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# Glenlyon Norfolk School

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## The Our Kids Review

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Photography by Arnold Lim for Our Kids Media

Written by Glen Herbert

ISBN 978-1-990397-08-0

Since 1998, families have trusted Our Kids to help navigate the private school landscape. Drawing on years working with education experts, parents, and school insiders, Our Kids provides families with insights into the top schools—and into choosing the right school for a child.

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## Preface

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*“At the core of everything is the community, that whole piece of working together in partnership.”*

*—Chad Holtum, Head of School, Glenlyon Norfolk School*

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Every private school is unique, with its own character, facilities, programming, culture, and reason for being. No private school is right for every learner, but for every learner there is a right school. Your task—and it isn’t an easy one—is to find the right school for your child; the one that offers the right challenges and the necessary supports; the one where she feels comfortable and included; the one that allows him to grow into a sense of himself and his place in the world; the one where people laugh at their jokes, and ache in the same places. The one where they know, without question: those are my goals, these are my friends, this is my school.

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We know how hard it can be for you, as a parent, to research private schools. For more than two decades we’ve published Canada’s most trusted annual private school guide, building on insights gained over years of work. The *Our Kids Private School Reviews* series of

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## Details: Glenlyon Norfolk School

**Founded:** 1913

**Enrolment:** 800

**Grades:** JK to 12

**Gender:** Coed

**Living Arrangements:** Day, Homestay, Boarding

**Language Of Instruction:** English

**School Focus:** Academic

**Developmental Priorities:** Balanced, Intellectual

**Curriculum:** Progressive, International Baccalaureate

**Curriculum Pace:** Standard-enriched

**Academic Culture:** Rigorous

**Motto:** Do your best through truth and courage



## Introduction

Glenlyon Norfolk School (GNS) is an independent, coed day and boarding school offering Grades JK through Grade 12. The Beach Drive campus—the only Junior School with an oceanfront campus in the country, as far as we know—houses JK through Grade 5. The Pemberton Woods campus houses the Grade 6 through 12 program.

The first thing that really distinguishes the school campuses, at least from the parking lot, is how different they look. Were you to ask someone to draw a school, many would likely draw a two- or three-story, symmetrical building with a stairway going up to a front entrance and a flagpole out front. In Canada, there are lots of public schools that look just like that. Buildings like that reflect their eras, though they also reflect an intention, an idea of what school was meant to be.

Private schools, of course, don't follow that pattern. They each stubbornly grow of their own accord, guided by their unique intentions and lifted up by their communities, and changing with the people and the ideas that pass through them. That's true here. GNS doesn't look like any other school you've ever seen, and indeed it isn't like any other school you've ever seen. In addition to the two campuses there is a boarding house located in the Oak Bay neighbourhood, so the school's physical boundaries are somewhat amorphous. These aren't grand campuses with high walls and gated entrances. Rather, they are integrated into the neighbourhoods within which they live.

The school is in the midst of a period of significant capital development. In the last strategic plan, the school set out to enhance the teaching spaces with an eye to the needs specific to the delivery of the International Baccalaureate (IB) programme. It began with a redesign of the Beach Drive campus, which included the creation of two learning pavilions for the early years programs completed in 2019 and a new main school building for Grades 1 to 5 completed in 2020. There has been a lot of time, care, and thought put into the development. It's a study in how to be sympathetic to the environment, the school program, and the history of the property. At one point second grade teacher Kathryn Wild noted that, initially, she was a bit concerned with how the development of the Beach Drive campus would unfold. When she first came to the school, it felt like a little village, with a number of buildings set across the property. She liked that feel, with kids walking between environments. The buildings showed their age, but also their character. However, Wild admits that she was pleasantly surprised. The development is different and the spaces are more integrated, though she feels it was done in a way that retained that village feel.

A key architectural element of the Beach Drive campus is Rattenbury House, built by Francis Mawson Rattenbury, architect of the Empress Hotel and the provincial Parliament Building. It's a stunning historic building, though not necessarily in the way that you might expect. If all you knew about Rattenbury were the buildings mentioned above, you'd expect piles of stone. But those were made for history, to house the mechanisms of the province. Rattenbury House was completed in 1898 to serve as a family residence. It was made for family, and that's how it looks and feels. More cottage than castle. The school moved to the property in 1935, and the building remains responsible for the look of the campus today, sitting on the original survey on a two-acre lot on the water.

It's a building that the school rightly treasures. "We did research with other schools and we looked at how they incorporate their history with their students," says head of school Chad Holtum.

"One of the recommendations that we received was, if you have a historic building, don't take classrooms out of it... don't go sticking the administration in the historic building, because the kids need to walk it, and they need to feel it." So during the development for Rattenbury House they created a 28,000 square foot addition to house teaching and learning. "We wanted to bring the outside in—because the site is so epic. And we wanted to bring that in, to bring the light in, to bring the woods in, and have the kids be part of that environment." The interiors retain the original feel, with kids learning in spaces that reflect the history of the space and the history of the school. The after-school care is delivered in a cozy room with wooden floors and the original fireplace. There's an inscription carved in a beam above the hearth. "If you back up a little bit, just to the right spot, you can see it," says one of the teachers. It reads "East west hames best," a Victorian phrase meaning that anywhere you go, home is the best. In the best ways, the spaces are reminiscent of Bilbo Baggins's home in *The Hobbit*: panelled walls, polished chairs, and lots of pegs for hats and coats.

The Pemberton Woods property feels much larger than it is, in part because of how the buildings are arranged at angles to each other rather than in rows. There are spaces in between where people gather or pass each other on the way to classes and activities. It has a sense of bustle. Again, while the property isn't huge—it's only about six acres—it's easy to get turned around, and that's part of the charm of the place. As with the Beach Drive campus, it too feels like a village in all the right ways. In some ways, it feels like the Tardis on *Dr. Who*: bigger on the inside than the outside, with all the teaching spaces, performance space, and student life facilities.

