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PRIVATE SCHOOL REVIEWS

The Country Day School

The Our Kids Review



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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

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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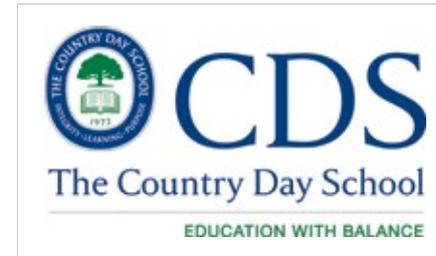
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Details: The Country Day School

Location: King Township, Ontario

Founded: 1972

Enrolment: 800 students

Grades: JK to 12

Gender: Coed

Living Arrangements: Day school

Language of Instruction: English

Curriculum: Traditional

Curriculum Pace: Standard-enriched

Academic Culture: Supportive

Motto: Education with Balance



Introduction

In the 50 years since its founding, The Country Day School has managed to retain its small-school, community feel while growing to offer students rich academic, artistic, outdoor, and athletic programs on a modern campus.

“Education with Balance,” the school’s motto, has been the guiding principle throughout its evolution. In practice, this means providing students with a robust variety of opportunities to explore their interests inside and outside the classroom. “We ensure students have the chance to stretch their learning and try their hand at multiple activities,” says head of school John Liggett. This isn’t the school for students determined to pour all of their time and effort into a single passion, whether it’s academic or extracurricular. It’s a place that encourages students to follow their hearts and minds into many endeavours so they can ultimately answer the question, “Who will you be?” This query appears visually in displays throughout the campus, but it also shapes the school’s overarching philosophy of encouraging openness to new ideas, opportunities, and people.

The school strives to create a supportive, inclusive environment where students feel confident enough to delve into new pursuits, says Liggett. “We work hard here to strengthen that intangible sense of comfort for students, where they feel safe and cozy and want to come to school. When they feel like that, they’re ready to

go—ready to learn and grow.” We heard the word “cozy” used to describe the school by several members of its community, and the term fits perfectly with our assessment of the institution’s culture. “I hope that people recognize that feeling when they walk the halls here,” says Liggett. On our visit, we certainly did. It’s a place where everyone—from Kindergarten students to graduating students and from teachers to senior administrators—seems happy to be there.

“Warm” was another often-used descriptor in our conversations about the school’s atmosphere. “The warm feeling inside the school is what the school is all about,” says Ann Wildberger, director of the Junior School and deputy head of school. The parents we spoke to agreed wholeheartedly. “This is a home-away-from-home for children,” says one parent of two children in the Junior School. “When I toured other schools, there was that impression of competition and intensity, whether in academics or athletics. You don’t get that here.” Instead, the school radiates community spirit, says another parent: “From day one, we felt welcomed as a family and knew that our child would be cared for well here.”

Joshua Simmonds, a 2009 graduate who returned as a Senior School teacher, attests to the school’s enduring home-like quality. “Enrolment has grown and the facilities are even more amazing than when I was a student, but what hasn’t changed is that you’re part of a big family here,” he says. “Inclusion, acceptance, diversity, warmth—all of that is bundled into one feeling of home.”

Relational teaching—a method that prioritizes trust and mutuality between instructors and students—is a core pedagogical approach. So is experiential learning, especially when it involves getting classes outside to take advantage of the surrounding 100 acres. There’s no dominant teaching approach here, but rather a commitment to hire teachers dedicated to truly getting to know each student and understanding how they learn best. That it’s a Junior Kindergarten to Grade 12 school is significant for students, parents, and teachers. Our conversations often came around to the fact that there are ample years to forge strong teacher-student ties

and solidify relationships with families, especially those with more than one child at the school. “There’s something very special about a child being able to start here as a pre-reader with their little struggles, then seeing their journey to the point where they cross the stage as graduates,” says Wildberger.

Parents are an integral part of that journey. Every parent we encountered agreed that teachers and administrators wanted their participation and feedback, and that the parent community plays a pivotal role in the school’s operations.

“The most important thing to us is that our students and their families feel that this is a good place, a fun and comfortable place,” says Liggett. “That’s when the learning can really start.”

Basics

True to its name, The Country Day School is a private, coeducational day school located on 100 acres north of Toronto in King Township. Students and staff refer to the land beyond the school buildings as “the back 40,” a term from farming that refers to the wild or undeveloped parts of a property. While many of the larger independent schools in the GTA have more than one field and abundant greenspace, there is indeed a great deal of country in the school, and the leadership intends to keep it this way.

“We’re committed to protecting our 100 acres into the future, while maintaining and developing our campus in a responsible, responsive way,” says head of school John Liggett. The latest infrastructure project, a new wing for the existing Junior School that will be completed in 2023, exemplifies this approach. There’s a sunlit atrium, new classrooms to replace undersized and temporary (portable) classrooms, an infirmary, a permanent outdoor education classroom, a new playground, and space for future growth in the Kindergarten program. But literally at the heart of the transformed Junior School—housed within the space and containing the library—is the Eversley Schoolhouse, an original one-room school built in 1883 that has housed the school’s Junior School library almost since its inception in 1972. The project pays respect to the school’s roots while keeping its gaze firmly on the institution’s current and future priorities.

A visit begins by driving past Hawksworth Field, one of 10 fields (including one with artificial turf). On the sunny, warm day in mid-May when we visited, the school was hosting a sports tournament across its outdoor athletic facilities, which only added to its picturesque appeal. Four tennis courts and the multi-sport Cyclone Dome quickly come into view next, not to mention the sprawling grounds beyond. The main entrance takes you into the Senior School, a 51,000-square-foot addition that opened in 2016. Everything is fresh and bright, with many floor-to-ceiling windows bringing the outdoors in. But the centrepiece is the Mantella Family Atrium, a space with soaring, intricately designed skylights. The atrium often showcases student art and is where prospective families meet the admissions team and start their tours—a wise choice for first impressions.

