

FIAT LUX! WE NEED LATIN!

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The time has come to require in the public school curriculum the subject that used to be considered the royal road to academic competence. That subject is Latin.

By Latin I mean the language that originated among the ancient Romans, that became the official language of the medieval European church, and that functioned for many centuries as the universal language of scholars and diplomats.

This explanation is necessary because one cannot assume any longer that if one says, "Latin," everyone will know what one means. Some years ago, a ninth-grade student who had selected my Latin I course seemed alternately confused by and indifferent to what we were doing in class. One day after class—not wishing to cause her needless agony—I asked her why she had decided to take Latin. She replied, "Because I like Latin music."

That was the moment that I began to contemplate taking early retirement. Since retiring, I have committed myself to working toward the rehabilitation of our public school system so that no other teacher will have to face the kind of moment—and it was but the last straw on the camel's back of many more such—that I did on that day.

For centuries, students learned Latin (and Greek) in primary school, completing by the eighth-grade the equivalent of what today would be a rigorous four-year high school Latin curriculum.

In the nineteenth century, in this country, one could not be accepted into college without demonstrating mastery of both Latin and Greek.

When I was in a public junior high school, in the 1950s, we were required in eighth-grade to take a course called "General Language," in which we learned, for one quarter each, Latin, French, Spanish, and German, with Latin first to indicate its primacy.

Until 30 years ago, one could not be accepted into medical or law school without having completed a high school Latin curriculum.

Since the 1970s, without the imprimatur of professional school requirement or public school support, Latin has been fighting an increasingly difficult uphill battle against the charge of its irrelevance and uselessness.

The paradox is that few subjects are as relevant or useful as Latin, and the gain from studying Latin is almost incalculable.

First, one gains a knowledge of the language that is the direct or indirect source of more than two-thirds of the English language. In this sense, studying Latin strengthens, enhances, and enriches one's knowledge of all aspects of the English language.

Second, one gains a knowledge of ancient Rome and Roman culture. Since later Western history and culture—especially the foundation of our own country—grew out of Roman history and culture, studying Latin gives one a deeper appreciation of both global and our own national civilization.

The so-called Romance—which means "Romanic," not "romantic"—languages (French, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, and Romanian) are the direct outgrowths of Latin. Therefore, knowing Latin makes it easier and quicker to learn those languages. My own daughter experienced this. After she took the three years of Latin that I insisted she take in high school, she started (and sailed through) French in her senior year (continuing it into her first year of college). In her college sophomore year, she started Spanish, and—because of the Latin foundation—she was able to learn it well enough after just one semester to qualify to do her junior year in Spain at the university in Madrid.

Third, the study techniques that are used to learn Latin make one a better student in all other academic subjects.

Fourth, as a byproduct, those who study Latin make demonstrably higher scores—in both English and mathematics—on the SAT (and other standardized tests) than those who do not.

Finally, studying Latin enables one to know which Super Bowl one is watching.

There are those who say that it is more useful to study, say, Spanish than Latin. I would challenge them to survey their parents and grandparents. Ask what language they studied in high school. Then ask how much they have used that language. I would wager that of those who took a modern language, no more than five percent will say that they have used (or even remembered) it, while of those who took Latin, almost all would say that—in some form or other—they have used it every year of their lives.

To those who would say that Latin is not the study of the future, I would say that we cannot know the future. Whatever we now pick as the study of the future may turn out to be obsolete when that future arrives.

However, we can—and should—know the past and present. The best road map to the best of the past and present, to what has endured through many earlier 'futures,' is Latin. Cicero, in his *Orator* (120), said:

Nescire autem quid ante quam natus sis acciderit, id est semper esse puerum. Quid enim est aetas hominis, nisi ea memoria rerum veterum cum superiorum aetate contexitur?

However, not to know what befell before you were born is always to be a child. For what is the age of a human if it is not woven together with the age of one's ancestors by means of a memory of old things?

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