The re-development of the Pemberton Woods property is ongoing. The administration has worked closely with all stakeholders—teachers, staff, students, donors, parents—to bring the facilities forward with an eye to academic and student life. The school added an athletic turf field—the first for a school in the area—in 2008 and Denford Hall—a 385-seat performance and meeting space—in



2013. Since that time, a number of renovation projects have resulted in the creation of a fitness centre and a music centre as well as a refurbished dining hall and gym. “At the core of everything is the community,” says Holtum, “that whole piece of working together in partnership.”

## Background

GNS started its long history in 1913 with the founding of Norfolk House, a girls’ school that found its permanent home in 1932 at what is today the Pemberton Woods campus. Twenty years later, a boys’ school was created nearby, Glenlyon Preparatory School for Boys, that moved to the Beach Drive site in 1935. In 1986 they amalgamated to become Glenlyon Norfolk School. At first, program delivery remained gendered: Beach Drive was the Junior Boys Campus for Kindergarten to Grade 7; Pemberton Woods was home to the Junior Girls Campus, Kindergarten to Grade 7, and a coed Senior Campus, Grades 8 to 12. In 2003 the school reconfigured to make both campuses coed and given the grade structures that exist today. In 1996, GNS became an IB World School with the adoption of the Diploma Programme, later adding the Middle Years Programme (MYP) and Primary Years Programme (PYP). The dedication to the IB has been ongoing and profound, and the school, to its credit, has allocated a large professional development budget to this area.

Boarding has been an aspect of the school at various points in its life. Both founding schools ran traditional programs until the 1960s and 70s. At that time, students arrived mostly from within Canada, and the program was designed to meet their needs, rather than those of international students.

The current boarding program began as a homestay program with a twist. In 2014, the school moved away from the typical program model that recruited families from the greater community



to billet students. Instead, the school looked for hosts already connected to the community, either staff or families with students currently enrolled. “We want them to live with GNS families because they understand the school, they understand the culture, they understand the ethos,” says Holtum. The community stepped up, and now there are between 30 and 40 international students who live with GNS families. The program receives a fair bit of attention in light of the benefits it offers. GNS remains the only school in Canada that offers this kind of homestay option.

In 2021, GNS augmented the homestay program with a more traditional boarding facility, Gryphon House, in a 1912 Victorian building located midway between both campuses. Formerly the site of the Oak Bay Guest House, it’s set within a residential neighbourhood, blending in nicely with the houses that surround it. “It was a unique opportunity,” says Holtum of the creation of Gryphon House. “It’s been honestly something that I’ve been thinking about since the day I got here.” If you didn’t know it was here, you’d easily drive right past, none the wiser, which is part of its charm. With space to house 24 boarders, international and domestic, it’s more in line with traditional boarding than homestay. Two teachers live in the dorm with the students full time, extending that family feel. It’s also within walking distance of the school.

Holtum says that “it’s very intentional, how we structured this. The intention was to put together a GNS version of boarding. And working with the board of governors, in working with the families and our teachers, we asked what boarding would look like in our school.” The result reflects the look and feel of the wider GNS community, appointed to feel like a home, which of course it is for those who live there.

## Leadership

The leadership hierarchy looks traditional on paper—there is a

school head, a deputy head academics, directors, divisional principals, IB coordinators, and directors of curricular and co-curricular areas. In practice it is quite flat and more collaborative than the org chart might suggest. “If I needed to or wanted to go to the top, I could. And vice versa,” says Duncan Brice, co-director of athletics. “The head can walk into my office, my classroom, and, boom, we’re right into a conversation.” That close communication and lack of bureaucracy is directly responsible for the quality of the programs. “I found in other situations, bureaucracy can be stifling, can kill initiative and creativity. People feel pigeon-holed. Where that does not exist here.”

Holtum has been at GNS since 2013 and has served as the head of school since 2020. His area of expertise is in advancement and marketing, and he’s been extremely successful in that regard. When he arrived, he brought a wealth of administrative experience gained at other schools of similar stature, including Queen Margaret’s School and Shawnigan Lake School. There may be heads of school who step back or retreat to their offices as if leading from afar, but Holtum certainly isn’t that. It’s hard not to smile when you’re in his presence, something that the students feel as well, and remark upon. He’s exuberant and very obviously loves what he does. It’s telling of his leadership style that when I ask what him what he feels is the strength of the school, he answers: “We’re approachable.” He’s thinking specifically of students and families, though that’s true of the staff and administration as well. “We’re caring, we live our core values. And we are a community. Ultimately, the number one thing is that this is like a family... That’s what we’re known for in Victoria and around the world with our overseas families: you’re going to come to a place where you’re known, you’re going to come to a place that you trust and that is safe.”

Holtum is visible, moving between buildings, pausing in the dining hall, and stopping to chat along the way. He also addresses the students at regular assemblies. The day before I visited, he spoke at the Middle School assembly about community. “I talked about

saying good morning to each other and looking each other in the eye. And it sounds silly, but I stand out there every morning where the kids get dropped off, and I wave and say hello. The kids are busy, they have their heads down in their phones. And I said, 'Imagine if we put those away and every morning that you walk in, imagine if people looked up and looked you right in the eyes and said good morning. How would you feel?' ”

After that talk, a girl in Grade 7 walked over to the office and booked an appointment with Holtum. “So she comes and sits down here today,” he says. “And she says, ‘I have a question for you. You talked about respecting each other and talking about each other. Empathy. When we walked in, we all stood up for O Canada, but then the land acknowledgement came on and no one stood up. Why is that?’ And I thought, ‘That’s a great question! I don’t know.’ ”

There’s a lot to the story that Holtum likes, as well he should, particularly that the student felt comfortable booking an appointment, sitting down, and asking the question. “And I said, ‘Ok, let’s find out!’ ” The school works with James Taylor, an Indigenous Educator, who was on campus that day, so Holtum brought him in as well. Afterward the student thanked him for listening to what she had to say. “And I thought, ‘Ok! We’re doing something right here!’”

## Academics

GNS was an early adopter of the IB Diploma Programme, and, after bringing on the Middle Years and Primary Years Programmes, has been accredited to offer the full continuum since 2007. The IB was created in the 1960s to offer a curriculum that wouldn’t be unique to a specific region or country. The aim was to be internationally recognized and promote the skills and postures of global citizenship. Initially, it was meant as a program for children of diplomats; students could move between IB schools, picking up the curricular threads exactly where they left off. (While not a child of a diplomat, per se, one alumna we spoke with chose GNS for exactly that reason. Ella Chan ‘18 had been attending an IB school in Singapore before she moved with her family to Victoria. “We were trying to keep the curriculum consistent,” she says.)