The facilities have grown in fits and starts over the decades, but the overall impression is of a cohesive school containing a variety of architectural styles. Some small parts of the original Junior and Senior Schools feel very much like your average public-school hallways, but these are far outnumbered by showstopper spaces such as the Niczowski, Temovsky, Arrigo Dining Hall. This airy, high-ceilinged hall flanked by a wall of windows features market-style buffets organized by cuisine or dietary preference, with seating on the main floor and a mezzanine. Another signature architectural element is the Winch Family Learning Stairs, an extra-wide staircase with both functional steps and comfortable banked seating. Students often gather there between classes or for special events such as coffee houses, where musicians perform at the base of the stairs. Comfortable benches line the main hallways of the Senior School, making it an even more inviting environment. A full-sized gym for each of the three schools, two well-equipped libraries, two Learning Centres for academic support and, last but certainly not least, a 350-seat Performing Arts Centre round out the facility highlights.

Enrolment stands at about 800 students, which is where the school intends to stay, according to head of school John Liggett.

“We’re at the sweet spot in terms of student population, where we can maintain our small-school feeling and individualized approach while still being able to offer all the programs, resources, and facilities of a larger school,” he says.

Dean Sherman, who has taught at the school for nearly 25 years, says the school’s moderate size allows the faculty to maintain strong connections with students. “In all the years I’ve been here, I’ve always been able to walk through the Middle and Senior Schools and know every kid’s name. That’s a crucial part of the school’s appeal for both teachers and students.” Class sizes range from about 16 in Kindergarten and the early primary grades up to 18 in the upper Junior and Middle Schools. Senior School class sizes sit in the low 20s.

While a good proportion of students come from neighbourhoods in nearby King Township (Aurora, Richmond Hill, and Thornhill), an equally large group travels by the school’s busing system from as far north as Barrie and as far west as Brampton. A surprising number have an hour-long commute, a testament to the value their families see in the school.

An after-care program runs until 6 p.m. catering to families in two situations, or a combination thereof: working parents who need the extra hours before picking up their children and families where an older sibling participates in extracurricular programs and the younger sibling needs somewhere to go on those days. The “Koalas” program for primary students runs fun, staff-directed activities until 4:30 p.m., when most extracurricular activities end.

Every student belongs to one of four Houses, named for the school’s founders and pivotal community members. Drumming up school spirit is always the intention of private schools’ House systems, but here it also aligns with the emphasis on “Education with Balance” and a strong encouragement of broad involvement across academic, athletic, artistic, and outdoor domains.

Background

The Country Day School, which celebrates its 50th anniversary in the fall of 2022, bears little physical resemblance to the humble institution where it all began. Yet its core values—community, balance, integrity, and inclusiveness—have withstood countless changes and substantial expansion over the decades.

The idea for the school was sparked over a casual dinner shared by two couples, Moffat and Margo Dunlap and Ed and Daphne Eberts. Their conversation turned to education because, at the time, the local government was planning to shutter the area’s small, rural schools and send students to newer, larger elementary schools in suburban neighbourhoods. Neither couple liked the idea, fearing that these schools lacked the warmth and personal attention their children were used to. They saw great value in maintaining the rural school tradition and soon recruited several more families with a shared aim: starting their own small country school (despite the fact that none of them had experience doing that).

The families hired seasoned private school educator John Pratt to conduct a feasibility study. His encouraging research gave them the green light to proceed, and when the school opened its doors to 47 elementary students in 1972, he became its first head of school. The Eversley School, circa 1883, and two large classrooms on a small plot of rented property were the sum total of the new coeducational, non-denominational private school.

Pratt, whose tenure was formative but short, helped to cultivate a school philosophy based on educating the whole student. The leaders that succeeded him stayed longer, overseeing massive changes at the school. Robert Ross, head of school from 1976 to 1989, began a period of expansion with the purchase of the previously rented land on which the school sat. Highlights of this period included the opening of the Senior School and the purchase of an additional 35 acres of surrounding land to the south.

The Middle School opened in 1991, shortly after Paul Duckett became the third head of school. That same year, the Senior School graduated its first 13 students—including figure skater Elvis Stojko, who went on to become the school’s first Olympian. A series of major projects transformed the school’s physical footprint over Duckett’s 22 years at the helm, from the purchase of the final 65 acres and the addition of new fields and athletic facilities to the building of a new Middle School and the Performing Arts Centre. He also helped the school secure its place as an industry leader in student support with the launch of the first Learning Resource Centre.

Current head of school John Liggett (see below) took over in 2011, a year before the school embarked on its largest capital campaign. Thanks to its huge success, the school now has the stunning dining hall and a rejuvenated Senior School, among other features. Outdoor education (see below) also became a signature program, first in the Junior School and then in the Middle and Senior Schools.

Leadership

School has always been where John Liggett feels most at home, whether as a student, teacher, or administrator. “It’s where my passion is,” he says. “Most days, my job here doesn’t feel like work.”

Liggett started his career in education about 30 years ago in the Toronto public system. Before shifting to the independent school system, he had a brief stint in the corporate world, getting his MBA and managing a manufacturing business. Then he taught at St. Clement’s School in Toronto and St. Michaels University School in Victoria, B.C. “My experience in both public and private education, plus the private sector, has been very valuable to me in my current role,” he says. “You never know what you’re going to be doing from minute to minute when you’re leading a school. The responsibilities are complex and varied.”

Liggett credits his predecessors for bringing the school to a very solid place financially and educationally before he arrived. “I’m grateful to those who came before me for shaping the community ethos and student-centred pedagogy. Over the last decade, we’ve continued to evolve our academic and extracurricular programs, but also maintain them, because nothing was broken when I started here.”

In terms of Liggett’s leadership style, he sums it up himself: “I lead pretty much with my heart.” In our conversation, this was abundantly clear and admittedly refreshing in a senior administrator. He spoke openly, for example, about how much he misses

teaching. “I’m always looking for any opportunity to connect with students, for example going on a field trip,” he says.

