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Welcome to our thirty-first edition of "The Academic Journal," a bimonthly bulletin in which you can read about MCA's educational philosophy, instructional methodology, and the various viewpoints and positions of our faculty, staff, students, and families.

Further Up and Further In: An Uncommon Education

In the last chapter of *The Last Battle*, the final book in C. S. Lewis's beloved *Chronicles of Narnia*, as the characters approach the end of the world and Aslan's Land, they are repeatedly called to come "further up and further in," finding themselves in ever-widening circles of delight. So it is at Millennium Charter Academy. We invite our students to come "further up and further in:" to come "further up," beyond the common standards to an education of embodiment and delight; and to come "further in" to the Great Conversation of the Western tradition. We invite them to participate in an *uncommon* education. We invite them to an education that is *uncommon* at its very core.

With all the controversy surrounding Common Core, one might begin to wonder what should be "common" about an education. The very term "common" can mean "found frequently," or "lacking in taste or refinement." Neither of these definitions inspires us to push beyond the minimum. Should every American student have a least-common-denominator education, egalitarian in the blandest sense of the word, based on data and statistics? Although standards in education are essential, they should be standards that inspire students to new heights of achievement, standards toward which they must work hard and diligently.

And what about the "core?" The word implies the very center of things from which all else proceeds. The core of the curriculum defines those most essential aspects of education necessary for a student to succeed, although the dimensions of that success are rarely defined except for "college and career readiness." If the core of the curriculum is merely common, little room is left to address the core of the individual student, which in more winsome terms, simply means the heart. That is the core with which we should concern ourselves, and it is anything but "common." Just as a certain brand of cookie advertises itself as "uncommonly good," let us propose an education with an *uncommon* core, one that is "uncommonly good," one that addresses the very core of each student as a person endowed with worth and value.

While standards address basic skills and sometimes prescribe a modicum of content, skills and content are only means and not ends. They exist at the periphery of education, rather than at its core. Common standards define what a student is to be able to do and to know, but entirely neglect what a student is to *be*, at the heart's core. At the core of our curriculum lie great books and great ideas that point our students toward wisdom and virtue, point them to who and what they can *be*.

At the core of an uncommon education lies the "Great Conversation," a journey into and interaction with the great works of Western literature. Beginning in the earliest grades, our students learn to delight in great literature. The youngest among us delight in classic fairy tales. Albert Einstein asserted, "If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales." Fairy tales reach the heart's core of these young ones by helping them to understand good and evil. G. K. Chesterton wisely said, "Fairy tales do not tell children that dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist. Fairy tales tell children the dragons can be killed."



When children in the grammar years “live” in Narnia, Middle Earth, or Ancient Troy, when they have time to float down the Mississippi on a raft or survive alone on a deserted island, the fires of their imaginations are fanned, and their hearts are shaped in new ways. As they admire heroes and hate villains, they become the persons they were meant to be, fully human and fully alive. Great stories reach them at their core.

As students mature and their capacity for argumentation develops, they actually become part of the Great Conversation by entering into thoughtful discussions on topics such as “What is the nature of man?” or “What is truth?” or “What is the purpose of government?” Rather than just offering opinions on these weighty topics, they refer to the authors they have read and offer well-reasoned arguments. Again, through these thoughtful discussions they become the persons they were meant to be, fully human and fully alive at the heart’s core. Whether reading biographies, primary sources in history, wondrous and amazing stories of the natural world, or the great works of fiction, the material that students read calls them “further up and further in” to a depth of knowing that goes well

beyond any common standards, providing them with an *uncommon* education. This depth of knowing requires diligence, but it produces delight; it stands in stark contrast to the drudgery of truncated, vocabulary-controlled reading passages with multiple-choice questions.



Author Annie Dillard strikes the right note when she asks, “Why are we reading, if not in the hope of beauty laid bare, life heightened and the deepest mystery probed? Why are we reading if not in hope that the writer will magnify and dramatize our days, will illuminate and inspire us with wisdom, courage, and the possibility of meaningfulness, and will press upon our minds the deepest mysteries, so we may feel again their majesty and power?”

And listen to C. S. Lewis on this topic: “Literature...admits to us experiences other than our own...In reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.”

To abandon sterile reading strategies and to read for these purposes is uncommon indeed. An uncommon education encourages students to transcend themselves, to become more themselves than they ever could in simply meeting common standards. It’s uncommonly good!

So, grab a great book and join us. We invite you to come “further up and further in!”

Pamela J. Braley, Upper School Director