Today, an equal if not greater draw of the IB is the academic approach. The curriculum is inquiry-based and interdisciplinary, with culminating projects at key points in a student’s development. It’s challenging and delivered through an international lens. Cole Carlson, deputy head of school: academics, says that GNS “lives and breathes the philosophies of the IB.” We tend to think of the IB as a university preparatory program at the secondary level. Of course it is that, though the Primary Years and Middle Years Programmes are just as important in that journey. They prepare students for the senior school years, both in content and instructional style, as well as in their support of students as empowered learners. “At those

years, it is very much a philosophical approach,” says Carlson, “and has an impact on pedagogy and how you plan for and deliver lessons and units throughout the year. But it also allows us to tackle things like the approaches to learning skills, learner profile attributes, and developing a global mindset.”

At GNS, there isn't one single, cookie-cutter approach to education; students have many unique routes to their graduation. Students have an option to choose the BC Diploma provincial courses and/or the IB Diploma Programme courses, and various pathways have been established to facilitate their choices. Some are fully IB Diploma students, others are fully BC Diploma students, though a majority are a hybrid of the two. “The BC curriculum has, in recent years, modelled itself more closely after the IB,” says Carlson, “so our school has done a really good job of marrying the two systems together. All students graduate with the BC Dogwood Diploma, with some choosing to pursue and graduate with the full IB Diploma as well. In a typical year, half of the graduating class will earn both.”

When I ask Carlson what he hopes students take with them when they graduate from GNS, he says “you know, there's lots to that.” First is “that they're academically ready, and socio-emotionally ready to tackle any challenge.” In addition he hopes that they'll take a sense of “confidence in themselves. Knowing that they're part of this supportive community, but confident in themselves as individuals as well.”

## The Junior School

“It's too bad you weren't here about an hour ago,” says teacher Kathryn Wild. “We were just starting a new unit on creativity and the whole central idea is that creativity is inspired by its surroundings.” I had been touring the Beach Drive campus and had come across Wild in what was clearly her element: a Grade 2 classroom.

That morning Wild had split the kids up into groups and she and the teaching specialists took them to different places in the school and, thanks to their imaginations, different places in the world. Some chairs had been placed in rows to become a make-believe plane. In it, the kids flew across Quebec. “Then some kids came through here, and, look! There's the Eiffel Tower,” she says, obviously delighted at the thought. “There's another big structure over there and everybody came up here and said, ‘Hey! Here we are!’ ”

The students went into the hallways and neighbouring teaching spaces. “Benjy had the strobe light going and everyone was dancing,” says Wild. “Then we had art in the music room to see if that affected their mood, instead of being in the art room.” Some went out into the yard between the building and the beach where they looked at the ocean and felt the rain. “We wondered if that could inspire us to play a tune, a piece of music.” It did.

Wild was right, it was too bad I hadn't been there. “And then we brought the kids together, because that's true inquiry. Asking ‘What were we just doing? What was that dance about?’ ” Wild is a force. In the junior hallway and in the classroom the word “yet” kept appearing, posted to the walls here and there. I asked her what that meant. “It's the power of yet!” she says. “For us in Grade 2 we say, ‘We're just not there, yet.’ If they say, ‘Oh I wish I could print better,’ we say, ‘you're just not there, yet.’ ” It's about possibility. “Sometimes we never get there,” she says, thinking generally. Not everyone makes it to the top of Everest after all. “But it's that process, that kind of thinking.” She pauses, seemingly catching herself and thinking back to the initial question. “Yeah. It's just that.”

I notice a note on the wall that some students had written and pinned with a thumbtack to a map of the world. “Dear Water First people,” it began. It was part of a project some students had done while completing a unit on “sharing the planet.” They had learned that some people don't have enough water, or enough clean water, so they decided to raise some money to help them out. With the support of the teachers, they found a charity called Water First that

helps First Nation communities access clean water. And then they wrote the note. “Dear Water First people. We learned about people that don’t have water YET! So we thought it would be nice to raise money for clean water. We raised \$440 dollars.”

We continue past some students who are learning about why people come to live in Canada, others working on pieces of art. “Do you wish you were in Grade 2?” asks Wild. “Yes,” I say, and I’ve never been more serious in my life. “Me too!” she says.

The things that Wild was doing that day were indicative of the overall approach across the grade levels. Instruction is constructivist, with students building from prior knowledge. Learning is inquiry-based, challenging students to apply their knowledge and skills through collaboration, discussion, and communication. A premium is placed on service and outreach, and of linking learning to real people, places, and issues. Just like Kathryn Wild’s kids were doing that day. This might look a bit different in Grade 11 or 12. The later grades maybe don’t make as much use of the strobe light, for example. But throughout—from JK on up—students are given opportunities to follow their curiosities and are constantly challenged to think in new ways. They learn about the world by engaging with it, gaining a sense of agency. They learn that this is their world to live within, not just to read about, and that they have the capacity to affect change. And they work together as a community—teachers, specialists, peers, and mentors—engaging actively with others and working to bring a lot of joy into the room.

Instruction is student-led, so much so that when Junior School Principal Crystal Shea speaks about working through the interests of the students, she talks about how they “co-create” the program. She gives an example of a Grade 3 class that was interested in spiders, so the teacher used that topic as a way to get into specific areas of the curricular content. “They were using spiders to connect—I’ll even say ‘weave’—everything together.” In math, for example, they may be using spiders to help drive the problem solving that they’re doing. “It’s just that little hook to get them interested.” A connection

to nature is often used to serve the same purpose, providing an entree to the science curriculum as well as topics like stewardship and conservation. The beach is a great resource, though the students also go to Uplands Park, which is nearby, and explore other beaches and biomes along the way. In the Junior School there’s a learning lab, maker spaces, as well as classroom structures built to facilitate community learning—from movable furniture to sliding partitions and walls. There’s a learning commons that provides a central space in the Junior School that students naturally flow into throughout the course of the day.