The parents we spoke to attested to Liggett’s openness and heart-on-his-sleeve approach. “He’s very authentic,” says one. “I’m always moved by his emails because he has a way of communicating that makes me see him more as a parent than a principal in his concern for students’ well-being.” According to another parent, “He makes an effort to get to know everybody, and he treats every student and family with respect. Also, he has a wealth of knowledge, so if you have a problem, you know you’ll get great support.”

Students also had only positive things to say about him, mostly about his friendliness and fairness. Liggett has a realistic take on how students see him. “I think the kids know that I’m not the archetypal strict, disciplinary principal,” he says. “I ride a motorcycle, for Pete’s sake. I always say hello to them and I’m pretty much smiling all the time. So, there’s that little bit of apprehension, but mostly I think their attitude is, ‘He’s pretty cool. He stays out of our business and we stay out of his business, and he keeps the school running.’”

It was evident in our discussion that he certainly isn’t a disciplinarian, but rather takes a big-picture view of children’s and teens’ development trajectory. “Every day, kids fail wonderfully and they achieve wonderfully. We see all parts of the spectrum. I need all of my wits about me to manage that, but I also need to lead with my heart in seeing the whole child and guiding them through the inevitable struggles of growing up.”

When Liggett joined the school, his two sons did too—one was in Grade 3 and one in Grade 9, and both have graduated. So he has the unique perspective, like many of his colleagues on the teaching faculty, of a parent and staff member. “One of the most important draws for me shifting my career to independent schools was the opportunity for my kids to attend,” says Liggett. “I chose to be in this sector because I’m a dad, too, and I value nothing higher than putting my children’s future interests first, as all our parents do. It’s an amazing life pursuit to participate in the growing up of children into wonderful adults.”

Academics

Balance defines every aspect of the school’s academic programs. Nurturing academic excellence and challenging students are key priorities, but not at the expense of the whole child’s development. Cultivating character, imagination, and a lifelong love of learning are equally important. At this school, the areas that are sometimes considered “extras”—visual art, drama, music, and a raft of extra-curricular activities—hold the same importance as core subjects such as math, science, language, and social science.

“We certainly don’t promote any one subject over another,” says Junior School teacher Rob Waldron. “Even on our report cards we list subjects alphabetically because, if we put language at the top, for example, parents will interpret that we’re most heavily invested in that.”

In our observations, the school’s philosophy on Education with Balance is genuine and pervasive. Not to say that academic achievement isn’t valued and encouraged, but everyone takes a broader view of what that achievement looks like. Whereas at some schools the students who excel at science, or whatever discipline it might be, would be ushered onto a path of advanced science learning inside and outside the classroom, that wouldn’t happen here. “We don’t just look at a child and say, ‘Okay, they’re very strong academically in this sphere, so let’s stream them in that direction,’” says Junior School art teacher Jo-Anne Kuchmak.



“Just as important, for us, is growing their emotional skills, their imagination, and their sports or arts abilities.”

The academic culture reflects this even-handed view. There are clear expectations for students to maintain their marks at a certain level, but also some flexibility. “We have many students who consistently earn very high marks across their courses, but we also support students who aren’t as strong,” says Celia Bland, director of the Senior School. “We require students to have a 70% average to promote them, but we also take into account if they’ve had struggles in their home lives or there are other relevant factors. We do have academic rigour because we’re a university preparatory school, but we’re not a pressure-cooker school. We want students to be successful, but we want them to be well and happy in that success.”

We saw no evidence of the fierce academic competitiveness of “hothouse” schools, and the senior student we spoke to confirmed our assessment. “There isn’t really a competitive culture,” says one Grade 12 student. “I think there’s a culture of wanting to do the best you can.” Another Grade 12 student agreed: “Everyone wants to be successful, and our teachers push us to get to the next level, but all in a nice atmosphere where the goal is getting us ready to be independent, motivated learners.” A student in Grade 10 added this: “It’s as competitive as you make it. We’re not all focused on beating our classmates’ marks.”

The Junior and Middle Schools

The Junior School is wholly dedicated to being a safe, supportive springboard for students’ academic career. Spending any time in this colourful, welcoming, busy space inspires a sense of confidence in the fact that it’s a good place to be for young learners. There’s a buzz of activity and artwork lining the halls, but there’s nothing chaotic about it. The children and teachers appear focused but at ease in their tasks.

While the Junior School’s physical home was more than adequate, it’s now exceptional in several regards. The renovations and additions (see above) offer new classroom spaces for the youngest learners, spacious common areas for gathering, and an outdoor education classroom.

Director Ann Wildberger starts every academic year by telling a story at the Junior School assembly with a theme that will guide academic and extracurricular endeavours across the grades. When we visited, the theme was captured in the question, “Why not you?” “The theme is a touchstone for teachers and students over the year,” says Wildberger. “They explore it in multiple ways across the curriculum.” We saw a vivid example firsthand: a large wall mural where students wrote and illustrated their future aspirations. It all ties back to the school’s aim of helping students uncover their strengths and ambitions.

One area where the Junior School is very intentional about fostering student strengths is public speaking. “Right from Junior Kindergarten, we have many opportunities for children to speak in front of their class or at assemblies,” says Wildberger. On the day we visited, she was announcing the grade winners of the latest public speaking contest. “We also have student-led parent conferences, where children run a half-hour meeting with their teacher and parents to share their recent work and goals for improvement. The whole exercise enriches their confidence and communication skills.” She notes that it’s no coincidence that the school is an international leader in debate.

Several parents mentioned the emphasis on public speaking as one of the school’s differentiators. “My kids were very shy before they started here,” says one. “Over the years, they get comfortable speaking to a crowd. Today my son is doing a speech at the athletic assembly, and he’s perfectly fine with it.”

Other parents commented on the Junior School’s inclusive, encouraging environment. “The teachers push them to grow and learn, but in a gentle way,” says one. “They stress that mistakes are

good because we learn from them, which helped my kids come out of their shells.”

Some notable features of the Junior School curriculum include a comprehensive visual arts program in the well-equipped art studio from Grade 4 on, and an accelerated music program where students can play in a beginning band starting in Grade 5.

