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Experiencing a variety of sports helps young students appreciate their learning experience. ALBERT COLLEGE PHOTOGRAPH

# Growing good sports

**DENISE DEVEAU**

Athletics is an integral part of a child's education, whether it's friendly pickup games or competitive varsity-level sports. For the most part, academic track records are the first consideration when choosing a school. But the right athletic program, large or small, can play an important part in a child's school experience.

There are many considerations that can come into play when exploring options. Parents of serious or gifted athletes will seek out schools with a highly ranked athletic program or specialization, while others prefer programs that are less competitive and more recreational.

Whether the intent is to encourage socialization and fitness, or help your child compete at a national or international level and possibly attract scholarship offers, private schools offer a wide range of sports activities to suit any grade level, gender and level of athleticism.

Most belong to at least one athletic association, to ensure students have the opportunity to play. One of province's largest is the CISAA (Conference of Independent Schools Athletic Association) Ontario.

With 38 member schools, 140 leagues and 1,300 teams, it offers opportunities for schools to compete in Division 1, 2 and 3 level sports. As a member of the Ontario Federation of Schools Athletic Associations (OFSAA), most CISAA teams also compete in both OFSAA provincial championships and national independent school tournaments.

"We offer every possible sport to student bodies for students to participate in one of the three school terms. Schools are placed in divisions for grades four through 12 based on their population," says Rob Reiner, athletic co-ordinator. "However, if a smaller Division 3 school has a strong athletics program, they can decide to play up to the higher divisions."

Most if not all private schools offer full-service pro-

grams, he adds. "The larger the school, the greater the variety of sports." League sports range from hockey and snowboarding to tennis to lacrosse, golf and ultimate frisbee.

It's not unusual to see parents with an interest in a specific sport or league, Reiner says. "Some schools are known for sports. Havergal, for example, has one of the best girls' volleyball programs in the province. St. Andrew's in Aurora has one of the finest hockey programs."

A small percentage are actually specialized sports schools, where a big portion of the day is spent on playing and training, notes Glen Hoffman editor, Our Kids Media in Mississauga. "The big distinction is that they offer more competitive programs that operate at a pretty high competitive level. That's a good fit for a child who is interested in pursuing sports as a career."

Those interested in more recreational level sports may prefer a school where their kids can play at a lower level.

Some schools even have an in-house league that runs friendly competitive events.

When exploring options, there several questions parents should consider, the first being what types of sports are offered and at what level.

Another is eligibility. Some sports may only be available to students in certain grades, or for certain genders. Also, check if students have to try out for teams, or if there's room on a team for everyone.

Some might think that a smaller school would offer more opportunity to join teams, but Reiner notes that larger schools will often have Division 1, 2 and 3 teams to accommodate kids' interest and athletic levels.

An important thing to know up front is the time commitment for the student in terms of practices and games. The same question should be asked about parents. Are they required to volunteer for sporting events, and, if so, how often?

Some schools include equipment costs in their fees;

others require additional payment. Entry fees may also be part of the ongoing costs.

When exploring options, ask about the coaches' qualification and the level of training or supervision that will be provided, as well as talk to the athletic director to find out more about each of their programs, Reiner says.

"Start with the admissions department first and decide if you're interested in all boy all girl or co-ed sports. From there, narrow it down to the type of environment you prefer for your child. Would you prefer touch or contact sports? Some schools, for example, have non-contact hockey or football for girls and boys."

If athletic scholarship opportunities are a priority, ask about the school's placement record, Hoffman advises. "Some do have a strong track record of producing great athletes in specific sports."

If a student wants to play in a specific league, athletic association memberships are posted on school websites.

“RATHER THAN RELYING ON THE TEACHER TO PROVIDE EVERYTHING, [STUDENTS] HAVE TO BRING THEIR OWN IDEAS TO THE TABLE AND SHARE THEM WITH OTHERS. IT REQUIRES EVERYONE TO CARRY THEIR OWN WEIGHT IN CLASS. — DAYNA TAYLOR, LAKEFIELD COLLEGE SCHOOL



Schools are re-inventing the approach to learning. WILL CALLAGHAM, LAKEFIELD COLLEGE SCHOOL, PHOTOGRAPH

# LEARNING SPACES MAKE ROOM FOR NEW TEACHING METHODS

DENISE DEVEAU

In a math class at Lakefield College School in Selwyn, you'll likely find groups of students moving about the room, writing formulas on boards and talking amongst themselves.