“It wasn’t until the IB came in here that we started, as teachers, to realize that, yes, this is the way to go,” says Gavin Bowers, Junior School vice-principal. In preparation for bringing in the IB Primary Years Programme, Bowers participated in an exchange with a school with a more progressive approach. He liked what he saw. It wasn’t that GNS had lost its way, or wasn’t delivering a good program, it was more a sense that the school needed a different focus.

Bowers is one of those people that, no matter how long you speak with him, you wish that you could stay longer. He came to our meeting wearing shorts despite it being a cold and drizzly day. Apparently, he wears shorts even at rare times when there’s snow. He has been at the school for more than three decades. Over that time he’s had a number of roles, the longest being as director of physical education, prior to his current role as Junior School vice-principal. When I ask him what has changed in the time he’s been at GNS, he first looks a bit bemused, then says, “Where do I start?” He’s seen five heads come and go over his long tenure, changes to the property, and significant developments with the program. In that, he feels the adoption of the IB Programme is what stands out the most. “I think that biggest growth has been that inquiry piece, seeing what can be done as opposed to just the rote stuff.” When he was first teaching here, they still worked within a very traditional model of academic delivery, with desks in rows and a teacher at the board at the front of the class. “Now it can be anything.” It can

be configurations of blocks, configurations of pairs, or the teacher moving about the room. “With the opening of the rooms, with that ability to open them up, the collaboration going on is constant.”

When I ask him what he had been doing with students that day, he describes the activities—dancing, partner tag, setting up mats and benches for a kind of circuit—but also how they self-assessed, how well they worked together. “They had to work together. They had to move as a group and cooperate.” He adds, “That’s the whole IB piece. There’s a central idea that’s demonstrated by the form teachers, then we as specialist teachers say, OK, how can we look at this? It’s all about [students] being individuals and what they’re able to do at this stage in their lives. They were inquiring into what they were doing. They had to use different parts of the body, and they had to create different movements with that.”

That kind of inquiry—learning about yourself as a learner—is key to the IB, though GNS has developed it further. Leanne Giommi, IB Primary Years coordinator, suggests “One of the things that we’re working on right now is building a writing continuum and having the students understand where they’re at as writers. So that they can acknowledge where they have been in their academic journeys and help figure out where their next steps are as writers.... We can put that assessment piece into their hands.” That kind of personal introspection begins as early as Grade 1. The writing continuum is a series of student exemplars—actual examples—a tool that was developed here. “We’re learning how to really put that into the children’s hands so they can take ownership,” Giommi concludes.

That continuum—it’s literally a book, with dozens of examples of student work—is one of the most impressive assessment tools I’ve ever seen. “We created this so that we could have a common language with the students as they move through the [Junior] School. So that when we’re teaching a new skill, or a new idea of what we need to be doing as writers for our audience, that we had that common language,” says Giommi. It charts 22 discreet stages of development. When Giommi shows the continuum to me in her

office, it’s a book, but in the classrooms, the exemplars are displayed on the walls. “It’s to empower the students to know where they are as writers.” Rather than just telling them what they’d like the students to do and to think about, they are modelling those things in ways they can readily understand.

The writing continuum is a demonstration of the kind of thought that goes into the work of the school, and what Giommi discusses as the co-construction of learning. Yes, parents are paying for the environment and the culture, but tuition is paying for this, too: a remarkably informed, deliberate approach to teaching and innovation. The walls of Giommi’s office are another example of that kind of dedication. The IB PYP units of inquiry and the scope and sequencing of the curricular content are mapped out in excruciating detail on panels that line the room. The units are set within the framework of the Primary Years Programme, with units falling within six transdisciplinary themes: who we are; where we are in place and time; how we express ourselves; how the world works; how we organize ourselves; and sharing the planet. The program was built as a collective group, and it’s reviewed at regular intervals. It’s multidisciplinary and explores concepts, developing skills that are important across the board. Intentionally, the application of the concepts can be very broad. A discussion of families in one setting could be linked, say, to a discussion in music about the families of instruments. That’s quite a leap, but through the contrasts and comparisons students are able to see the complexities that gather around the core topics.

When I ask Crystal Shea why she feels families should choose GNS, she gives an answer that I’ve never heard before: “I think it’s that consistency of expectation.” She continues, “it doesn’t matter what class your child is in, what teacher they have, you know that there’s an expectation that will be met or exceeded.” Frankly, it’s a brilliant answer, and one that says a lot about both her and the school. Parents I spoke with seconded the idea. “It is a beautiful school,” says Jody Carrow, a current parent of the school, “but that

matters to us very little. What matters is the environment they're in every day, and that we've entrusted them to every day." Shea clearly takes that concept absolutely to heart.

## The Middle School

The Middle School at GNS spans Grades 6 through 8, while the IB Middle Years Programme spans Grades 6 through 10. Admittedly, this represents a unique time in a learner's life. "Early adolescence represents a unique time in a learner's life—at times awkward or frustrating," says Russell Marston, principal of the middle school, "At the same time, it can be really amazing to see their growth, to watch them build self-reliance and belief in themselves as they move on to Senior School with the tools that they need." He adds, "It's not just about teaching the subjects, it's about teaching the students."

Gina Simpson, the Middle Years Programme coordinator, agrees. "The social-emotional piece is huge. The neat thing about the middle years is that it's an interesting time for students. It's adolescence. There's so much change going on for students physically and emotionally and everything throughout the middle years." That includes physical development, and the struggles of learning how to manage the pressures of social media and friendships. "But they're still so keen and eager and interested and that's what I find with our students here. They want to know more. They have that hunger for learning. The challenge [we enjoy supporting our students to work through relates to] that social-emotional support and building up the social-emotional skills."

Add to that the natural push for independence and responsibility. "That dynamic in a group of kids, in Grades 6, 7, and 8—and there's definitely an evolution within that age group—presents some unique opportunities in the classroom," says Marston. "If you can harness the passion and get students engaged and interested in what you're teaching, they'll take it and they'll run with it. One of the

most important things for a teacher of middle school is to establish a relationship with their students." For Marston that means seeing the teacher as an expert, but also as someone who cares about them. "If you get that buy in," he says, "you'll often be surprised by what they're capable of."