The Middle School sits literally in the middle of the Junior and Senior Schools, naturally occupying less space since it only houses Grades 7 and 8. Built in 1998, it doesn't have the architectural appeal and open spaces of the school's newer additions, but the same bustling, comfortable atmosphere of the wider school prevails.

Middle School interim director Catie Ferguson was full of energy and enthusiasm when we spoke—two vital qualities in someone responsible for the education of early adolescents. “I often talk about the roller coaster of Middle School when I speak to parents,” she says. “It's a time with big social, physical, and intellectual transitions, and we have to expect there may be some twists and turns.”

To give each student a sense of belonging and grounding in these grades, they have a consistent homeroom teacher each year who also has an advisory role. “The kids really get to know the teacher and 18 classmates in their homeroom, and parents have a go-to contact for communications about their child,” she says. Every month there's an advisory session, with an extended homeroom class for discussing social-emotional and academic matters.

For further support in these areas there's a dedicated Middle School guidance counsellor. In addition to teaching a guidance course on topics such as study skills, mental health, internet safety, and other relevant issues in this age group, she's available for individual counselling. “Every month we choose a theme to embed in the curriculum that aligns with the guidance course content,” says Ferguson. When we visited in May, the theme was exam preparation, since Grade 7 students were heading into their first-ever exams.

Preparation for the increased academic demands of high school is integral to the Middle School's program. Students become accustomed

to the rotary system, where they have a different teacher for most classes. “We're very fortunate to have a lot of specialist teachers in the Middle School, which introduces students to what it is to be passionate and deeply knowledgeable about a subject,” says French teacher Hannah Fransen. Students also get a taste of the interdisciplinary, project-based learning ahead. “Our teachers team teach and come up with incredible projects that are a crossover with math, science, and English, for example, and maybe some outdoor education or whatever they feel is the right fit and match for the current student body,” says Ferguson. Getting students outside to channel their sometimes restless energy is a big focus at the Middle School.

One unique offering in the Middle School is the Comprehensive Arts Credit in Grade 8, which counts as a Grade 9 credit. Combining courses in visual art, drama, and music, it challenges students to take on more advanced work in these areas. “It's not so much a way to accelerate their Senior School credits as a way for us to gather some insight into how our Grade 8 students will do moving forward,” says Ferguson.

The Senior School

The Senior School strikes a balance between having enough critical mass to offer robust academic programming yet remaining small enough that students are truly known by their teachers. The focus, of course, is on readiness for post-secondary. However, in keeping with the school's emphasis on nurturing the whole student, there's still room to explore, grow, and discover.

“We try to find the fine balance between academic rigour and those other ways that young people find out how they're built and what they want to be,” says Dave Harvey, director of Middle and Senior School academics. “Certainly there are some students who are on that path of high-flying achievement, but we want to make sure that we're providing students with opportunities to figure out



who they are. That means it's not about getting 98%, but figuring out what you're passionate about, so that you make choices that fit."

As students progress through the Senior School, the number of elective courses on offer increases. By Grade 12, there are more than 20 options. The aim, says director of the Senior School Celia Bland, is to foster students' individual interests and growing independence. To ensure these courses meet the current study body's unique strengths and interests, there's an annual academic renewal process where faculty vet new courses for potential development.

When we visited the school, the Senior School was offering two relatively new interdisciplinary courses. A team of three from history, philosophy, and math teach "The Nature of Change," which examines the concept of change from diverse perspectives. The second course, "Challenging Perceptions of Well-Being," brings together faculty members from English, physical education, and science. Each course has a strong student-directed learning component, enabling students to choose project topics that intrigue them within the primary themes.

For next year, an interdisciplinary STEM course is in the works that sounds like it will have broad appeal. "We're going to explore big ideas and questions in science and technology, starting with a mission to Mars project," says business and math teacher Joshua Simmonds. "There will also be climate science and independent-choice projects, all based on collaborative problem solving from across the disciplines."

The Senior School offers six Advanced Placement (AP) courses (university-level courses for high school students) but stops short of offering the AP Capstone program (seminar and research courses) like some other independent schools. "We consider AP courses an enrichment experience for our students," says Harvey. "We don't care about students' exam scores as much as we care about the fact that writing them is a worthwhile challenge. It gives students a sense of confidence in that they know what university-level expectations are like. We're focused on preparing the kids well for what's

next, not just accelerating their university degrees."

For direct assistance mapping out their path to post-secondary education, the school has a dedicated counsellor who collaborates with students' regular guidance counsellors. "My favourite moments each year are when graduating students come by my office to say, 'I got in!'" says David Huckvale, director of admissions and post-secondary counselling.

Grade 12 students traditionally begin their year with trips to tour major Ontario universities, plus two in Quebec. Many of them end up at these schools, with the top four destinations over the last decade being Queen's, Wilfrid Laurier, Western, and the University of Toronto. Offers also come from leading schools in the United States and United Kingdom, on occasion, which isn't surprising given that 88% of 2022 graduates were Ontario Scholars.

Pedagogical Approach

Exceptional teaching starts with exceptional teachers at The Country Day School. "Hiring is so important to us because of our emphasis on relational teaching and community," says Liggett. "It demands that we find people with a genuine love of working with children and getting to know them as whole individuals. So, we observe prospective hires actually teaching and interacting with our students. Then we ask the kids what they thought, and I'm not sure many schools take the time to do that. As a result, we hire wonderful people."

The teachers and other senior administrators we met spoke with pride about the thorough hiring process. "A school can have all the best facilities, but if you haven't got good faculty, it doesn't matter how shiny and beautiful it is," says Senior School director Celia Bland. "We work hard to get the right people here." Junior School teacher Rob Waldron summed up the consensus among his colleagues: "We hire exceptional people who really value the time

that they spend with kids in the classroom and how they connect with them. We share the belief that, for students to feel they can give of themselves in the classroom and take risks, they need to feel safe. Our teachers put a ton of effort into ensuring they make and maintain that strong connection with students.”

