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Innovative showcases are here to stay

Virtual open houses, tours and podcasts are enriching admissions beyond the pandemic

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

While podcasts have proliferated during the COVID-19 pandemic, their usefulness varies. Sourdough baking and mask disposal tips? Useful! "The Unusual History of Gnomes"? Not so much.

For parents seeking private-school insights in the absence of campus tours and open houses, The York School's new "York Talks" podcast clearly falls into the useful category. It's just one of many virtual and digital tools being used by independent academic institutions across Ontario to carry out admissions and showcase students, faculty and campuses in the middle of a pandemic.

As York Talks host Natasha Estey explains, the half-hour podcasts are modelled after the in-person familiarization events that would normally take place at the 56-year-old co-ed school's two Yonge Street campuses.

"We wanted to leverage the podcast medium to provide families with insights and content in a more intimate, digestible and accessible format, and include a more diverse range of voices and perspectives," the enrolment and engagement associate says. "Even with the better part of a decade of experience working in admissions at the York School, I jumped at this opportunity to connect with expert educators, articulate students and engaged parents in a more informal, conversational way. I knew they would have a lot to teach me and all the families listening."

Since launching in September

of 2020, the twice-monthly series has gone on to cover topics ranging from "Experiential Learning at Its Best" and "Parents and Partners" to student wellness and the school's JK to Grade 12 International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum. Upcoming podcasts will feature a discussion about innovation, technology and the future of learning, and how York's athletics program stems from the belief that sport can be a great educator.

"We've noticed great innovations in all the admissions departments at our 48 member schools," says Sarah Craig, executive director of the Conference of Independent Schools of Ontario (CIS Ontario). "During the pandemic, virtual tours and open houses have become the norm."

There's much more to these experiences than roving webcams, Craig says, pointing to York Talks and a 360-degree virtual reality experience covering 20 different venues at Ottawa's historic Ashbury College, including its recently opened Centre for Science and Innovation.

Like Ashbury and several other CIS Ontario members, Richmond Hill's TMS was still hosting virtual sessions with admissions staff and faculty after the admissions rush that typically takes place from October to January each year.

"We've actually had a huge uptick in interest because it's easier to stop what you're doing and turn on the computer, participate for an hour and a half, and then go back to what you were doing, than it is to actually hav-



ASHBURY COLLEGE

Ashbury College offers a 360-degree virtual reality experience covering 20 venues at the school.

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SARAH CRAIG
CIS ONTARIO

ing to come out to something," says Kirsten Eastwood, executive director of community development at TMS.

While showcasing TMS's new Lower School atrium, entrance gym and outdoor grove has presented a challenge — "virtual tours can't compare with seeing these wonderful spaces in person," Eastwood says — one-on-one video chats with parents and prospective students have proven more effective than in-person open houses in fuelling enrolment. "We've been able to answer questions and engage with people in a way that we

may not have been able to do with a larger group."

Craig echoes this view. "I've heard from our schools that visits to their websites are up overall, as are inquiries of admission. At the outset of the pandemic, our schools were really well-suited for the transition to virtual remote learning with a lot of technology pieces already in place and a lot of professional support for teachers."

In terms of the admissions process itself, technology again prevented the pandemic from getting in the way.

"We were lucky that we already had all our admissions form applications online," Eastwood says. "People could register for an open house, apply to the school, and our current families could re-enroll. Having to deal with paper-based processes would have been very difficult."

While Eastwood is hopeful

that the admissions process will return to some semblance of normalcy by the fall, "the value we've seen in one-to-one connections means we will continue doing virtual open houses."

Likewise, thanks to the virtual admissions resources they've rolled out, CIS Ontario members are now able to "provide better and more accessible insights to those people who are interested," Craig says.

"Our schools have already invested time, energy and resources, so I can't imagine that these innovations will disappear. They will be maintained and enhanced alongside traditional opportunities to meet face-to-face.

"If you're not able to make it to a school campus, you're going to get a richer experience online than ever before."

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