In the best case, any middle school serves as a bridge from the kind of intense attention that learners feel in Junior School and the independence of Senior School, where students are not only traveling between classrooms, but also taking more charge of their own learning. "To be able to bridge that gap with a high level of pastoral care is," says Marston, "I think, really key." That term he uses, "pastoral," isn't one that most schools use, but is used commonly here. (In a separate conversation, Simpson said "in the Middle School, here, pastoral care is huge.") It's more common in the UK, and while to some it can sound religious (it's not) it's actually more in line with wellness; it includes not only physical health and safety, but also social and emotional wellness, and an overriding sense of care; healthy relationships and independence in school work. It's one thing to have a counselling office, and another for students to feel supported and cared for at every moment of the day.

It's that latter version of care—all encompassing, or "holistic," which is also a word I heard commonly within the school—that GNS strives for and achieves. "If you can have that dialed in by the time you reach Grade 9," says Simpson, meaning a confidence, independence, a sense that it's safe to take academic risks, "you're in pretty good shape going forward."

There are structures in place in order to ensure that. In the Middle School, there are two homeform teachers per class, each with about 20 students. They serve as the primary connection with parents and with managing and helping with the relationships that students have with other teachers, which includes learning how to ask for help. Charmingly, in Grade 6 at GNS, students are taught how to write a polite, clearly worded email to ask for help from a teacher. The lesson is that if they don't understand something, or





if they get a result that they're not happy with, they are the ones who should be reaching out to teachers directly, thus the school is guiding them to the kind of independence that they're going to need when they enter Grade 9. Says Simpson "It's a really key time to bridge that gap."

Gina Simpson has been with GNS for two decades, first starting as an instructor, then moving into her current role. When she arrived, the school was more a traditional offering. With the adoption of the full continuum of the IB, it also changed that feel. "Now I feel it's more of a holistic approach to education," meaning it encourages students not only to excel in school, but "to become people who can really contribute to society and care about the world" beyond the communities that they live within.

"What I say to kids when I teach them Individuals and Societies 9," says Gina Simpson, is that "in the future when you're applying for a job no one is going to ask you the specific date that Louis XVI was beheaded. They're going to ask you about whether you can critically analyze the situation, can you research and understand both sides of an argument. Can you communicate your opinion and understanding? Can you synthesize multiple ideas? What we use these subjects for is so there's a vehicle for skill development."

That might be about the most succinct and accurate description you can have for what the IB Middle Years Programme is, and why it's important. "It's really not about teaching to the test anymore," says Simpson. "It's about teaching beyond the test and understanding the point of learning and its connection to the world."

Simpson teaches and also coordinates the delivery of the MYP. In that role, she's charged with ensuring that the school not only delivers the BC curriculum, but that it is delivering it through the IB MYP framework, which is a student-centred, inquiry-based delivery. The IB audits the school every five years to make sure that instruction is following the framework, and that the core skills are identified in every lesson that is taught. (Simpson chuckles, saying "it's actually quite a bit of paperwork.") "We have to make sure it's

explicitly taught and that students understand why they're learning what they're learning."

The MYP emphasises skills: communication skills, social skills, self management, research, and thinking. And students are able to understand their learning style, what works for them, and that transfer of skills. "It's so much beyond memorizing the textbook," says Simpson. (She adds, "Though, actually, we don't even use textbooks all that much anymore.")

The MYP ends in Grade 10 with an exhibition for which the students each take on an independent project of their choice. They pick their learning goal and their product goal and they start on it at the end of Grade 9. It's a culmination of all the skills that they've been learning all along as highlighted in the IB framework. "We've had students create and build their own standup paddle boards, or recyclable or biodegradable plastic—they can take whatever path that they want." Students write and illustrate children's books or explore how to create a video game. They create movies, cookbooks, online blogs, photo galleries, and objects made from upcycled materials. The range of projects is impressive. During the exhibition the Grade 10 students create displays and the Grade 5 and Middle School students come and tour through. "We're hoping to generate some excitement for when they themselves move through the MYP."

## The Senior School

"It's that good feeling," says Doug Palm, principal of the Senior School, when I ask him what attracted him to GNS. "And I really like the motto: Do your best through truth and courage. I like the word courage the most, because it's really about each student finding that courage within themselves. Whether it's to try something new, or overcome something, or even having that sense of caring." He admits that it can sound cliché, though notes that it

shouldn't. He continues saying that "a lot of schools talk about focussing on the individual and trying to make them the best they can be. At GNS, we don't talk about 'the GNS grad.' I would say there's a real focus within our staff of trying to help them find who they are and build that confidence and ability. And help them find their best. Rather than trying to aspire to a place that others might think they need to get to." Many schools have defined a "portrait of a graduate." At GNS, they recognize their graduates as unique individuals with different strengths and interests that don't all fit into one mold.

Palm has been principal since he arrived in 2016. He brought extensive experience in independent schooling, having been a student at Crescent in Toronto, as well as teaching at Collingwood School and holding administrative roles at St John's Ravenscourt in Winnipeg and Southridge School in Surrey, BC. He's aware that, on some level, the goal of the school is to help students reach that next step in their education, which for most if not all that attend the Senior School, is post-secondary study. But, like any good educator, he's aware that that shouldn't be the only goal. When I ask him what he hopes students take with them when they leave GNS he says, "a real trust in themselves and ability to feel like they can make a difference."

For Palm, a distinct strength of the school is diversity, something that is demonstrated in different ways. The most obvious is the international diversity—20% of the students arrive via the boarding programs. What animates Palm, though, is that students don't cluster around a specific core set of interests. There are athletes and artists, students contributing to the science fair and others mounting plays. The other strength, he feels, is the IB Diploma Programme (DP), both for what it is and for how it reflects that goal of allowing students to leave feeling they can make a difference. The DP was created in 1968 as a two-year advanced secondary school curriculum. Then, as now, the curriculum requires that students complete a course of study in six subject group areas (language and

literature, language acquisition, individuals and societies, sciences, mathematics, and the arts), write an essay of up to 4000 words, and sit standard, externally assessed exams. Students also complete Internal Assessments or IAs in each of their subject areas where they have the opportunity to apply their learning on assignments that are assessed by GNS teachers and moderated by IB examiners.