On our visit, as teachers and directors walked us around the school, we observed a steady flow of greetings and brief exchanges with students. As one Junior School student we met put it, “My teachers are always checking in with me and asking, ‘How are you? How’s your assignment going? How’s home and your family?’” Outdoor education teacher and 2004 graduate Andrew Bartle has experienced this connection from both sides: “The relationships are the foundation for everything that’s special here,” he says.

For the directors of the different schools, it’s the norm to know each and every one of the hundreds of students under their leadership. “Something new I started this year is bringing a list of all our students to every staff meeting,” says Middle School interim director Catie Ferguson. “I made it a requirement that we keep an updated record beside each name that has nothing to do with academics, whether it’s their extracurricular interests or that their parents are divorcing. It’s a way of creating connections and trust.”

The enhanced job description for teachers at the school facilitates these ties. It was very clear to us that teachers who want to clock in and out need not apply here. “The points of contact that we have with each student are higher than in a lot of other schools, in my experience, because of our extracurricular activities and advisory roles,” says Middle School French teacher Hannah Fransen. Students told us they did indeed feel known by their teachers. “They see you not as just another student in a class, but individually in your personality and what you do outside of school, and if you’re struggling or doing well,” says one Grade 10 student. A Middle School student echoed this, saying, “Each of the relationships that I have with my teachers is very different,

but I always feel like they want to understand what I need and do what’s in my best interests.” The parents we spoke to agreed: “One of the things I love about the school is that teachers really pay attention to detail in the kids. We’ve experienced four years now, and every teacher here has that dedication.”

This attention to detail extends to diversifying teaching strategies, content, and assessment methods based on individual learners’ requirements. Some Middle School students we spoke to explained how that looks in their classrooms. “The teachers really understand how you feel about the subjects and may realize that you don’t completely love certain ones, so they teach you in a way that is good for you,” says one. According to another, “Sometimes they alter the lessons to relate more to our lives, so it’s much more interesting.”

The school’s extensive professional development program is designed, in part, to keep teachers on top of social trends and the effect of these trends on students’ learning and behaviour. As is typical at independent schools, the faculty attends conferences with their colleagues across North America. Yet they’ve also hosted a few of these gatherings in recent years, allowing more of the school’s teachers to benefit. What most distinguishes their approach to ongoing teacher development, however, is their in-house research. “We bring in outside experts to complement our efforts, but we often develop committees to dig into the evidence, interview students and colleagues, and then share what they’ve found,” says Dave Harvey, director of Middle and Senior School academics. “It’s about working as a community to improve ourselves.” Recent projects have examined how to best educate Generation Z, managing student anxiety at school, and diversity, equity and inclusion issues.

In our conversations with faculty members, they tended to bring up the long tenures at the school. A handful of the teachers we spoke to had been there 20-plus years, and several over 10. “In a Canada-wide independent school benchmarking exercise, the school places in the top ranks in length of service,” says Liggett. “It’s a good metric of how satisfied and connected our teachers feel.”

Character Education

At The Country Day School, character education is incorporated across every curricular and extracurricular program. There was broad recognition among all the community members we spoke to that a “one-and-done” approach is insufficient: single lessons, events, assemblies, or even courses cannot instill the qualities that build sound character. “We view every moment where lessons can be learned about handling difficult situations and treating others with respect as opportunities,” says head of school John Liggett.

Liggett explained that, in 2014, the school decided to formalize its response to the question continually asked at the school: “Who will you be?” The result was the school’s “Portrait of a Graduate,” which lists the qualities students should possess by their final year. Ranging from integrity and perseverance to adaptability and resilience, the traits will be familiar to any parent who has browsed a few independent schools’ viewbooks. Yet we saw abundant evidence that they walk the walk here. Recent graduates also talk the talk, as evident in the school’s “Portrait of a CDS Graduate” video series found on their website: www.cds.on.ca/portraitofagrad

Every new Junior School student’s journey starts by taking the school’s Citizenship Pledge, which lays the groundwork for instilling the characteristics in the Portrait of a Graduate. “The Country Day School can count on me,” the pledge begins, continuing with promises to be “honest, trustworthy, courageous, and kind.” Once they’ve taken the pledge, students receive a citizenship pin to wear on their dress uniform. “These are words we say together at assembly, that the kids have in their lockers and that most of them have memorized,” says Ann Wildberger, director of the Junior School and deputy head of school. “They define how we work and play here. If I’m working through an issue with a child, everything can come back to the pledge.”

In our conversations with parents, they all commented on the school’s commitment to turn out kids that aren’t just polite, but

genuinely caring and compassionate. “The environment here creates nice kids,” says one. “When we were trying to decide on a school for our children, we saw some high school students in their Country Day School uniforms in a public setting, and we were so impressed with how they interacted with each other and people around them. It definitely influenced our choice.” Several parents said that character education was a priority for them on par with academics, and they recognized that the school shared this belief. “I wanted my children to go to a school where the values we foster at home are reinforced consistently, and this has been the case.”

The students we met were aware of the pervasiveness of character education, though they experienced it in different ways. “They take topics like responsibility and respect and being kind very seriously here,” says one Middle School student. “I think they’re helping us learn good habits to get into when we’re older.” Another noted the link between character education and extracurricular activities. “We learn a lot about proper etiquette and sportsmanship, and the teachers stress that we represent the school inside and outside the school.”

Character education naturally becomes more sophisticated as the students move through the grades. In the primary years, says Junior School teacher Melissa Mazurkewich, the lessons are simple and often visual. “For each monthly trait, we read a lot of picture books on the theme and have group discussions about what the trait would look like in daily interactions. Then we reinforce those ideas at assemblies.”

Later on, there’s an integration of more complex citizenship and social justice themes across student learning. A prime example was the Fall 2021 Grades 7 to 9 theatre production, an original, environmentally-themed musical called *Searching for Greta* (as in Thunberg). “We’re always looking for ways to be innovative and connect the kids to issues in the outside world,” says Middle School teacher Dean Sherman, who was instrumental in the production.

