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# The Clover School

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Photography by Krista Fogel for The Clover School

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ISBN 978-1-990397-12-7

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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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 book-length reviews is aimed at information-seeking families, providing a detailed look at the offerings, the traditions, and the culture of each school. Titles published in this series to date include:

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5. Brentwood College School
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## Details: The Clover School

**Location:** Toronto, Ontario

**Founded:** 1996

**Enrolment:** 400+ students

**Grades:** Toddler to Grade 6

**Gender:** Coed

**Living Arrangements:** Day school

**Curriculum:** Montessori

**Curriculum Pace:** Student-paced

**Academic Culture:** Supportive



## Introduction

“We’re an extension of our students’ families, so rather than beating around the bush and saying your child will be cared for and respected here, we say your child will be loved here,” says Amy Gataveckas, principal at The Clover School High Park Campus. It’s rare to hear the word love used like this in conversations with faculty and administrators at independent schools. That we heard it frequently at Clover, and from a cross-section of the school community, is a telling insight.

“When we talk about love here, it’s about love for our students and a passion for what we do as educators,” says Director Isabelle Kunicki, who co-founded the school in 1996 with fellow Director Sandra Bosnar-Dale. “But it’s also about wanting our students to have self-love. It’s our hope that all of the children who come through our doors develop self-awareness, compassion, resilience, and a curiosity about the world around them. As a heart-centred school, we teach students that love starts with believing in yourself, then it radiates outwards to the world.”

Three Toronto campuses make up the school, offering programs for children from 18 months to Grade 6. Each campus has its own unique features, but the overall feel is the same: warm, alive with the energy of kids at work and play, and yet somehow peaceful. As one parent we spoke to put it, “The children were visibly happy when I toured the school, without there being any sense of chaos.”

The school's strong sense of community was unmistakable on our visits. This stems, in part, from the fact that each campus is moderately sized, ranging from about 100 to 150 students. "Everybody knows everybody," says Dawn Whitehead, principal at the Midtown Elementary Campus. "At morning drop-off, I'm out there talking to parents and students. There's always the feeling that we're on the same page: we want an open and loving environment for the kids to learn in."

Bosnar-Dale and Kunicki built the Clover community from scratch more than 25 years ago. Though the school has grown substantially since then, the founding values are stronger than ever. "We've always believed that schools should be true communities that bind students, families, and teachers together," says Bosnar-Dale. "Raising children is hard in this fast-changing world, especially living in a big city. Our goal from the start was to create trusting relationships with families because everybody benefits from that—especially children."

There's no pretense among the administration or faculty about the school's identity as a small school with lovely and more than adequate facilities. "We have the professionalism and the bells and whistles, but on a more intimate scale," says Tracy Durisin, principal at the Midtown Junior Campus. Several members of the Clover community commented on how students consider the school a second home. Primary teacher Amy Carter attributes that in part to the joyful atmosphere. "We all have a pretty good sense of humour here, and we love to laugh with the children."

As the principals showed us around, children of all ages came up to hug them or have a quick exchange. No matter where we were in each school, the principals knew every child's name and had an obvious rapport with them. The students also approached us with greetings and questions. Another parent, who experienced the same thing on her tour, said it sold her on the school. "Random kids would come up to me and say, 'Hi, how are you? What are you doing here today?' I just remember thinking that they were so polite and confident."

Fostering social skills alongside academics is integral to Clover's Montessori curriculum. Students learn in mixed-age classrooms that promote mutual respect, courtesy, and kindness. The same values apply to the teacher-student relationship, where teachers guide—rather than dictate—the pace, content, and learning format based on children's individual learning styles, interests, and strengths. "We believe it is more important for students to learn how to be and how to do than to memorize facts," says Head of Schools Erika Lacey. "Information is free in today's world."

"At Clover, we offer children freedom within limits and choice with responsibility, which are really character-building tools that all kids need," says Bosnar-Dale. "This promotes a healthy sense of confidence and belief in themselves, but also personal accountability and the ability to thrive within a community."

The school delivers its robust academics through an integrated curriculum, where the emphasis is on the interconnectedness of core disciplines. Beyond the foundational subjects, Clover provides a rich array of learning opportunities in the arts, outdoor education, community service, leadership, mindfulness, and athletics. Every aspect of programming incorporates character education, with consistent encouragement for children to "lead with their hearts." The consensus among Clover teachers and leaders is that designing children's education plans around their specific interests unlocks joyful learning.