But it's also a style of learning, one that foregrounds critical thinking, collaboration, and an appreciation of multiple perspectives and points of view. For Angela Girard, the IB Diploma coordinator, it's the approach which makes the IB so desirable. "I love the breadth, depth, and curiosity that it develops in students," she says, "not only in their academics but also in their co-curricular activities." She finds that it's "heartwarming to see students as they come into their own over the last two years of senior school."

Says Girard, "You have all the subjects at the outside of the programme model. Then at the centre you've got the course Theory of Knowledge. You've got the extended essay and CAS," or Creativity, Activity and Service, which encourages involvement in creative pursuits, athletic activities, and service learning. Girard sees the extended essay as the culminating project, the equivalent of the Exhibition in the PYP and the Personal Project in the MYP. It's an academic research paper written on a topic of the students' choice, so long as it relates to one of the subjects they are studying as part of the Diploma. They develop their research question; they work with an extended essay supervisor. She adds that "for many of the students [the essay] ends up being one of the pieces of the Diploma that they feel the most proud of accomplishing. I've got a daughter in third-year university and she has yet to write a 4000-word paper, and she's in third year. And she keeps saying 'when do I get to do this again?!'"

GNS is the one of only two private schools on Vancouver Island offering the full IB continuum, and one of only four on the island offering the DP, so it's a notable and distinguishing factor. GNS also has more history with the programme than perhaps any school



in the province, having been accredited since 1996. Certainly, any school that has in excess of a quarter century offering the IB DP is rare, though that's the case here. Every student at GNS is involved in the DP, though they aren't all involved in the same way, with students free to take a combination of IB and BC provincial courses. Some, of course, do take the full IB Diploma and all the elements included within it. Others opt for a more hybrid pathway. "It really is 'choose your own adventure,'" says Girard.

"We are a university preparatory school," says Sarah MacMillan, university guidance advisor, "so the experience here is to launch them into post-secondary. And, yes, we do have students who are gunning for Harvard and Stanford. Having said that, we're happy to support students looking at gap years or who are looking at taking other pathways."

As Gina Simpson noted about her first years with the school, prior to the adoption of the full IB curriculum, there was a more formal, more traditional take on academics. Being a preparatory school meant just that, getting students into the university of their choice. That remains—the goal for all is, ultimately, to get to the university of their choice—though the school has dedicated itself to a broader conception of what that means. It centers on that idea of pathways, and finding the right one for each student. The intention is to give students the opportunity to direct their learning, and to decide where they want their learning to take them. "The sense that we're all unique," says university guidance advisor Angela Colibaba, "this is the advantage of having time on our side during Senior School, and not just meeting in Grade 12. We can notice that we have a story."

All schools of quality have a strong university guidance program, and that's doubly true here. Counselling begins in earnest in Grade 9 and is incorporated within a specific curriculum, with classes in Career-Life Connections. The counsellors lead workshops and administer diagnostics. The students keep strengths binders. Because guidance is built into the curriculum, students are meeting

with guidance counsellors effectively every two weeks. They also meet regularly in larger groups to talk about the courses they're choosing and the kinds of things that they should be thinking about when they make those choices. Smaller group and one-on-one discussions with guidance counsellors begin in Grade 10. "Selecting courses intentionally, moving into Grade 11, is a real emphasis," says Sarah MacMillan.

What distinguishes GNS is that attention to self-awareness, or what Colibaba refers to as the students' stories. "For them to even consider 'What is my story?' and to dig deeper into that, is an important life skill," says MacMillan. "And we tell them that too. It's not just about writing that one good personal statement." She intends for students to take the time to understand who they are. "To be able to tell your unique pieces of your story and how you're showing up in the world can really have an impact." The week I visited, the counselling department had distributed self-awareness questions to Grade 11 students, asking them to respond in writing. One question asked about what kinds of struggles our ancestors or grandparents might have had and how that impacts the life that we're able to lead. The students were asked to construct a life timeline, from earliest memories to the present day. "Just exercise that part of the brain. Where have I been? What is my story?" They are asked to reflect on their values, what they stand for, how they approach the world and, ultimately, "what makes you, you."

Counselling gets more detailed in Grades 11 and 12 as students turn their attention to their post-secondary plans. Though, even there, there's a lightness to the endeavour. This isn't a process of filling out forms, but rather one of considering what they want to do, who they'd like to be. To find the soil that their skills, interests, and talents will grow best within. Says MacMillan, "You know MIT, you know Harvard, but is that where you're going to thrive and be at your best? Just because it's a branded school doesn't mean it's going to be the best for your program or for you as an individual.... Just because you know the name doesn't mean that it's the best place for you to shine."

When I ask Palm what he would point to, an aspect of the campus, that he feels is emblematic of the culture of the senior school, he answers, without a pause, Denford Hall. “I mean, it’s gorgeous.” He’s right, it is. A classic theatre space, with a full front and back house. But he’s thinking more about what it means. “It references a wonderful place to meet, to bring the community together, to show kids’ talent. It also references the kids who help.” During productions, the students are left alone, with all the staff, including the drama coach, sitting in the audience. The kids, as they did in a recent production of *Mama Mia!*, are literally doing it for themselves. “The kids are owning it, there’s older kids helping younger,” and all—in the cast, in the audience—are sharing with each other. For Palm the great strength of the school is that: kids helping each other—presenting, listening, and sharing. “And the turf. We love the turf.”

“We’re a community,” says Rebecca Neilson, “a powerful group of human beings that work together to support each other.” (As coordinator of student life for the senior school, she says “I joke that my job is being the director of fun.”) I was there the week leading up to Halloween and Neilson was working with the prefect group to plan an event called “Never Too Old to Trick or Treat.” Students would be given a map of stations to visit, and at each would be challenged to answer tricky questions hoping to earn treats. Student volunteers were already distributing the treats and setting up some of the stations. “It’s a real community effort,” which is what Neilson likes about it. “It’s just little things like that that bring fun and community into the school so that, when we do the hard work—which we do, this is an academically rigorous program—we’ve built that community. I think what this school does well is that it makes people feel like they fit.”