Outdoor Education

The Country Day School's 100-acre living classroom undeniably sets it apart from other independent schools. "An outdoor educator's dream is literally at our back door," says Liggett of the school's protected wetlands, fields, and forests that are home to indigenous plant species and regional wildlife. The school takes full advantage of this unique asset, incorporating outdoor activities into both curricular and extracurricular programs to foster an appreciation of nature, environmental responsibility, and wellness. But more broadly, says Junior School teacher Rob Waldron, "we use the outdoor environment to enhance our programming, similar to the way we use technology."

"In the Junior School, outdoor learning is scheduled, with at least 80 minutes and up to 120 minutes every four days," says Andrew Bartle, one of the school's outdoor education teachers. "It's all hands-on, experiential learning, mostly tied to the science curriculum. But many teachers spend time outdoors in addition to this scheduled period." For Middle and Senior School students, this could involve outdoor theatre performances, writing nature poetry, launching rockets, or—an annual tradition in Grade 10 History—digging trenches and simulating soldiers' experiences in the First World War.

Outdoor Education runs rain or shine. "We want them to appreciate nature even on the cold or rainy days," says Bartle, "because developing a relationship with the outdoors cultivates perseverance and grit, while hopefully influencing their environmental decisions." The parents we spoke to were unanimous in their appreciation for the program, though some acknowledged that their children weren't always keen on trekking outside on cold or wet days. "I think it's great that they get so much fresh air in a time when kids spend a lot of time inside on their devices, though they don't always love it," says one. Other parents said the program had the opposite effect: "Both of my daughters love anything to do with nature and animals and hiking and things like that. I can trace that back to the outdoor education program."

In our conversations with students, most expressed enthusiasm for getting outside, but the younger students were particularly keen. "I feel like being in nature is a better way to learn about nature," says one Junior School student. Middle School students recognized more nuanced advantages. "It helps a lot of the kids feel better and calmer when we frequently go out to breathe fresh air and have a little break," says one. Another offered this insight: "It's like when you're in a new environment, a new part of your brain is being used and it helps you learn."

Technology

The Country Day School's dedication to Education with Balance is especially evident in its approach to technology. Also referred to as "mindful technology" by several school community members, it means being open to how the latest digital tools can enrich students' learning while always putting the teacher-student (not technology-student) relationship first. "We think very carefully about any new technology we introduce and never jump on something as a panacea," says Dave Harvey, director of Middle and Senior School academics. "The pandemic shift to virtual learning reminded us that we are a relational, face-to-face school—that's where the best teaching and learning are."

This judicious approach is most apparent in the Junior School. "You can go to many schools and see every child is one-on-one with a computer," says director Ann Wildberger. "That's not us. We do have great access to technology, but we use it with purpose." Indeed, we saw no shortage of advanced educational technology in the younger grades, with interactive whiteboards in every classroom, an Apple iPad mobile learning lab, iMac labs, LEGO robotics, and a generous distribution of iPads. Yet not every student had a device in their hands.



Academic & Wellness Support

Consistent with The Country Day School's focus on Education with Balance, there are numerous avenues of support for students' holistic well-being. "You can measure student success in a lot of different ways, and one of the central measures we use here is student happiness," says Junior School teacher Rob Waldron. "It's well-established that kids who are achieving well academically tend to be those who are happy across all aspects of their school lives."

The student services department is the central resource for both academic and social-emotional support. Most of the department's counsellors work in the Student Services Centre, a bright, welcoming spot on the upper level of the Senior School with ample space for one-on-one meetings, group workshops, and seminars. The Junior and Middle School guidance counsellors have offices directly within their schools, but often collaborate with staff at the centre.

Every Senior School student has both a homeroom teacher/advisor (the same one through all four years) and a guidance counsellor. In addition to helping students work through academic and/or personal issues, the guidance counsellors manage required accommodations if students have an Individual Education Plan (IEP). "We maintain close contact with post-secondary institutions to ensure that we only offer accommodations that students will receive at university," says Middle School interim director Catie Ferguson, who was previously head of Middle and Senior School learning support.

There are a wide range of academic resources available to students, whether they're struggling with some aspect of their learning (peer tutoring and learning strategies sessions), seeking to hone their skills (test-taking and time management classes), or looking for a challenge (enrichment opportunities and summer school programs).

Providing students with guidance around non-academic matters is an equal priority. "Our counsellors are trained to offer help with the gamut of issues that affect children and adolescents," says Ferguson. "Since the onset of the pandemic, youth mental health concerns have increased dramatically, and we're acutely aware of the extra need for support. We create a circle of care around every student who needs it, so that parents, teachers, and guidance counsellors are all on the same page."

Beyond student services, many school programs and services are designed to promote student wellness. The Fitness Centre, a spacious facility that occupies the school's older atrium, offers yoga and workout classes before and after school. There are also mindfulness and meditation classes, winter wellness workshops, and "breakout" weeks in the fall and spring where Senior School students have off-campus educational experiences, such as attending leadership camps or going on canoe trips. Above everything, however, is the promise that students can seek help from any faculty member on virtually any issue when they're struggling. "It all comes back to our commitment to building those relationships," says Waldron. "We want every student to have a trusted adult in the building that's their go-to person."

Extracurriculars

Participation in The Country Day School's rich extracurricular programs is highly encouraged—if not expected—of all students. Teachers and students begin their days early and end them late here, a fact we can attest to since we finished our visit well after 3:20, when classes end, and the school was still buzzing. Extracurricular life at the school reflects and reinforces the relational approach to teaching, creating opportunities for teachers and students to connect in different contexts with different aims. “It’s a way for us to see each other differently, whether it’s on an athletic field or in a debate, a concert or a show,” says Scott Garbe, a Middle School teacher and head of drama with 25 years’ experience at the school.

