, excellent, and Godly. A good deal of instruction in the early grades therefore consists in teachers reading great works of literature (e.g., children's versions of Homer) to students over the course of many days or even weeks. Often 'age appropriate' texts are less challenging (and inspiring) than great works which seem slightly out of reach. But when these texts are read slowly, with the teacher pausing to explain or discuss difficult phrases and ideas and the children being challenged to recall and narrate the story, children begin to discover the wonders of language, the power of big ideas, and to improve their own vocabulary and reading capacity. Most importantly, our students acquire a foundation for understanding most of the great Western art and literature they will encounter later in their studies and in life.

## **January 10<sup>th</sup>**

### **History as a Grand Story**

At St. Thomas Aquinas Academy, the study of history is rooted in an understanding of the human person as a creature created in the image and likeness of God. From this starting point, the curriculum presents history as a coherent, if uneven, story propelled by the human desire for God and God's coming to meet, inflame, and satisfy that desire in Christ. This is what our mission statement means by "the Catholic liberal arts tradition." We therefore place special emphasis on the Greek, Roman, Jewish, and other ancient Near East cultures that make up the Catholic and Western tradition. Rooting history in the understanding of the human person as a creature with a natural desire for God also orients those and other pre-Christian cultures toward the coming of Christ, after which they are taken up, transformed, into a new Christian culture in which the deepest of human longings and the highest of human aspirations are met by a gift from God which surpasses all these. In humility, students will come to understand history neither as a story of constant progress culminating in the present, nor as a series of disconnected events lying side by side in time, but as

the story of the world's anticipation of and longing for the truth and happiness revealed in Christ and the events his incarnation sets in motion.

A Catholic and classical understanding of history does not shy away from learning and memorizing names and dates—indeed such knowledge at the ready is crucial to understanding connections across continents and time periods; if one does not know that the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776, one cannot see its connection to many other transformational trends in philosophy, art, science, and industry happening throughout the world in the years before and afterwards. But, history is not just names and dates. It is a grand story, good to study in itself because it is exhilarating, fascinating, instructive, and hopeful. It is a unique way to understand ourselves. After all, the people living in the time of the Pharaohs, the Athenian Empire, or the Italian Renaissance were not so different from us. That understanding encourages a sense of wonder—how did people just like me build the Pyramids, discover philosophy and geometry, or create timeless works of art?

Students will thus come to understand American history as a chapter in this larger story. American history is studied in the same spirit of love for truth, goodness, and beauty that animates the rest of the curriculum, and American history and culture should therefore be viewed through the same lens as other historical cultures: as a lived answer to these fundamental human questions. American history should therefore form in students a love of their country and its ideals, but it should also encourage them to subject that love and those ideals to the still higher love for the truth of God and the human person revealed in Jesus Christ and through his Church. In this way, the study of history should prepare students to become both virtuous and responsible citizens and faithful Catholics and begin to equip them with the tools of discernment necessary to live deeply Catholic and deeply human and virtuous lives amidst increasingly challenging times.

