



LIFE Carpe Diem: U.S. Students Revive Latin and Greek

More schools, children spurred on by Percy Jackson

By *Nina Sovich*

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Latin is a dead language, but don't tell that to 12-year-old Faiyaz Khan.

A sixth grade student at Decatur Classical school, an elementary school on the north side of Chicago, he began taking Latin in kindergarten and is getting pretty good at reading Cicero without a dictionary. He speaks Latin well enough to correct adults on their pronunciation.

"It's Kicker-o," he says of the Roman orator. "People always make the mistake. Like it's French or something."



Faiyaz Khan, in sixth grade at Decatur Classical school in Chicago, says he enjoys learning Latin and learning about ancient Rome. 'I was shocked by that,' he says. 'An empire could just fall apart.' PHOTO: NINA KHAN

Latin and Ancient Greek, once the purview of elite private and Catholic schools, are showing up in public school classrooms across the country. From 2000 to 2016, the number of students taking the National Latin Exam, has increased roughly 30% to 142,271 from 110,015,

according to Clement Testing Services. Nevada and New Mexico showed the biggest recent growth.

Its popularity is spurred by shifting cultural tastes. Percy Jackson and Harry Potter have made Greek myths and Latinate spells cool. Spoken Latin, once a rarity outside the Vatican, has become all the rage. Students can geek out in Certamen contests, which are fast-paced jeopardy-like competitions about ancient civilizations. Parents are drawn to the rigor of the classical languages, where memorization is emphasized, and dissecting grammar and sentence structure can help with standardized tests.

Nava Cohen, Faiyaz's Latin teacher at Decatur, starts kindergartners off with songs. This year she translated "On Top of Spaghetti" into Latin. As she introduces grammar and vocabulary she brings in the classics. In first grade they read simplified versions of the Iliad and Odyssey. In second grade they start the Aeneid. By third grade her students are "mythology experts," she says.

"Percy Jackson is the single greatest thing to happen to this profession," she says.

Modern takes on old myths help students tie the past to the present, says Ms. Cohen. As they have for generations, teachers vary the classroom work—they teach Julius Caesar's military diaries, but also the racy love poems of Catullus. History and culture are taught hand-in-hand with verb declensions.

"Rome was just such a powerful thing," says Faiyaz. "But it got to one point in history where it fell apart. I was shocked by that. An empire could just fall apart."

Faiyaz wants to be scientist when he grows up. "I am going to be a microbiologist," he says. "The Greeks developed epidemiology."



At Students do Latin worksheets in a class at the Washington Latin Public Charter School. PHOTO: STEPHEN VOSS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Washington Latin, a charter school in Washington, D.C., for grades five through 12 all students must take at least three years of Latin.

“Latin is an equalizer because we all start out from zero,” says Bill Clausen, head of the humanities department.

Some parents wonder if Spanish or Mandarin would be more practical because they are spoken in the world today, but middle school Latin has benefits, especially for students from less-advantaged backgrounds, says Mr. Clausen. It gives them a sense of pride, he says.

He says that when students learn Latin, they can quickly expand their vocabularies and use it to decipher SAT words and words in other languages. Latin also helps students break down English sentences into their grammatical components, a skill that is not often taught in English classrooms anymore.



Caleb Tucker, a fifth-grader at the Washington Latin Public Charter School in Washington, D.C., says he likes learning Latin because it is hard. PHOTO: STEPHEN VOSS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Caleb Tucker, in fifth grade at Washington Latin, likes to greet people with a handshake and a rousing ‘Salve.’ He has been at the school for a year and is astonished by how hard the language is.

“Some nights I have 17 words to memorize,” he says. “It’s pretty hard, but I like it. I like it because it’s hard.”

Despite the difficulty, the middle school classrooms at Washington Latin aren’t rigid or stressed. Seventh grade teacher Adam LaFleche throws a red ball to students who holler out principal parts of verbs when he or she catches it. “Nolo! Nolle! Nolui!” If a child misses the answer, Mr. LaFleche waits until they find it, and usually they do.

“Some professions, like nursing, require an insane amount of memorization,” says Mr. LaFleche. “You have to know how to study for that.”



Mr. Clausen teaches his honors humanities class while Alex Davis, in the red Cornell sweatshirt, looks on, at the Washington Latin Public Charter School. PHOTO: STEPHEN VOSS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Young children memorize Latin more easily than older children, which can benefit them in high school. Washington Latin has a teacher who will conduct an entire high-school class in Latin.

The memorized ancient prose can come in handy later in life as well. Alexa Hirschfeld, 33, studied Classics at Harvard before going on to co-found online stationery company Paperless Post. She studied Latin and Greek throughout high school in part to give her an edge in college admission, but also because she loves Sappho and Homer. The rigors of learning Ancient Greek helped prepare her for both entrepreneurship and understanding computer coding languages, she says.

“I liked the inaccessibility of it. The decoding. It’s like an excavation.”

When dealing with a problem, she often thinks of the first book in the Aeneid, in which Aeneas is speaking to his followers who are about to be shipwrecked: “Maybe someday you will rejoice to recall even this.”

“It’s a beautiful thing to think about when you are in a crisis,” she says.



The library, featuring a quotation from Aristotle, at the Washington Latin Public Charter School in Washington, D.C. PHOTO: STEPHEN VOSS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL to Nina Sovich at nina.sovich@wsj.com