Students’ first opportunity to get involved in extracurriculars officially comes in Grade 4, though unofficially often begins near the end of Grade 3. Younger siblings can join the Koalas after-school program while they wait for the activities to end—ensuring parents have just one pick-up. Sports in the Junior School are recreational, leaving the competition for the older students. “There’s a big dichotomy between the sports my children play inside and outside the school,” says one parent of two sons in Grade 4 and Grade 6. “If you’re very competitive that could be frustrating, but it’s about being as inclusive as possible and giving every student the maximum opportunities.” The younger students we spoke to seemed to recognize the value in this approach. “It doesn’t matter

what level you’re at when you join something,” says one Grade 6 student. “If I were to do cross country, I don’t have to be fantastic at it, I can just be doing it for fun. So no one gets left out from seeing what it’s like.”

By Middle School, students are fully immersed in a variety of athletics (intramural and competitive), bands, choirs, and clubs. And they don’t have to make trade-offs as they explore their interests because of the school’s carefully constructed schedule. “We purposefully clear the way for kids to try out a wide variety of interests, and the result is that, anecdotally, about 95% of Middle School kids participate,” says Catie Ferguson, interim director of the Middle School. “If a student doesn’t sign up for anything, we’ll have a conversation to see what the barriers are, because we believe so strongly that this involvement is crucial to their overall well-being.” Some kind of sports participation is particularly encouraged, since athletics are considered an integral part of Education with Balance. With a wide selection of intramurals and about 65 competitive teams across 24 sports, this is achievable for most students.

Students we met from across the grades knew that participation was the cultural norm, and they were just as keen as their teachers on this subject. “Our teachers push us to do extracurriculars because they know that once you join, it’s like you’re part of your own little family,” says one Middle School student. Another summed up what we discovered was a fairly typical student experience before Senior School: “I’ve tried almost everything—the arts and music and sports.” Parents expressed approval for the gentle requirement that their children join in, especially since it comes with a lot of choice. “My daughters aren’t especially athletic, but there were so many other things for them to try,” says one parent of two students in the Senior School. “There’s always the chance for them to be exposed to a lot of things and discover their interests.”

Some Senior School students find their extracurricular niche and double down on those interests, while others continue to dabble. We spoke to students in the former category—a few on

competitive sports teams and one who focused on Model UN, the Diversity Club (see below), and debate. “While in some but not all post-secondary settings, these experiences can offer a leg up for admission,” says Dave Harvey, director of Middle and Senior School academics. “We encourage students to get involved to figure out who they are and what they love doing.” The students agreed that the school broadly, and their teachers specifically, fostered an environment where learning outside the classroom is valued equally alongside academics. “I’m never worried that my grades are going to drop because of my sports, because if I really need an extension or extra help, they’re available,” says one Grade 10 student.

While the school isn’t known for any single extracurricular area, it has its share of distinctions. The cultivation of public speaking skills in the Junior School appears to pay off, since at least one student has qualified for the World Individual Debating and Public Speaking Championships for each of the last 15 years, and the school has captured the World Champion title four times in the past seven. Students from each school put on high-quality theatre productions each year in the Performing Arts Centre, which boasts a full-time technical director and production assistant, while choirs and bands perform both on campus and at local and international music festivals. In athletics, teams regularly win medals in hockey, volleyball, rugby, snowboarding, and track & field in Conference of Independent Schools Athletic Association (CISAA) competitions.

For students who have demanding athletic careers outside of school, there’s the High-Performance Phys-Ed Program (HPPP). It offers scheduling accommodations and customized coursework for provincially or nationally ranked athletes in Grades 9 through 11 who train more than 12 hours per week. Only a handful of students tend to be in the program, but it’s resulted in a number of high-profile graduates who have gone on to national teams, the Olympics, or professional hockey.

Service and outreach activities, an extension of character education, are also central to extracurricular programs. Whether they’re

working inside the school as reading buddies and tutors, fundraising for local non-profits, or travelling to developing countries, students have many opportunities to develop a sense of civic responsibility. “I find that that desire to help other people is contagious at the school,” says one parent, who noted that her Senior School daughter continued tutoring a younger student well beyond the requirements of the community service hours for high school graduation. The Junior School’s philanthropic group, “Pathways to People,” for example, commits to charities for extended periods, allowing students to forge authentic connections with the various causes.



Student Body/Diversity

The sense of community among students at The Country Day School is palpable, but not accidental. Faculty and administrators nurture a culture of mutual respect by promoting traits such as responsibility, empathy, and kindness across curricular and extra-curricular programs. The result is a school community that's not only strong, but inclusive.

“If there's one thing I want our students to feel, it's that they belong,” says Middle School interim director Catie Ferguson. “Inclusiveness based on culture, LGBTQ+, race, and ethnicity—that's our goal here. We want every kid to be an ally. There's a lot of work to do and a lot of learning to still happen, but the school is moving forward.” She points to the example of the school raising the Pride flag for the first time in 2021, and the student-driven clubs that have activism at their core. These groups include the Inclusivity Club, a safe space for LGBTQ+ communities and their allies, the Social Justice Club, which raises awareness and funds around issues of injustice and inequality, and the Diversity Club, which aims to amplify minority voices within the school community by delivering advisory sessions on unconscious bias for faculty and students, among other activities.

One interesting facet of the school's efforts in the area of equity, diversity, and inclusion is the content of the annual Middle and Senior School theatre productions. “Through these shows, our

school community has come to know Chanie Wenjack as he fled residential school, the people of Laramie, Wyoming as they dealt with a hate crime, and Anne Frank as she hid from those who branded her identity a crime,” says Scott Garbe, head of drama. “Empathy and inclusion are at the heart of the drama program.”

The student body reflects the racial and ethnic diversity of the Greater Toronto Area, yet not its socio-economic diversity—as is typical at most independent schools. There are ongoing efforts to change this through financial aid (see below) but probably the most successful strategy to date has been offering a financial aid program for faculty and staff to send their children, says Brent Johnston, executive director of advancement and a parent of two graduates.