Students reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the Greater Toronto Area, and the majority live in neighbourhoods surrounding each campus. Some families take on moderate commutes for the privilege of having their children attend, a testament to the school's appeal. The administrators agree that Clover attracts like-minded parents and caregivers that value the "soft skills" as much as academics and are looking for a caring community as much as a school.

There's a gentle expectation among teachers and staff that parents will "bring Montessori home." In other words, they encourage parents to do their best to maintain a child-centred household that



supports children's active learning, independence, and responsibility. In practice, this may look like a three-year-old showing up at school in May wearing mittens, as one did on the day of our visit. Unless there's any harm involved, the school lets children learn from the natural consequences of their choices. "Teachers want the children to advocate for themselves, while still respecting others," says one parent of a son in the primary program. "They become thoughtful, kind people. It's just a beautiful little place where kids can grow and learn."





## Basics

The Clover School is a member of the Ontario Federation of Independent Schools and accredited by the Canadian Council of Montessori Administrators, a legally registered not-for-profit corporation that administers a thorough 12- to 18-month accreditation process. Founded in 1996 as Forest Hill Montessori School by Directors Sandra Bosnar-Dale and Isabelle Kunicki, it offers coeducational Montessori programs for children from 18 months to Grade 6.

The school currently has three campuses. At full capacity, the total student population is over 400 students. Two campuses are across the street from each other in midtown Toronto, and one—which opened in the spring of 2021—is in the High Park area. “Our campuses are closely linked, since we only have Bathurst Street between us,” says Dawn Whitehead, principal at the Midtown Elementary Campus. “We have quite a bit of cross-campus programming and activities for students and parents, since many families have children in both locations.”

The Midtown Elementary Campus is on a quiet cul-de-sac just off Bathurst north of Lawrence. It’s an ideal spot for a school that prioritizes outdoor education, as it backs onto Woburn Park, which has two playgrounds, a basketball court, picnic areas, and plenty of open space to run. Mature trees surround the front and back of the building, providing perfect shade for the fenced greenspace that features a greenhouse, garden, and large building

tunnels, bridges, and blocks for improving gross motor skills in the youngest students. Inside, the classrooms are bright and spacious, and the school has community spaces like a gym, music room, and library. The primary program, for students ages three to six, operates on the first floor, while the elementary program, for children ages 6 to 12, is downstairs.

A short walk across Bathurst Street, made easier by the convenient crosswalk, brings you to the Midtown Junior Campus led by principal Tracy Durisin. It’s located in the main level of the Asbury & West United Church, built in 1856 and extensively renovated specifically for the school and purpose-built for The Clover School’s Montessori community. The classrooms are fresh and bright. “I think we’re in one of the most beautiful old churches in the city,” says Durisin. Designed specifically for children 18 months to six years old, the space features beautiful bright spaces with attached washrooms and same-floor laundry. For outside time, there are age-appropriate playgrounds around a massive tree providing shade, along with a tented toddler space for year-round protection. When we visited, the midday traffic on Bathurst was noticeable to us, but the children were unbothered in their play. For a change in scenery, the older students sometimes cross the street to visit the Midtown Elementary Campus playground or Woburn Park.

The third Clover campus, across town on a residential street in the High Park neighbourhood, serves children 18 months to 12 years old. Opened in the spring of 2021, the handsome historic building underwent a complete renovation inside and out and has great curb appeal. The exterior includes resurfaced red brick, windows that span nearly the full two storeys and a wildflower garden out front. It’s just north of Annette Street, which is mostly homes with a few corner stores, but mature trees shelter the school from traffic noise. We felt like we were in a leafy haven away from the city, and the nature theme continues inside, with natural light woods, floral wallpaper in the offices, and sunlight streaming in. The toddler, pre-primary, and primary rooms are on the first floors, while the primary and

elementary classes occupy the second floor (accessible by wheelchair lift). Every room appears freshly scrubbed, which makes sense given its top-to-bottom renovation. Outside, there's a fully fenced turf play area, gardens, rock garden/outdoor classroom, and greenhouse.