An English class may offer up a different scene. There, students sit around a single large oval table, openly sharing their thoughts and opinions on literary works.

These new approaches to classroom environments are driven by the 21st-century learning movement, where students are encouraged to collaborate and develop critical thinking skills.

“Traditional environments have been front-facing, with the teacher lecturing and students taking notes and doing problems,” says Dayna Taylor, who teaches pre-advanced placement math and English at Lakefield. “Now we

have ‘de-fronted’ the math classrooms by adding whiteboards on all four walls.”

There's a reason this is more effective, she says. “It allows students to approach problems together and figure things out for themselves. Once the problem is on the board they come together in random groups, walk around to see each other's work, and discuss things as a class. I'm freed up to circulate and provide help where it's needed.”

In some English classes a large oval Harkness table is the only piece of furniture in the room. Students are encouraged to read and discuss topics, and come to a common understanding as a group. “Rather than relying on the teacher having to provide everything, they have to bring their own ideas to the table and share them with others. It requires everyone to carry their own weight in class,” Taylor explains.

Sarah Thompson has been using a Harkness table for teaching her English classes. “It develops more of a sense of community. There's a lot of emphasis on every voice counting. Students can't hide away and passively let lessons wash over them. They have to be actively engaged. It's been especially helpful for international students, because they gain confidence in front of their peers.”

These more flexible approaches help to prepare students for their university careers and beyond, Taylor explains. “Research has shown that students with memorized knowledge won't be set up for success in the future. Today's students are not going to need to grasp a trigonometric function or memorize dates. Their phones can tell them that. They will, however, need to work with and talk to other people, and share and present ideas.”

A renovation project at The Rosedale Day School in Toronto gave them the opportunity to create a 21st-century learning environment from the ground up, says James Lee, head of school.

“We looked at every school from the perspective of 21st-century skills buzzwords such as collaborative problem solving, creativity and innovative thinking,” Lee says.

The new classrooms are open, teachable spaces with movable furniture and wall-size whiteboards, along with the latest collaboration technologies. Tables have slots for mini-boards that can be placed on the edges for presentations, or slide to the centre of the table to create an individual work environment when needed.

A big driver behind these new approaches has been access to information, Lee says. “It has changed so much for children. Now it's all about

project-based learning and design thinking, human interaction and collaboration. You need to create physical learning spaces that are conducive to that.”

As he likes to point out, “we can't operate in the same way we did in the 1970s and 1980s. You would never go to a doctor using tools from decades ago.”

Design thinking is about fostering future ready skills and competencies in the classroom, confirms Sandra Nagy, director of learning, with Toronto-based Future Design School. “Having desks and chairs in rows doesn't lend itself to collaboration and communications — both of which are so important for today's students. Students and teachers need to be able to interact, bounce off each other's ideas, and share thoughts and processes. The right space design encourages that type of learning.”

A redesign doesn't have to mean a wholesale renovation. An existing space can also be transformed by reconfiguring surfaces, adding modular furniture or introducing enabling technology, she says.

“Depending on what they are learning, you can move things around in different ways.”

Many of the ideas are inspired by the corporate world, where flexibility is key, she adds. “Google offices, for example, have collaborative hubs and isolated pods when they need to concentrate.”

Making things visible and sharing ideas with others helps students gain a deeper understanding of what they are learning.

As for technology, Nagy says, “it can be a distraction if it's not being used to drive effective learning. Everything should be about what you are teaching.”

## Planning your budget for the long haul

DENISE DEVEAU

You've made the decision to send your child to private school, and your financial planning is pretty much squared away for the beginning of a new school year.

So much for your short-term budgeting. But what about your long-term financial planning? Once you make the decision to send your child to a private school, it's important to look beyond the immediate needs and consider the impact over the long haul.

“There's no question tuition can be a major expense,” says Amy Dietz-Graham, portfolio manager and investment adviser with BMO Nesbitt Burns Toronto. “I often get calls around August from parents who want to discuss education goals as

a part of their financial planning. When budgeting for private school you need to look at both your short- and long-term goals, including the eventual costs of their post-secondary education.”

There are the tried and true basics, such as start saving early and invest wisely so your money can work for you over time, she says. While RESPs can help to take care of post-secondary education costs, a TFSA is the ideal ongoing savings vehicle, as investment income and capital gains are not taxed.

There are some options where you can look for funding help over time. Family members is one, she says. “Grandparents often like to help out, whether it's for RESP contributions or setting up a life insurance policy so the child can use

the cash value for education purposes. Also, it never hurts to look into bursaries as a means to help finance their education.”