New students receive a warm welcome at the school. They start the year a day early, so they can meet other new arrivals and get to know their teachers, and are paired with a student mentor. “We're very good at helping children feel like they belong here from day one,” says Junior School director Ann Wildberger. The students we met agreed, speaking with pride about the broad camaraderie at the school. “New students should trust that they're going to find a group of friends, because there's a space for everyone,” says one Middle School student. “We kind of care for each other like one big family,” says another. “Even with people I'm not exactly friends with, we're still kind to each other.” The relatively small size of the place is a big factor, according to a couple of Grade 12 students who have been at the school since Junior Kindergarten (affectionately called “lifers”). “There's nobody in the high school where you don't at least know them as a familiar face, so we're all friendly,” one says.

Senior School director Celia Bland notes that she can rely on the older students to keep her informed if their peers are struggling or straying from the expected behaviour. “They want this to be a safe, healthy school where everyone can be happy, so they're pretty good at letting us know when something should be looked into.”

It's not surprising that Senior School students assume this oversight role, since leadership skills are integral to all the school's

programs. Around Grade 4, students begin speaking at assemblies and taking on other small leadership roles. These intensify in Grade 6, when students manage morning announcements, lead play days, organize community service events and more. By Senior School, the leadership opportunities are plentiful, ranging from student council and student ambassadors to House captains and club executives.

Getting In

The admissions process at The Country Day School resembles that of comparable independent schools, where both students and parents take part in a comprehensive assessment of students' "fit." There's a concerted effort to make the student evaluation not just age and stage appropriate, but enjoyable. "In the Junior School, we like to call it a 'play date' for the really young children, where we can observe their early language, math, and social skills," says Junior School director Ann Wildberger. Every admissions assessment for every grade has been developed in-house, so there are no third-party standardized tests.

After Kindergarten, the central entry grades are 1, 4, 7, and 9. Non-entry grades tend to be full, though spaces are sometimes available. Every grade looks for different skills and qualities in applicants, says director of admission David Huckvale, though there are some key characteristics that suggest a good fit, such as curiosity, a motivation to learn, respectfulness, and a willingness to participate in all aspects of school life. "The kids who will thrive here are not only capable of keeping pace with our challenging academic programs, but also excited about getting involved in the arts, service, and sports."

Tuition is on par with other top-tier independent schools in Ontario, and parents can expect \$1,000 to \$3,000 annually in additional expenses. There's a one-time, non-refundable enrolment

fee of \$5,000 and a suggested donation of \$1,000 to the Annual Capital Fund. Students entering Grades 9 or 10 with financial need and excellent marks can apply for the \$10,000 Eberts Entrance Scholarship, renewable each year if they maintain an 80% average. The Bursary Program—applied as reduced tuition—supports new and existing families with demonstrated financial need and must be renewed each year.

For its age, the school has a healthy endowment. Head of school John Liggett says there's an ongoing effort to use it to increase diversity—especially socio-economic—within the study body. “We’re investigating the idea of expanding merit-based scholarships as one avenue.” According to executive director of advancement Brent Johnston, the school is also actively raising funds to build “Pillars of Support” within various programs. “We just established one of these in computer science and robotics, for example, to support families who might be squeezed and unable to pay for their child to attend robotics competitions in other cities. The philosophy is that, once students are part of the school community, we want support in place so everyone enjoys the same wonderful benefits.”

Parents

The Country Day School works hard to establish strong, trusting relationships not just with students, but with their parents. For families with children in the Junior School, the process starts within the first week with the “Chat About Child” tradition. Each fall, teachers meet with the parents or caregivers of every child in their class for about 30 minutes. “We sit and listen to parents talk about their child’s strengths, weaknesses, and goals, and what brings the family stress and joy,” says Junior School teacher Melissa Mazurkewich. “It gets us all on the same page as we start the year.” According to Junior School director Ann Wildberger, it’s a big undertaking for teachers, but the payoffs are immeasurable in terms of building the teacher-student-parent team.

Another unique school-wide feature is that teachers avoid contacting parents by email to discuss matters related to their individual child whenever possible, preferring phone or in-person meetings. And those are often “happy calls,” says Wildberger, as the school philosophy is to reach out to parents when things are going well as much or more as when things are not.

There was a consensus among the parents we met that the school is receptive to questions, feedback, and concerns at all levels, whether that’s contacting the classroom teacher, school director, or head of school. A number of the teachers and administrators we spoke to emphasized that they are, or were, also parents at the

school. “There’s a true partnership with teachers and parents as we raise children together here,” says Wildberger.

An active parent association organizes coffee mornings, an annual auction, free educational webinars, and various fundraisers. Even those parents who aren’t involved on a formal level appear to have a strong connection to the school and, often, their fellow parents. “I go out of my way to welcome new parents and students when I see them at drop-off, because I want them to feel the same sense of belonging that I do,” says one parent. For those parents who aren’t keen to immerse themselves in volunteering and other aspects of the parent community, that’s okay too. “We experienced another private school that had a kind of competitive feel among the parents, but it’s so down-to-earth here. Everyone is welcoming, and that’s what I love about it,” says one parent.

Alumni

The Country Day School now has more than 2,100 alumni worldwide—a respectable number for a relatively small school just celebrating its 50th anniversary. Many of these graduates maintain strong ties with the school, volunteering with the alumni mentorship program to share their post-secondary or professional experiences or attending reunion events on campus and in the communities where they live. In keeping with the school’s comfortable ethos, many of the younger alumni’s first visits are informal drop-ins during the school day or for lunch, as they truly miss this place.

Some events, such as golf tournaments, welcome not just alumni but current and past families, faculty, and staff. Alumni giving is, of course, encouraged, and one way of doing that is purchasing a brick for the Alumni Walkway. The Alumni Legacy Fund is building an endowed fund that provides financial assistance for children of the school’s alumni to attend their alma mater. In a testament to the strength of the school community, several alumni have returned as staff, including six teachers and two staff members to date.



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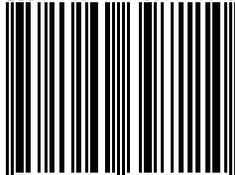
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