Soon the High Park Campus will have a second building exclusively for Clover students just around the corner. "It's a gorgeous old home with lots of stained-glass windows, a beautiful kitchen where the kids can cook, and a huge backyard that will connect to the backyard of the original campus," says Kunicki, adding the opening date is January of 2023.

Clover programs fall into the traditional Montessori mixed-age categories, versus traditional grades. Children can start the toddler program at 18 months, then move into the pre-primary program at age two. The primary classroom includes three- to six-year-olds, and elementary follows until age 12.

The school runs from 8:45 a.m. to 3:45 p.m. An extended care program starting at 7:45 a.m. and running until 6 p.m. is available for additional fees. "We spend a lot of time outside, and it's an opportunity for students in our different programs to interact and discover leadership opportunities," says Cameron Arias, director of special programs.

Toddler and pre-primary program tuition includes catered lunch from Real Food for Real Kids, a catering company that specializes in nutritious meals for kids. Parents of primary and elementary children can opt into this lunch program for an additional fee.

The newest addition to the Clover family is "Homegrown by Clover," an at-home learning program for children ages three to nine. "This was sparked over years of being asked by parents 'What can we do at home with our children? How can we support what you're doing at school?' " says Bosnar-Dale. "So we gathered together all the ideas we've been collecting and organized them into a website." Parents can search for activities based on whatever time and materials they have available and whether they want to be inside or outside.

## Background

The Clover School has come a long way since Sandra Bosnar-Dale and Isabelle Kunicki launched it with eight students in a church basement in 1996. It all started with an idea hatched while the two were fresh out of university and training to be Montessori teachers. "We had both done some work in traditional classrooms," says Kunicki. "When we discovered the Montessori path, we both fell in love with this beautiful alternative method of education."

Within a few weeks of meeting, the two began devising a plan to start their dream Montessori school. "We spent a lot of time sharing ideas and our passion and vision for what a school should be, but then we said, 'Why don't we just try to create that place ourselves?'" says Bosnar-Dale. "We had no idea what it would take to operate a school or a business. We were just two idealistic, passionate young educators. I remember we had about \$2000 in student loan money left between us, and we thought that should be enough to do it."

While they were still working full-time toward their Montessori teacher certification, Bosnar-Dale and Kunicki found a space in the basement of a church in Forest Hill, an upscale Toronto neighbourhood. They convinced the church to rent them the space for free for the first few months and arranged a loan with a distributor of Montessori materials. "We were very resourceful," says Bosnar-Dale. "We spent our weekends finding desks and chairs at garage sales and repainting them. In the end, we pulled it all together and the classroom was beautiful: colourful and put together with love."

And somehow, we convinced eight families to trust us with their children—all little boys between three and six who came together to form a primary class. We called it Forest Hill Montessori School.”

By the end of the first year, the school was full and they had to hire an assistant teacher and open a second classroom. They wore all the hats in those early days. “I think we worked 20 hours a day,” says Kunicki. As the students grew up and out of the primary program, their parents began asking Bosnar-Dale and Kunicki to add an elementary program. “We had so many families who were with us for three years and said they couldn’t imagine sending their children somewhere else for Grade 1,” says Kunicki. “Eventually it propelled us to start looking for a second location that could accommodate this growth.”

Around 2013, they found a spectacular opportunity in the historic church on Bathurst that currently houses the Midtown Junior Campus. Construction delays forced the school to set up in a temporary location across the street—the current Midtown Elementary Campus. “When the church renovation was finally complete, we decided to keep both locations because we were growing so quickly,” says Bosnar-Dale.

By 2019, the school had progressed to a point where Bosnar-Dale and Kunicki felt it needed a new name to reflect the experience of its students. “The school had grown well past our expectations, and we could see it was going to continue to grow in ways we didn’t imagine when we named it Forest Hill Montessori,” says Kunicki. “For one thing, we’d left our Forest Hill location. The name didn’t feel right and didn’t capture our progressive, holistic approach.”

The name change was understandably daunting. “It was scary and took months, but as soon as we heard ‘The Clover School’ we knew it was the one,” says Bosnar-Dale. “There are so many reasons that ‘clover’ was the right word and the right symbol. Just the fact that ‘love’ is at the centre of the word was enough, but then there are the four, intersecting heart-shaped leaves. Each one represents one of the pillars—mind, heart, health, and soul—that guides our curriculum.”