For those with the resources to spare, a formal trust might be an option, Dietz-Graham says. “It gives you a tax advantage since the income is taxed in the child's hands. However, there are a lot of accounting and legal costs involved. You should only be looking at a formal trust if you have a substantial amount of money to invest.”

It's also a good idea to check out payment plan options at various schools. Some offer monthly programs that can help with cash flow.

When modeling your financial plan, bear in mind that education costs tend to exceed the rate of standard

inflation. If you do have to consider a loan to keep things afloat, find a low-interest-rate option, she cautions. “A home equity line of credit might be helpful. But you want to make sure you're not going into huge amounts of debt and that you are balancing your needs with other goals.”

When it comes to private school education costs, many assume that nothing is tax deductible, says Denise Wright-Ianni, a CPA with a cloud-based practice across Canada. “But the truth is, some of it is if you qualify.”

There are three different areas that can be eligible for deductions, she says. “But you need to ask a lot of questions before you get there.”

One potential deduction is child-care costs. “Depending on the school, they

may designate before- and after-school child care as a portion of the tuition, although each will calculate it differently. However, that depends on the school policy and requires a tax receipt for the child. Generally, the CRA accepts those. And you must use the deduction in that tax year or you lose it.”

A second potential deduction is if your child attends a religious or other school that has charitable tax status. School tax receipts may be issued for up to 80 per cent of the tuition, which is deemed as a donation. The deduction can be used in the current year or carried forward for up to five years.

A third area falls under medical expenses. If a child has a doctor's confirmation that a private school would help a medical condition

(e.g. ADHD), you may be able to claim a specific portion as a medical expense. “Not everyone qualifies, but it's always a possibility,” Wright-Ianni says. “Ask your doctor and administrative staff at the school whether that would be an option.”

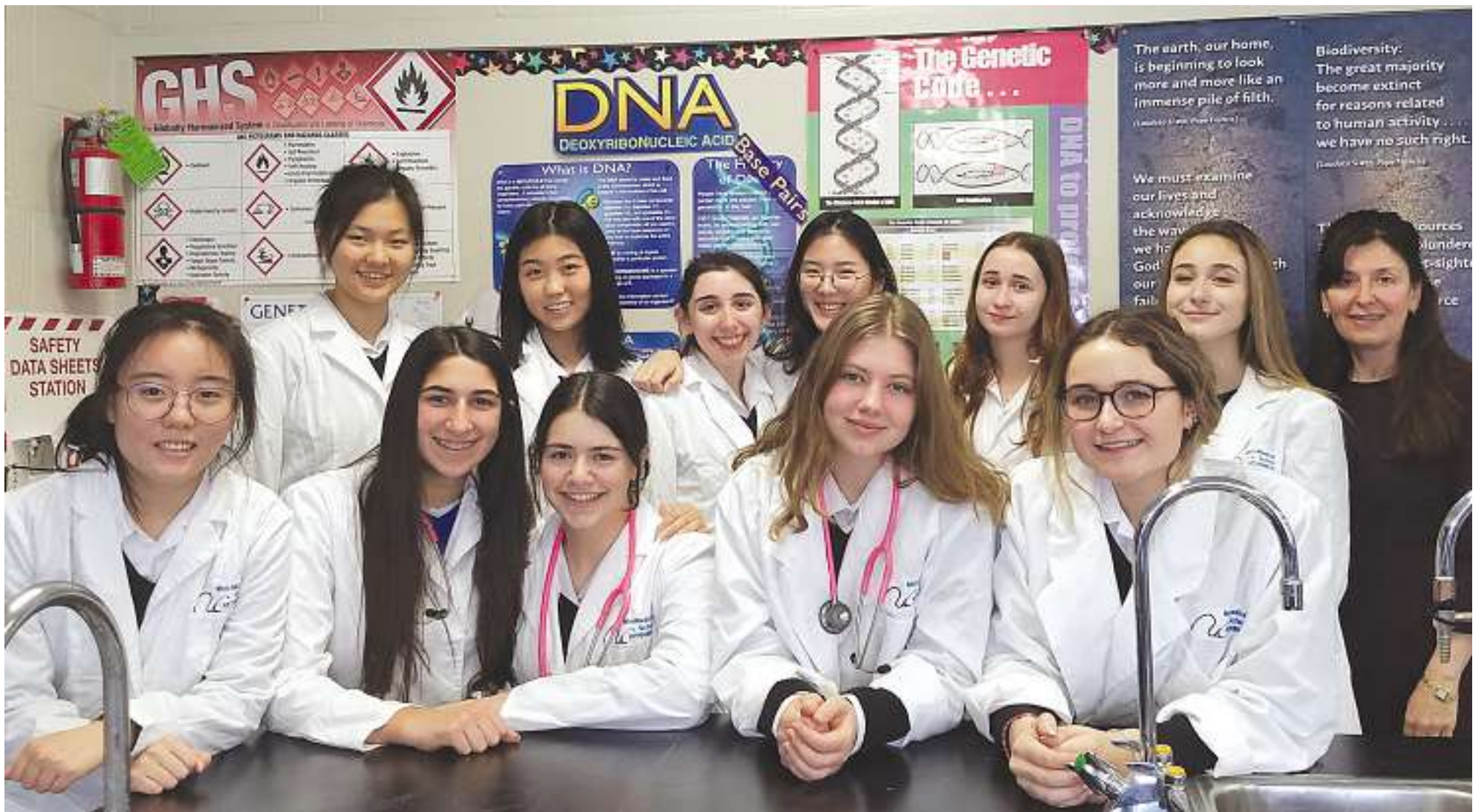
If it all sounds too complicated, not to worry. You can either talk to an accountant or the school itself, Wright-Ianni says. “Private schools have pretty savvy advisers who can help you find appropriate deductions.”

