

Chesterton Academy promises classical education with modern elements of fun

If reading, writing and arithmetic are the basic skills taught in schools, the new online Chesterton Academy wants to add a few more, including Latin, medieval history, classics and philosophy.

The Chesterton Academy is a new, full-time online high school program focused on the classics and the Catholic faith. It will be available starting this fall through the St. Isidore Centre, an Elk Island Catholic Schools outreach learning centre.

The Chesterton Academy will focus on Latin, philosophy and literature and medieval works with an emphasis on the classics, while meeting Alberta Education requirements. It will be launched at Grade 9 and Grade 10, and then phase in Grades 11 and 12.

“It’s for anybody who is interested in a classical education, anybody who is interested in digging back into the history of the Church,” said Stefan Johnson, the assistant principal of the St. Isidore Learning Centre and lead teacher for the Chesterton Academy.



Stefan Johnson

“It’s a bit nerdy,” Johnson laughed. “That’s part of the fun, is getting nerdy and being excited about it. I think actually that’s what makes it work. It’s the twofold thing, one that the classics are really interesting and understanding of them helps us understand the world, but the other part is that

there are no dusty, bow-tie-wearing professors teaching this. We'll all just having a really good time."

The Chesterton Academy is a network of 20 private schools in the U.S. with a classics-based curriculum. The concept was developed by the Chesterton Society, a lay apostolate dedicated to G.K. Chesterton, the early 20th-century English writer, philosopher and Catholic intellectual icon.

The Chesterton Academy program in Elk Island Catholic Schools would be the first online, the first in Alberta, and the first publicly funded version. Since it is an online program, it is open to anyone with computer access.

Chesterton Academy students will be taught using a combination of texts, discussion boards, video lectures and video conferences with their teacher individually and as a group. The full-year program includes math and science classes that fulfill provincial requirements but also offer the Chesterton philosophy.

"We hope it's a challenging program," said Louis Rouleau, who enrolled his home-schooled daughter Gabrielle in the Chesterton Academy's Grade 10 program because of its liberal arts curriculum.

"We were excited by the Catholic tradition of history, philosophy and literature. There are many works of literature worth delving into, even if they are difficult," Rouleau said, although he's quick to add that the promotional videos for the academy show it will also be fun for students.

"If you know Chesterton, he was a man of mirth and we hope to see that carry over."

Parents can monitor their child's progress, and course material, through the program software. To take the entire Chesterton program, students will learn online. Elk Island Catholic does offer individual philosophy courses for students who are not in the Chesterton program.

Johnson said staff will be in place by the fall, based on enrolment. He hopes to have 15 to 20 students per grade level in the Chesterton Academy. However there isn't a class size limit, in part because of St. Isidore's success as an online school.

More information on the Chesterton Academy will be available on March 26 when Elk Island Catholic Schools hosts an online question-and-answer session for parents.

The idea to bring the Chesterton program online, and to Alberta, came after Paul Corrigan – an assistant superintendent at Elk Island Catholic Schools – attended a Chesterton Society conference in the U.S. and broached the idea of having an online version.



G.K. Chesterton

There's already been interest in the Chesterton Academy program from families in Alberta, and because it's online, from Ontario as well. From Johnson's own experience, it won't be difficult to get students excited about the curriculum.

"Kids find this stuff novel, to be honest," said Johnson, who taught Latin for eight years at Archbishop Jordan Catholic High School in Sherwood Park.

"They find Greek mythology novel and philosophy novel. And then they read Socrates and they read Plato, we talk about it a little bit and they realize how modern it is. It's really, really cool. It really comes down to all those students who are interested in a classical education."

Johnson said the Chesterton Academy curriculum mirrors its patron. Chesterton was classically educated but not a "stuffy individual." Instead he was a gadfly who often targeted English society.

Johnson said the classics will provide a unique education, with some fun too – Latin, in particular.

"What it lets us do, instead of reliving the past, understanding Latin allows us to see the past a little bit better," Johnson said. "God writes in many books. He writes in the books of the Bible and he writes through the history of the Church ... We don't want to be living in the past, but we don't want to ignore it either.

"It's part of our communion," Johnson noted. "Chesterton says that. He calls tradition 'the democracy of the dead.' That's where we allow the dead to have a voice instead of just silencing them."