Today, the clover logo and the slogan “The School with Heart” (symbolized by a bold red heart) welcome every student and family arriving at each of the school’s campuses. The images also feature prominently in the interiors, and the children we spoke with were all familiar with the sentiment. Some, though, thought the slogan was “The school with love.” When I shared this fact with the founders and teachers, they liked this interpretation just as much.





## Leadership

At The Clover School, leadership is a team endeavour. Their leadership team is comprised of the school's founders, the head of schools, the admissions director, campus principals, and other administrators whose voices are equally welcomed and valued in decision-making at the school. "We have an incredible team that works together collaboratively to support each other to implement the school's vision," says Kunicki.

That vision has evolved over time, but the fundamentals remain. "We've developed a unique approach to delivering the Montessori philosophy of education that encourages everyone in our school community to lead with their hearts," says Kunicki. Bosnar-Dale and Kunicki's own experiences as parents, with two children each, have also informed their aims for the school. "Our children have a variety of strengths, needs, and personalities, and we've explored a multitude of public, private, and alternative school options," says Bosnar-Dale. "Much of what Clover has become has been inspired by our desire to create the school that we wish had been around for our children when they were younger."

In the years since Bosnar-Dale and Kunicki covered every role in their small school, they've shifted their focus from managing day-to-day issues to directing the big picture.

The principal at the Midtown Junior Campus is Tracy Durisin. Like her two fellow principals, she received her certification at the Toronto Montessori Institute. "I was drawn here by Sandra and

Isabelle's passion and the strong community that they've created," says Durisin, who was an elementary teacher for 14 years at a small-town Montessori school before coming to Clover. "I feel like I belong to something important." Her warm, vibrant personality was immediately apparent on our visit, when we saw firsthand how close a connection she's forged with the young students on her campus. "My day often starts and ends with a hug from a toddler," she says. "It doesn't get much better than that."

Across the street at the Midtown Elementary Campus is principal Dawn Whitehead, Durisin's long-time colleague and friend. The two met at their former Montessori school, where Whitehead taught in the elementary program for 15 years. "I was easily convinced to take on this role at Clover," says Whitehead. "I know how important it is for an urban school to have a small, close-knit community for big-city kids." Whitehead's two children are students at her campus, which she says fosters even stronger ties with the school's parents. As for her connection with students, it was evident on our visit that the students are attracted to her calm, smiling presence. "I have an open-door policy for my office, and I often have a student or two in here who just need some quiet time or a little chat."

The newest principal is Amy Gataveckas, who assumed leadership of the High Park Campus in 2021. Like her colleagues, she began her career as a Montessori teacher in the elementary program, but she worked at schools in Toronto and—briefly—the Cayman Islands. A few years ago, she took some time off from teaching and earned a postgraduate certificate in human resources management. "When this vice-principal position came up, it was the perfect marriage of my qualifications and experience because I'd be helping to hire all new staff and build a Clover community in a new neighbourhood," she says. It helped that her two-year-old twin girls started at the school along with all the other new students. "From the start, I've told parents that we're raising our children together here," she says.

## Academics

The Clover School curriculum could be described as Montessori-plus. Students benefit from a proven, century-old educational philosophy, but also from a progressive approach that nurtures today's child and nurtures the mind, heart, health, and soul of each student.

Founders Sandra Bosnar-Dale and Isabelle Kunicki say Clover's overarching priority is to ignite students' natural curiosity and creativity. "Our teachers encourage students to use joy as their GPS system," says Kunicki. "They ask, 'What fascinates you? What excites you?' Critical thinking skills through project-based, inquiry-led learning form the cornerstone of our curriculum." Clover students at every level have the freedom to explore subjects and projects that spark their interest. The core Montessori tenet of self-directed learning—within limits and with teacher guidance—is core to the school's curriculum. "I wanted my daughter to be at a school where she could learn at her own pace, depending on the day and her interests," says one parent. At Clover she's free to experiment and move through things based on her curiosity."