Ultimately, you should never look at education costs in isolation, Dietz-Graham advises. “You have to consider all the other moving parts in the way of your retirement planning, debts or mortgages. Look at the entire situation instead of one single avenue.”

# EDUCATION

SPONSORED BY HOLY NAME OF MARY COLLEGE SCHOOL

## Mississauga school provides head start to next-generation female leaders



Fayble Shawera (front, second from right) is pictured with HNMCS' HOSA club. SUPPLIED

**DENISE DEVEAU**  
Postmedia Content Works

Holy Name of Mary College School (HNMCS), an all-girls school in Mississauga, knows its students have boundless leadership potential just waiting to be tapped. Whether in the arts, sciences, technology, or business, the school prides itself on encouraging students to put their minds to anything they want to create.

"Because we are a school of about 230 students, we can offer big opportunities for girls," says Carrie Hughes-Grant, head of school. "Our environment encourages them to share their own thoughts and ideas. Every student is given leadership opportunities, both in the classroom and beyond."

Opportunities to test their leadership potential abound through clubs, field trips, camps, co-curricular programs and partnerships. The school boasts more than 100 co-curricular programs ranging from medicine and robotics to Model UN and athletics, many of which have been established and led by students themselves. In many cases, these groups successfully compete with much larger groups on a global level.

All experiences are designed to allow students to learn multiple skills, which means every girl has their own unique story to share.

Grade 12 student Rachel Senatore, this year's student government president, joined the school in Grade 7. "When I first started here, I was not very confident and had a really big fear of public speaking," she says. "But then I found a comfortable community where I could be myself and develop my confidence. Public speaking doesn't make me nervous anymore. That might not have happened in a bigger school."

In addition to discovering a love of STEM at HNMCS, she's become invested in several projects, including jack.org, a mental health awareness group. She started the HNMCS chapter of the group to break stigmas surrounding mental health

in the school community. She's also an active member of DECA (Distributive Education Clubs of America), which helps students apply business skills in marketing, financing, hospitality and management through worldwide competitions.

Fellow Grade 12 student Janaé Allen is vice-president of student government. She came to HNMCS in Grade 8 from an inner-city school where, she says, opportunities for growth were limited. "There wasn't a lot of focus on expanding horizons."

That changed at HNMCS. This fall she developed a female empowerment workshop called Unapologetically Me as part of an innovation project, networking with cosmetic companies including Shiseido, Body Shop and Dove to deliver it to students. "The idea stemmed from the fact that women are not happy with themselves because of the standards media has forced upon teenage girls," she says. "With the workshop I wanted to focus on women empowerment and positive self image."

For her next workshop, she plans to work with universities to expose inner city kids to STEM-based concepts. Beyond that, she plans to use her experience to enter a field like political science. "Now I feel I can apply what I've learned to achieve my goals in my undergraduate career and whatever else comes along."

These are but a few examples of how students are able to pursue their own interests while developing leadership skills, with staff at the school encouraging students to take initiative. "By providing them with real-life skills development in a positive and supportive environment, they discover the best parts of the things they love, which will serve them well in their future education and careers," says Kathryn Anderson, director of student life.