The events that dot the weeks and months of the annual calendar illustrate the dedication to ensuring that sense of shared community. The day before I visited there was a house-spirit activity afternoon at the Pemberton Woods campus for students in Grades

9 through 12 and their teachers and staff. There was a tug-of-war, games, capture the flag, a scavenger hunt, and it was all led by students. This in November, though no one was deterred by the fall temps. Leading up to the day, the prefects were charged with gathering and organizing 30 volunteers to work together to design the afternoon, set it up, and run it. There were meetings to organize materials, work through the logistics, and address safety (this was still within the pandemic protocols).

Neilson sees events like that as essential elements of the culture of the school, though also as essential for building student leadership. She’s keen to find any opportunity to put students into mentoring roles. I ask Neilson why she feels leadership is important. “It’s important because people and relationships are important. And so the skill set that leadership, as an umbrella framework, provides are the soft skills that I think the future needs.” She describes leadership as an “anchoring skill” that is useful in all disciplines, so she makes time to speak with students about leadership theory. “Our students need to see what it’s like to actually collaborate and, when it doesn’t work out, they need to listen to each other. They’ve got to work together, to be able to serve others and create opportunities for other people’s lives to be better by them doing that work of leadership.” She adds that, “For me, it’s a critical life skill.”

The student leadership roles within the school are many and varied. There are 10 prefect positions, with two heads and eight that reflect specific areas of student life. There’s an arts prefect, a community prefect, a service prefect, an athletics prefect. They run assemblies, plan events, and also act as a bridge between parents and students. All the prefects are elected by the senior students at the end of the Grade 11 year, so all are in Grade 12. There are speeches and elections. The roles themselves are substantial—clearly this is a school that values student input in the life of the school and allows the prefects latitude to truly lead. Similarly, in the younger grades there are grade reps who represent each grade, as well as house captains, all of whom work closely with the prefects. “We’re good role models

for the younger years,” says Calla Roberts, one of the head prefects, “and also it’s important to give students a space and opportunity to feed that hunger for leadership. To be able to step into a role of more responsibility.” She adds that, “it’s a lot more opportunity to fail, but we need that in order to grow as students and people.”

There is a newly formed Gryphon Government, which is a fresher, livelier take on the concept of a student council. There are divisional communities and grade-level communities. The house system runs from JK through Grade 12, with four houses. There are weekly assemblies divided by division. Students also take active roles in the creation of co-curricular programs, and an example of that is the science fair. All Grade 9s take part in it, and the school regularly makes it to national competition. Participants in the fair, as they get to Grades 11 and 12, take on mentoring roles.

The students also prepare for post-secondary life through taking part in community service. That grants them some experience, which of course is invaluable. Students leave very well prepared,” says Colibaba. “They have an excellent story because they do service and a lot of community engagement and co-curriculars that make them stand out competitively.”

## Athletics and co-curriculars

“We try to have student interest drive the program,” says Duncan Brice, co-director of athletics and co-curriculars for Grades 6 to 12. As an example, he mentions how, during the pandemic, when some traditional offerings couldn’t be mounted, one of the staff was approached by students looking to start a Dungeons and Dragons club. So they did. That the staff member himself shared the passion only added to the quality of the offering. “That’s kind of our philosophy,” says Brice. “If we don’t have something and a kid wants it, we create it.” There are the perennial teams and clubs that are available every year, though there are others that are added or removed based on interest. In all, in any given year, there’s a longer roster than you’d expect.

Participation rates are high. If you ask a student who has been at the Senior School for a number of years what they’ve taken part in, a typical response is a long list followed by some version of “Um, well, it’s hard to remember them all.” GNS is a small school in terms of student population, which means that it relies on every member of the school community to mount the co-curricular programs. If there is a play, then they need everyone to pitch in. A school event, same thing. That’s true for athletics as well. In larger schools the top athletes dominate the teams, and they specialize in specific athletics.

Here, in contrast, “our goal is participation,” rather than just competition, says Brice. “One hundred per cent.” If students are interested in being athletic, or even just trying something out to see

what it's like, they're on every team with starting roles. There isn't a set-in-stone no-cut policy, though cuts are rare, with exceptions for the senior girls' volleyball and senior boys' basketball. Those are signature sports for the school, and because there is a limited number of athletes who can be in play at any one time, cuts can be hard to avoid. Even so, the students who don't make the lineup are given opportunities to participate through attending practice or taking supporting roles, such as the team manager or the gym supervisor.

In the Middle School there are no cuts at all, and the desire is for students to sign up for as many co-curriculars as possible. ("Do 'em all!" says Brice.) As they get older and other things encroach on their time—academics naturally being one of them—students will refine that list, taking part in the things that excite them and maybe stepping away from others that may not engender the same level of excitement.

The school competes with other schools in the city and beyond in girls' soccer, field hockey, and basketball, and boys' soccer, rugby, and basketball, and more recently, in co-ed ultimate. They have won an impressive array of titles in Vancouver Island championships, independent school championships, and provincial championships, including those in rugby, tennis, soccer, and basketball, where GNS teams compete at the A or AA level. The school also competes within the ISABC competitions. Soccer is unique because the local league is so strong that players bring their training with them. So, again, while it's a small school, it does surprisingly well in soccer competition.

Ultimately, when they graduate, students have had all those various experiences: participation, competition, inclusion. And travel. Because they are on an island, going to a provincial tournament is quite involved. The trips are also where many friendships form and solidify. Brice, as any athletic director, tends to speak in the long term, well beyond when students have left the school and gone on to other phases of their lives. The desire is that they not only take with them a sense of the benefits of an active lifestyle but

also that they have experienced the full breadth of student life and made some lasting memories.

The facilities at the school are exceptional. One showcase is the turf field, which is a point of pride. When it was built a decade or so ago it was unique for a school, public or private, to have one. It was a big investment, Brice admits, but has paid off through the use of the school—great facilities can be a motivator—as well as through community use. The main gym was renovated in 2019 and a fitness centre was added in 2016 following the renovation of the original Norfolk House gym—both projects were funded entirely through donations.