The classrooms are minimalist yet welcoming, and consistently uncluttered considering the autonomy students have to choose the work they do each day. The low shelves lining the walls are filled with beautiful materials designed for hands-on learning that is a Montessori hallmark. During our tours at each campus, the classrooms were peaceful yet full of activity. Children sat alone or collaborated in small groups, visibly engaged in their tasks.

"We call it their 'work' rather than their play or activity," says Tracy Durisin, principal at the Midtown Junior Campus, who adds that uninterrupted work periods are central to every Montessori classroom. "But we use that word in the sense of something that's chosen by the child, [is] enjoyable to them, encourages learning, and requires some focus and concentration." Amy Gataveckas, principal at the High Park Campus, adds that students appreciate their right not to be disturbed. "When a child is focused, we honour that," she says. According to primary teacher Amy Carter, this also means not rushing children to complete tasks or demonstrate knowledge: "We give them the space and the freedom they need, then wait for the magic to happen. As a result, Clover students develop long attention spans over time through the intentional limitation of interruptions."

Montessori is known for an emphasis on early academics, and Clover's toddler and pre-primary programs include a focus on cognitive development fuelled by curiosity and newfound independence. The school's aim, however, isn't to accelerate learning, but rather to lay a strong foundation for it. "Parents who come here want more than a traditional daycare for their toddlers and preschoolers," says Tracy Durisin, principal at the Midtown Junior Campus. "They want their children to be as independent as possible and think for themselves. At this age, children's critical thinking skills can be amazing, and their communication skills can take off so quickly when they're immersed in this environment." Several parents we spoke to expressed amazement at what their young children had learned at Clover. "My son was talking about pollination the other day, and he recently told me about the moon cycles," says one. "It's always such a pleasant surprise when he comes out with these things."

The children we met spoke enthusiastically about the freedom they're granted to follow their interests and learning styles. "We don't do different levels of work based on what grade we're in," says one elementary student. "If the teachers think we can do more, we're allowed to try." Others commented on the comfort that





comes with flexibility in the academic program: “You can choose what type of work you want to do each day, which makes learning so much fun.” Teachers develop custom education plans for each child made in partnership with the student to ensure all subjects are covered throughout the school year.

As for parents, they couldn’t say enough about how Clover’s academic programs have enriched their children’s knowledge and skills. “My children are flourishing at Clover,” says one parent of two Clover students. “Every day I’m blown away by their verbal communication, writing skills, math, and general awareness about things like nature, outer space, and social topics. I absolutely know my children have fun learning there.”

When it comes to curriculum basics, Clover has several defined methods. In math, hands-on learning is a core principle, moving from the concrete to the abstract. Teachers use an inquiry-based approach that involves solving authentic, open-ended problems. Science is also inquiry-based and encourages students to develop and execute their own experiments. For language, the school uses a phonics-based early reading program with three levels of increasing complexity (starting with three-letter phonetic words, then four-letter words, and finally more complex four-letter words). Clover also uses the Heggerty Phonological and Phonemic Awareness System, along with different levelled reading collections.

For those accustomed to the fixed grade system in traditional schools, mixed-age classrooms require a shift in mindset. There’s ample evidence and experience to support the arrangement in the Montessori literature, but our conversations with Clover community members provided first-hand endorsements. “There’s a ton of interaction between the different ages in each level, and it’s very free flowing,” says Nina Mason, a pre-primary teacher. “We see a lot of mentoring, where the youngest children have someone to emulate and ask for help, and the oldest children not only share their skills and knowledge, but really build their self-confidence.” Elementary teacher Elizabeth Roschman says mixed-age environments prepare

students for life outside the classroom: “We don’t work with people who are all the same age and have the same abilities. It’s a micro-community that teaches real-world collaboration.”

The students we spoke to agreed. “I like how you can get mentored by older kids in your class, and then you can help out kids who are younger than you,” says one. “It’s fun to explain and teaching is a great way to learn.” Then there are the social advantages that come with a broader age context. “I find it allows you to have friendships with children of different ages because there’s a bigger variety of kids in your class,” says an elementary student.

Parents new to Montessori may also be surprised to discover that there are few or no tests or graded assignments. They may wonder how they’ll know whether their children are progressing appropriately. “One of the most frequent questions I get from prospective families is how well we prepare our students for when they leave here to attend traditional schools,” says Dawn Whitehead, principal at the Midtown Elementary Campus. “I tell them that, since each child essentially has their own lesson plan, they tend to be ahead of where their peers are in straight grades.”