Anderson adds the cooperative environment only serves to encourage students to pursue such interests.



From left to right: Student Rachel Senatore is pictured with speaker Tierra Hohn from jack.org and fellow student Angeline Medeiros. SUPPLIED

"Together we have built a real sense of community where students work collaboratively with other groups within the school. Everyone supports each other, and the friends they make here are friends forever."

Grade 11 student Fayble Shawera, another leader in the making, can speak to the effects of the positive school environment. A member of the senior robotics team and president of the HOSA (Health Occupations Students of America) Club - an international organization that hosts competitions in health sciences - she enjoys taking on projects and activities that apply to real world problems.

"It's a comfortable place to learn and understand what we need to be successful," she says. "Being here really helped me develop a lot of



Janaé Allen (centre) poses at the Unapologetically Me event she organized. SUPPLIED

confidence and allowed me to be myself."

That emphasis on finding one's own voice and path is intended to positively guide

them in the future, Hughes-Grant says.

"Our goal is to look at the whole girl, from the inside out so they can find their

own place in the world."

HNMCS will be holding an open house February 1, 2020. Learn more at [www.holynameofmarycollegeschool.com](http://www.holynameofmarycollegeschool.com).

“CO-CURRICULAR IS NOT ABOUT JUST ONE ACTIVITY. IT IS ABOUT BEING OPEN-MINDED, TUNED IN TO WHAT YOUR CHILD ENJOYS AND KNOWING WHAT THEY ARE, AND ARE NOT, GOOD AT. — SHARNDRÉ KUSHOR, CO-FOUNDER/CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER, CRIMSON EDUCATION



A variety of co-curricular theatrical clubs benefit both introverted and extroverted students at Hillfield Strathallan College. HILLFIELD STRATHALLAN COLLEGE.

# Re-imagining co-curricular

KATHRYN BOOTHBY

When Paul De Vellis noticed students turning to electronic devices as a way to cope with, or distract from, life's stressors, he was determined to find an alternate solution. He did so by founding a meditation club for grade nine to 12 students. Meditation is not something that is typically found on a school co-curricular activity list but it is now a fixture at Ridley College in St. Catharines, where De Vellis is a senior faculty member and leader of the club.

Students initially had mixed reactions to the program. "Some chose it as an easy activity credit, only to realize that meditation is not as easy as it seems. Others were keen to cultivate a better relationship with their inner dialogue. As students gained experience and increased their understanding of meditation, and mindfulness in general, the feedback was quite positive," says De

Vellis. "Parents have been supportive, with some pleasantly surprised that this type of practice was available, especially in a fast-paced and rigorously academic environment."

For the younger crowd (kindergarten to grade eight) co-curricular are about developing the building blocks for movement and engagement with physical activity, says Jay Tredway, Ridley's director of athletics. "Physical literacy and movement are like languages. Young brains are so ready to soak in all of the information. It offers a great window to establish the fundamentals that can help build the confidence needed later in sports and life. It is also social — participating with friends and having fun is a great motivator and instills in students the sense of what sports should be like."

Hillfield Strathallan College (HSC) in Hamilton also takes an innovative approach to co-curricular and reimagines them on a

regular basis. The breadth and depth of offerings is significant. They run the gamut from highly competitive sports and robotics, to service clubs and activities that are just for fun.

"Knowing your student body, having focus groups on what works, and re-evaluating often are key as students' interests change from year to year. We also pride ourselves

"Students also participate in arts and crafts, comic creation, cooking, and giving back to the community. We even have an investment club that is a huge draw for senior students. Here, they learn investing and how to properly account for their money."

Strong connections with the community give HSC students meaningful experiential learning that cannot

public schools with newcomers to Canada where they help with language skills, school work and life lessons such as how to take a bus and shop."

HSC's dramatic productions are not only avenues for outgoing students. "The behind-the-scenes leadership and dedication from the stage crew club is immeasurable. These are often the more introverted students who are quietly making things work flawlessly, from lighting to sound to set decoration," says Faggion.

The most important consideration for parents and students when choosing co- and extra-curricular activities is to look at the core skills that need to be developed, says Sharndré Kushor, co-founder and chief operating officer of Crimson Education. "For younger students it can be activities that help with public speaking, numeracy and literacy. It is also important that the child does things they enjoy.

Students do their best work when they are happy. Giving a child the chance to experiment is useful, especially when there is some structure around it," she says. "Look at strengths and weaknesses and activities that can help build both while contributing to their educational development. Creating this plan together, between parent and child, will gain buy-in from all parties. Co-curricular is not about just one activity. It is about being open-minded, tuned in to what your child enjoys and knowing what they are, and are not, good at."