Athletics are not the only co-curricular activity that reaches beyond the school. GNS has been a global member school of the Round Square network since 1996 and in 2008 co-hosted the International Round Square Conference on the theme of local to global environmental sustainability. Founded in 1966, the Round Square is an international network of schools that encourage students to live according to the IDEALS: International understanding, Democracy, Environmental stewardship, outdoor Adventure, Leadership, and Service. Community involvement is encouraged through participating in local and international leadership conferences, service projects, a student exchange program for Grade 8 to 11 students, as well as in-school student service. Leadership groups at each campus called the Round Square Committee provide a focal point for service learning and local and global engagement. GNS was an early adopter, and when it joined, it was only one of 20 participating schools globally. That number has grown considerably since then to over two hundred schools around the world.





## Getting in

Applications become available in August one year prior to the year of entry. The admission process for most families begins by filling out an online form. Once complete, families are invited to tour the school and submit a full application. Tours aren't required but are highly recommended. The best time to visit is when classes are in session in order to get a sense of the buzz of the community, which is delightful.

Applications for Junior Kindergarten (for both the First Steps 3-year-old program and the JK 4-year-old program) and Kindergarten classes are due by October 1 for entry the following year. That said, applications will still be accepted after that date, and will be considered throughout the instructional year until the classes are at capacity. Applications for Grade 1 to 12 are accepted and processed throughout the academic year.

The next step is the assessment process, which can sound daunting, but, per the parents we spoke with, isn't at all. The school is interested in making the best introduction to the student, and of course, that's what families are looking for as well. The admission process isn't seen as a test but rather the beginning of an important relationship. To that end, Kindergarten applicants meet with a teacher who intends to gain a general sense of their skills, abilities, and social development. Students planning to enter Grades 1 through 12 are asked to complete an admissions assessment to better understand their academic strengths, including their literacy,

numeracy, and communication skills. Students intending to enter Grades 6 through 12 are asked to attend an interview with members of the admissions office.

The admissions committee is looking for mission-appropriate students, those who can benefit most from the GNS experience. Where space is limited, some students may be placed on a waiting list and notified when a space becomes available.

Tuition is on par with schools of similar focus within the region. The school intends to make the offering accessible to all students who can benefit from it, and therefore has a sizable financial aid program. It includes the Community Scholarships, renewable annually, for domestic students who are new to GNS and entering Grades 8 to 12. Needs-based support is available, covering up to 40% of the cost of attending. There are also one-time Entrance Scholarships available to new students.

## The takeaway

By any metric, Glenlyon Norfolk School is one of the best of its kind in Canada, namely a school that offers the full IB curriculum with two unique boarding options and prepares students for post-secondary education and beyond. Had you visited a decade ago, as even Head of School Chad Holtum admits, you might have found that parts of the school felt a bit tired, maybe in need of some TLC. Now, as the school completes the largest capital campaign of its long life, that's emphatically no longer the case. The development is crisp, clean, beautifully maintaining the legacy aspects of the property (particularly Rattenbury House) while bringing classrooms and common spaces in line with the demands of the IB curriculum.

Every alteration is deeply considered; this isn't a school that takes anything for granted, nor do they make any changes just because. Yes, they decided to augment the boarding program, but they didn't just build a dorm. Instead, they waited for the right opportunity to do it in a way that reflected the school's core values. Hence, it now has Gryphon House, an extension of the singular family boarding program that the school is known for. In the Junior School they decided to invest in self-assessment, and then created a tool—the writing continuum—that subtly recasts what self-assessment can be by reconsidering how students would access it. It's very likely that they'll publish that tool, as well they should. It would no doubt become an industry standard. They consider the smaller things, too.

Where other schools of this size, focus, and stature would have full-time catering, GNS chooses to have parent volunteers run aspects of the food service program. They didn't need to, but they chose to, knowing it was the right choice for them.

These things can seem like small details—that's particularly true in the case of the cafeteria—and perhaps they are, but they are intentional, each of them considered. Add them all together and you get a whole that looks like GNS today. Ask the administrators what they feel their school does best and the first thing that comes to mind, as it did when I asked Chad Holtum, is the community and the fact that “we're accessible.” He says that he knows that academic programs at schools of this quality are a given, so the better question is “What else do you have?” Here, they have inclusion, belonging. “There was a solid sense of community,” says alumna Ella Chan. “You know everybody in your grade. My graduating class was around 70 students. So it was quite a small, close-knit community.” That doesn't just happen. Instead it's the product of all those decisions, big and small, made over the course of decades.

The lessons and activities may look different between the Junior School and the Senior School but the foundations and the intentions are common to both. “One of the things we talk a lot about is critical thinking and we're often told that there's a million different jobs that are not created yet,” says Holtum. “So we're just going to have to prepare kids for that ever-evolving change. And critical thinking is a huge piece of it.” He feels the goal is to help students live balanced lives, to learn to be caring, to be communicators, and to be open minded and able to take calculated risks. “That will set them up to do well, not just in the job, but in life.”

The staff is skilled at making learning engaging. They are committed to active learning as well as active assessment and ensure that the students grow into a sense of who they are as learners—that they know their story, which includes their talents, their struggles, and the communities that they are part of. “For a relatively small school, there's a lot of things happening,” says Chan. There are.

GNS may not be as well-known as some of the other schools within its market. To date, as parent Samir Dhrolia noted, the school has been principally a local one. That's changing. With all the development, and the careful augmentation of the boarding program, its profile is growing, as it should. "Our kids have really no idea," says parent Jody Carrow. "They're not sheltered from the world, but they think this is just what school is, because that's what they know." As teacher Kathryn Wild said during my tour, "creativity is inspired by its surroundings." She's right—people, buildings, postures, values—and that's especially true here. It could easily be the school's motto.



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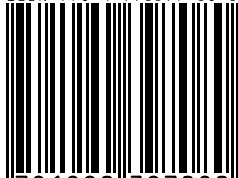
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US: \$8.50 CAN: \$11.50

ISBN 978-1-990397-08-0



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