According to Head of Schools Erika Lacey, most Montessori students tend to reach optimal reading levels faster and generally excel in their core learning skills, but Clover students get more than an academic head start. “They gain true self-understanding through their learning, discovering how they acquire knowledge and skills best.”

The Montessori philosophy emphasizes children’s intrinsic motivation rather than external rewards such as grades. “We stress mastery of skills rather than demonstrating knowledge on a test,” says Whitehead. “Once students and teachers agree that the students have mastered a skill—that they truly understand it—they go on to the next one. The reward is in finishing the work, not in marks, because our aim is for students to be self-motivated learners.”

For students in elementary school, the curriculum includes the acquisition of practical skills needed for success in high school. “We

teach them how to study and how to take a test,” says Whitehead. “And we refine their time management capabilities, which are already there if they’ve been Montessori students because they’ve had to meet daily, weekly, and monthly expectations in terms of their work.” She adds that many parents report back that their children were more than prepared for the next steps in their education.

Another key difference in the academic program at Clover compared with traditional non-Montessori schools is the minimal use of technology. We didn’t see a single SMART Board, TV, tablet, or laptop in use in the classrooms we toured, though in the upper levels of the school the students may occasionally use technology for purposes such as researching their interests or participating in coding classes. “We feel very strongly that technology is a distraction to our youngest students,” says Head of Schools Erika Lacey. “They should be developing their social-emotional skills and engaged in experiential learning—not looking up how a plant grows online, but planting seeds in their own garden.”

## Specialized programs

The Clover curriculum features several unique programs that contribute to holistic learning. Outdoor education is the most prominent among these, which aligns with the Montessori philosophy that nature is a classroom in itself and should be integral to children’s learning. On the sunny May days we visited each campus, many classes were outside. Some were in the adjoining playgrounds, some at a nearby park, and others at Evergreen Brickworks, a Toronto community hub that showcases sustainable practices. The Clover School partners with Evergreen Brickworks to provide specialized outdoor education programming for its elementary students.

Bi-weekly, year-round nature days see students and teachers out on local adventures where they explore the physical world. At the Midtown Elementary Campus, the children often visit nearby Earl

Bales Park, while High Park is a popular destination for the west-end campus. “My daughter lives for these outdoor education days,” says one parent. “The kids get to run around and explore, but they also learn to respect the environment.”

Coming from a rural Montessori school situated on 10 acres, principal Dawn Whitehead wasn’t sure that Clover could compete. “I realized this is a little gem in the city,” she says of the Midtown Elementary Campus. “We have that country feel here because of the outdoor piece in our programs. The kids are outside so much, it’s amazing.” Elementary teacher Elizabeth Roschman, who worked at several Montessori schools before Clover, says the school is truly distinct in this respect. “We really live up to the Montessori ideal of extending the classroom past the walls of the school.”

Part of that time beyond the classroom walls is devoted to a program run by a full-time, urban farming specialist. The urban farming specialist manages an ‘Edible Lab’ on each campus in collaboration with students, which provides the basis for multiple, interconnected learning opportunities. The vegetable and herb gardens at each campus were still young but well-tended when we visited, and the students were keen to show them off. “The urban farming program builds on our hands-on science curriculum,” says Vesna Bosnar of the Edible Lab. “The students come together with a common purpose to plant, care for, and harvest their gardens, giving them the skills and confidence to make gardening a part of their lives.” Put simply, as one lower elementary student did, “We learn that it’s fun to dig in the garden and get our hands dirty while watching our gardens come to life.”

In our conversations with students and teachers, cooking and nutrition lessons stood out as an especially popular offshoot of the program. “It’s good that we learn how to garden, since it increases our variety of tastes,” says one elementary student. “We pretty much always like to eat what we grow.”

Students also learn to sell what they grow by hosting a farmers’ market. “Gardening gives students greater awareness of food



sources, but we extend that to provide them with some entrepreneurial skills,” says Bosnar-Dale. In addition to the farmers’ market, the curriculum incorporates small business education in several ways. Teachers encourage students to organize and plan events, for example, and set up community fundraising projects to encourage innovation, financial budgeting, and risk-taking.