Ridley College is a private junior kindergarten to grade 12 co-ed boarding and day school. Hillfield Strathallan College is an independent, Montessori (18 months) to grade 12 co-ed day school. Crimson Education provides consulting services to help high school students access global opportunities and gain entrance to top tier universities.

## YOUNG BRAINS ARE SO READY TO ... SOAK IN INFORMATION

on student-driven initiatives which help ensure we are heading in the right direction for interests and passions and catering for every child," says Kristy Faggion, vice-president of school life. These activities give students pause from the curriculum. They are not only about physical literacy, however,

be gained in the classroom, adds Faggion. "Our Adelaide Hoodless club provides programming in gym or arts and crafts at a local inner city school where students may not have the funds to otherwise participate in these kinds of activities. The English Conversation Circle (ECC) sees our students visit

## Helping students sleep well

KATHRYN BOOTHBY

Inadequate sleep has become a global epidemic for adults and children alike, says Wendy Hall, professor emerita at the University of British Columbia's School of Nursing.

"For children, short sleep duration can result in poor academic achievement, attention problems, difficulty with emotional functioning and, especially in younger children, hyperactivity. It packs quite an impact, not only for the individual but for the people around them," she says. "Conversely, a good night's sleep results in great-

er ability to focus and retain information, better co-ordination, improved mood and more creativity."

Familiar routines at bedtime and during the day help children sleep. "However, a relaxing of schedules over the summer and during holidays, such as later rising and longer days, often bring challenges when it comes time to get back to a schedule. Strenuous exercise and screen time before bed also affect the ability to settle," notes Hall. "That being said, changes cannot be made in one giant leap. A sudden change will often result in tears. If a child has been going to bed at 10 p.m. instead

9 p.m., for example, take a gradual approach. Adjusting in 15-minute increments over the course of a week is more effective and less traumatic."

Starting at boarding school can also affect sleep patterns. "At home, many children are used to their own space. Sharing with another student can be disruptive — a roommate may snore or be a restless sleeper. Other students miss familial relationships during the first few weeks away," she says. "Having objects from home that are associated with sleep is helpful, even for older students. For many, something as simple as a familiar pillow is a big deal. For younger children a stuffed toy, water cup or blanket from home can be reassuring."

Homesickness typically hits at night, says Carmen Holland, director of boarding life at Trafalgar Castle School (TCS), an all-girls day and

boarding school in Whitby, Ont. "It is not unusual and something we have come to expect in the first few weeks of school, as students try to make new friends and connections. We offer comfort and support during this time and focus on the positive aspects of the experience," she says.

Along with homesickness comes the stress of academics, as well as new responsibilities such as managing finances, room cleaning and laundry, and sharing a space with someone they don't know.

To help familiarize new students to the changes they can expect as a boarder, TCS sends families a boarding life student handbook prior to the start of the school year. "The handbook provides an overview of the program, a calendar of important dates and events, routines and expectations. It also helps new

students to prepare for their arrival with suggested packing lists and a boarder questionnaire. The questionnaire asks if students have shared a room before; whether they like a clean or messy room (you'd be surprised how many say messy); and how they would describe themselves.

"This helps us to match roommates with similar interests and, more importantly, with similar working habits and living styles," explains Holland. "For returning boarders, we ask if they wish to stay with a previous roommate or make a change for the coming year. We do our best to fulfill each girl's requests so they are happy here."

Evening routines help settle boarders of all ages. "Following a healthy evening snack there is a 30-45-minute slowdown ritual where students take a shower, call parents, finish talking with friends and prepare for bed.

At the end of the day electronics are collected from grades seven-to-nine students. Others are encouraged to turn them off," says Holland. "Bed checks and lights-out schedules help ensure the girls are settled and that electronics are put away. We work closely with parents and faculty should sleep issues arise. For older students, if electronics at night are an issue, we discuss options."

