

Private Schools:

AN OPTION FOR FAMILIES
CONCERNED ABOUT 'LEARNING GAP'

by Dr. Leanne Foster



Trafalgar Castle School is a private all-girls' day and boarding school in Whitby for students in Grades 4 through 12. SUPPLIED

The new school year is barely underway, but some parents are already worrying about their child's learning. More than two-and-a-half years of COVID-disrupted learning has resulted in what researchers are calling 'the learning gap.' Ontario students are falling behind and whether report cards reflect it – they often don't – declines in literacy and numeracy are very real and worrisome.

Tutoring is one solution but the \$400 per student the Ministry of Education will provide to families won't go very far in addressing the problem. Also, scheduling tutors after school is difficult for many families and not much fun for most kids. For this reason, concerned families are increasingly looking to private schools, hoping that smaller class sizes, more individualized attention and support can help their child catch up or even get ahead.

The good news for families is that private schools aren't just for the wealthy. Many schools offer financial assistance and most offer flexible payment plans. Most families who select private schools do so because they believe a private school experience will better prepare their child for success down the road.

Many value the character education, high academic standards, ample clubs, competitive sports and other opportunities that private schools offer. For some children, the higher level of learning support available in schools like Trafalgar Castle School in Whitby is the difference between success and failure, making the decision to move from the public system an essential one.

For parents considering the move to a private school, the first step is to decide what's important to them. Some schools offer a specific curriculum or instructional approach, such as Montessori, International Baccalaureate (IB) or Advanced Placement. Some schools are single gender or faith-based, while others offer bilingual programs. Knowing what you want for your child is important because it's not only about the cost of tuition; it's about which school is the right fit for your child and your family.

A school's website should provide information about tuition and other fees. Look carefully at the academic program being offered, knowing that private Kindergarten to Grade 8 schools in Ontario aren't inspected by the Ministry of Education and there are no regulations or standards determining what gets taught or who does the teaching.

Be sure to find out if a school is privately owned, managed by a for-profit company or governed by a



Board of Directors as a not-for profit, as is the case with Canadian Accredited Independent Schools and most schools belonging to CIS Ontario. Ask if the school is accredited in any way, as is the case with IB and some Montessori schools. Find out if all teachers have teaching qualifications and are certified by the Ontario College of Teachers. Don't assume that a private school automatically offers a better education.

A phone call or visit with the school is a good idea. Some schools hold open houses that provide families with an opportunity to meet students, teachers and often current parents. Ask whether specialist teachers provide instruction in subjects such as music, art and physical education. Some schools offer comprehensive tuition that includes meals, field trips, classroom supplies and sports. Other schools bill for things considered extra. Each school is different so research is essential.

The admissions process will be unique to each school but typically, schools ask families to complete an application and will schedule an interview with the family and child. Often an academic assessment is arranged to determine the student's level of learn-

ing. Don't worry – private schools aren't just looking for students with straight A's so approach the interview and assessment with a relaxed and open attitude. Reassure your child that the school simply wants to get to know them better.

During the admissions process, parents should be open and honest about learning needs or areas of challenge, such as anxiety or ADHD. The more information a school has, the more it can ensure it can meet the child's needs. No one wants a child to end up at a school that can't provide the required support.

For families thinking about a change in school, the fall is a good time to begin the research. Many schools have application deadlines and many are seeing higher than usual levels of interest from parents and students alike. Small class sizes are a hallmark of private schools and it's not uncommon to hear about grades filling up quickly.

Dr. Foster is Head of School at Trafalgar Castle School, a private all-girls' day and boarding school for students in Grades 4 through 12. Visit trafalgarcastle.ca for more information.