Whether children are day or boarding students, time management is key, says Hall. "Parents and teachers must be mindful of the extent of extracurricular activities combined with homework. Some students are trying to learn on just four to five hours of sleep a night because they are overextended. This impacts memory and learning and can also increase carbohydrate cravings, which can lead to metabolic disorders," she says. "

“WHEN LOOKING FOR A SCHOOL IT IS IMPORTANT TO LOOK FOR THE RIGHT FIT FOR THE FAMILY AND THE CHILD. SIZE IS DEFINITELY A FACTOR. LARGE AND SMALL SCHOOLS DEFINITELY HAVE DIFFERING TRAITS AND BENEFITS. — GLEN HOFFMAN, OUR KIDS MEDIA

# Right-sizing your child's school

**KATHRYN BOOTHBY**

When choosing a private or independent school, does size really matter? It absolutely does, according to Glen Hoffmann, editor/writer for Our Kids Media. “When looking for a school it is important to look for the right fit for the family and the child. Size is definitely a factor. Large and small schools often have differing traits and benefits that need to be considered.”

Small schools, such as those with 150 students or less, can offer a greater opportunity for intimacy. “Often classes are small, faculty members know students well, and a more personalized and individualized teaching approach can be taken. This helps students to be more enthusiastic, engaged and interactive in the classroom,” says Hoffman. “A small school is typically also a close-knit community. This can be especially important for introverted children. Sometimes it can be tricky for shy students to navigate socially and find a peer

group in a large arena. A small school can help bonds form in a less intimidating environment.”

Dragon Academy in Yorkville, for example, enrolls about 60 students per academic year from grade four through 12. “We have 17 faculty members and small classes — some with only two or three students. We have occupied a niche that tends toward teaching children with multiple exceptionalities, including gifted, that often come with autism spectrum or anxiety disorders, or ADHD — though not all students have these diagnoses,” says head of school Kelvin Sealey. “As a university prep school, all of our graduates gain entry into the most competitive programs in the country. Last year our graduating class was nine students. It will probably be the same size this year. We are a family. Our size allows us the intimacy to bring individual success to each student.”

Large schools can offer a great diversity of academic and extracurricular oppor-



Though large in numbers (over 700 students), TMS is proud of the small-school feel of its campus. TMS PHOTOGRAPH

tunities, says Hoffman. “This can be important for students who are looking for a wide choice of options. Large schools also tend to have competitive sports teams. For those aspiring to become elite athletes, a larger school may be a better fit. In addition, there are often more opportunities for community partnerships.”

TMS in Richmond Hill, which has a student body of over 700, offers a wide range of athletics programs suited to all levels, includ-

ing those for students who wish to dabble and those who are highly competitive, says Kirsten Eastwood, executive director of community development. “We also have strong partnerships with external organizations. A summer program with the Schulich School of Business helps develop entrepreneurial skills for grade nine-10 students. The friends-of-the-community program, which begins in grade three, is part of our strong service focus. Many students eventually

graduate with far more than the 40 hours of community involvement required from the curriculum — some have hundreds or even thousands,” she adds. “Though large in numbers, we are proud of the small school feel of our campus.”

With all the options available, finding the right school for a child can be a challenge. “There is no cut-and-dry formula, with steps A through F, to determine the right size,” says Hoffman. He does, however, offer these

strategies to help parents find the right fit, and that is where size can matter:

■ **Focus on the child.** Ask questions that relate to the traits of a school. Is your child shy and introverted or outgoing? Do they want a wide range of extracurricular activities? Are they looking for opportunities to learn outside the classroom? Do they need individualized teaching at the academic level (small), or do they want a lot of specialized classes in science, arts, and humanities (large)?

■ **Look at the school.** Regardless of size, get to know the school well. Start at Ourkids.net/school/ for in-depth information about curriculum, academic and non-academic culture, and more. The next crucial activity is in-person visits. Not simply an open house or planned tour — make multiple impromptu visits, walk around the school, and speak to students and teachers to get candid answers to your questions. Check out the cafeteria and library, get a feel for the school vibe, and even go into the washroom to check for graffiti. Really look around and see what's happening at the school, and take your child with you to get their opinion.

■ **Talk to other parents and students at the school:** Ask about their experiences and how the school handles behaviour issues, math enrichment, and other areas that are important to you and your child. Visit school events such as sports games and barbecues and talk to people about the school environment.



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## EDUCATION

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St. Michael's College School integrates a focus on wellness in and out of the classroom. SUPPLIED

## Toronto school weaving wellness in where it matters

### How St. Michael's College School is balancing pressure and support in student achievement

A confluence of factors continues to thrust wellness to the top of professional and personal priority lists across society today.

High school teachers and administrators in particular have a daunting task in this space – on a daily basis they navigate the developing teenage brain, evolving socioeconomic and family structures, the power of technology and social media, among other factors – while meeting the expectations required for a high level of student achievement. They do this in tandem with striving to ensure the mental, physical and emotional well-being of students along the way.

“Wellness is about understanding people’s needs,” says James McKinnon, principal at St. Michael’s College School, Canada’s only Catholic, private, all-boys school from grades 7-12, run by the Basilian Fathers. “What is the goal of mental health? It is to be well,” he says.

McKinnon, an educator for more than 30 years and new to his current role since August 2019, says “holism is the target” when it comes to addressing health and wellness in a high school setting. “Our unique umbrella is the Basilian model of education – teaching the mind, the body and the spirit,” he says. “This approach has endured for 168 years here, and speaks to teaching the whole individual. That means providing each student with different opportunities, experiences and tools to learn about, identify and manage their own wellness.”

Enter a comprehensive, multi-pronged approach in

place at St. Michael’s College School.

A training and professional development program for faculty and staff focused on the various mental, physical and spiritual aspects of wellness has been a perennial commitment at the school, renewed and refocused in recent years. Daily reflection periods, weekly yoga, movement and breathing sessions, as well as mindfulness around diet and exercise comprise some of its core elements.

Evolution of the program has continued, building on student voice and the parent perspective.

“We are hoping to foster an environment where, as a community, we are able to be reflective, review, and clearly convey our approach to wellness as a pathway to student success,” says Liat Benzacar, M.S.W., RSW, the school’s first student wellness officer.

“SMCS is dedicated to making wellness a mandated initiative and is doing so through the implementation of programs such as deep learning (an inquiry-based experiential teaching method) in our classrooms, the weaving of wellness into programs such as careers, cross-grade, student-teacher mentor sessions, and physical education, appropriate course selection, and a monitored ‘Return to Learn’ program for our concussion students, to name a few,” she says.

Among a host of other tools available to support and promote well-being are: the school’s outdoor education curriculum for all grade levels, leadership and mentorship formation, student am-



Designated wellness spaces include the library Zen Zone and Student Commons hallway. SUPPLIED

bassador training, designated wellness spaces (library Zen Zone, Student Commons hallway), the Learning Enrichment Centre that supports individual learning styles and needs, the guidance department staffed with seven counsellors assigned to the more than 1,000 students, and a wellness team (after-school club).

Then there are the intangibles: wellness education that happens where students may least expect it.

That includes learning how to think critically, make decisions, solve problems, communicate with confidence, lead, self-regulate, mentor and socialize. This education comes from students getting together on trips, on the theatre stage or in band; interacting via group projects like making and delivering sandwiches to the homeless, building a robot or executing a fundraising initiative through jack.org.

“We continue to grow in developing student agency where students spearhead, drive and are the agents of their own learning,” says McKinnon. “Greater student agency in self-determination, control and advocacy requires a gradual release of responsibility by staff. As educators, we want to empower our students to be, become and belong. When someone isn’t well, one of these is missing.”

McKinnon also points to the school’s array of community and Christian service initiatives for all grade levels as another key tool to wellness education. “There is a fulfillment of being of service to others that makes one feel whole.”

To support student agency, St. Michael’s College School developed a five-year mental health action plan for students in 2017, authored by the school’s director of student affairs, Frank Trentadue ‘84.



A training and professional development program for faculty and staff focuses on the various mental, physical and spiritual aspects of wellness. SUPPLIED

“At the core of the plan is the concept of ‘all, some and few,’” says Trentadue. “All students are supported by whole-school strategies and programming that enhances social-emotional learning and fosters resilience and self-advocacy,” he says. “Some students will display signs of mild to moderate distress and will need individual supports, strategies and interventions. Few will require intensive interventions to address more severe challenges that may be seen as mental health problems.”

A one-page student action plan tool has also been developed to capture key information for each student. “It is an attempt to get a social wellness baseline on student wellness in addition to giving them a vocabulary to monitor their own health,” says Trentadue. “It will significantly inform future directions around meeting student needs.”

To support wellness for

parents, the school provides toolkits, resources and invited guest speakers. In May 2019, it also introduced ParentTalks, an ongoing series of conversations featuring medical and other guest experts speaking to current parents. Topics align specifically to school life, the academic schedule, and generally to raising teenage boys today.

“Triangulating school, home and parish is the engine which makes our vision for wellness run,” says Trentadue. “Parents and students are key partners whose participation are both essential and valued.”

Benzacar adds, “I believe that we are working toward enriching an environment in which the staff and students both can find improved health and enjoyment in this high achieving and academically rigorous program. That means dedicating ourselves to continually evaluating and evolving to meet the needs of our community.”