French language instruction starts early at Clover, a unique attraction for many parents. Starting at the toddler and pre-primary ages, students receive an introduction to some basic vocabulary words in the context of a nurturing environment. From the primary level onwards, French lessons focus on vocabulary students use in their daily lives, while integrating with drama, arts, and creative expression. In fact, the school embeds arts-based education throughout the curriculum, offering wide-ranging exploration in music, the visual arts, dance, drama, and the performing arts. Every classroom creates space and opportunity for fun and creativity, since the Montessori philosophy views the arts as a springboard for self-expression and deepening children’s confidence. Beyond the classroom, there are frequent outings to take in Toronto’s diverse arts and culture scene.

### **Pedagogical approach**

Montessori teachers are often referred to as guides, or trained observers, of children’s learning and behaviour. They don’t stand at the front of the classroom to deliver lectures and instructions to all students. Instead, they move around to individual students and small groups to discuss the students’ work, help them plan their next steps, or offer relevant lessons.

Recent research evidence affirms what Montessori educators have long known: the Montessori teaching method has long-term benefits for students. A University of Virginia study comparing outcomes of children at a public inner-city Montessori school with

children who attended traditional school found that the Montessori education led to better social and academic skills. These results relate back to our conversation with Co-founder and Director Sandra Bosnar-Dale, when she pointed out how many successful—and even famous—adults have Montessori backgrounds.

While Montessori teachers can have a wide range of educational certifications, all lead teachers at Clover are trained and certified Montessori experts from the toddler level up. On top of their formal qualifications, it was clear to us that they’re genuinely committed to the school’s “heart-centred” philosophy. “We hire teachers that are flexible and loving,” says Dawn Whitehead, principal at the Midtown Elementary Campus. “They put forth so much effort because they want their students to succeed in every aspect of their lives, not just academically.” One parent we met summed up the sentiment we encountered in many Clover families: “The teachers embody the School with Heart motto in the way they care for our kids. It’s never just about achieving academic milestones with them, but about building our kids into well-rounded, good human beings.”

In pedagogical terms, the school takes a strongly relational approach, meaning that the teacher-student relationship is the catalyst for learning. “Our fundamental belief is that children can’t learn unless they feel safe and loved and supported, and that’s what we do to the best of our abilities here,” says pre-primary teacher Nina Mason. Relational learning is a pedagogy that many non-Montessori independent schools espouse, but the difference at Clover is the equal emphasis on student-centred, student-directed learning. “Our teachers meet students wherever they are academically, socially, and emotionally,” says co-founder Isabelle Kunicki.

Mixed-age Montessori classrooms, which typically allow students to have the same teacher for up to three years, naturally foster close student-teacher ties. “Instead of 10 months, it gives children a long period to develop a strong bond with their teacher,” says Kunicki. “The relationship grows and evolves over this time in step with children’s growth.” Primary teacher Alexandra Caldeira says she and

her colleagues always encourage parents to allow their children to complete the full three years. “I tell them we’re not done yet, and to just wait and see what their kids can accomplish if they stay.”

In our discussions with Clover students, they showed an appreciation for their teachers’ adaptability and awareness of their individuality. A few elementary students contrasted the pedagogical approach at Clover to what they experienced at their previous schools. “They understand when you want to try things a different way, or take your time with it,” says one. “They’re very accepting.” Several students reflected on how their teachers represent a School with Heart. Their comments ranged from, “They always listen to what we say,” and “They’re very kind and don’t make you do things that you don’t want to do,” to “The teachers are loving and comforting. They respect you and make you feel like you are on a team.”

Parents told us that, by the end of three years, their child’s teacher felt like part of the family. “We were heartbroken for a little while when my son moved on to the next class,” says one. Another parent shared how her daughter’s connection to her teacher matured in the years between when she was six and nine years old. “It was a natural progression, because there are so many changes over those ages and they went through it all together.”

Amy Gataveckas, principal at the High Park Campus, says Clover teachers work hard to cultivate an environment of mutual respect in their classrooms. “Our commitment to families is that we don’t expect their children to just blindly respect the adults at school. It’s a partnership based on reciprocity in terms of caring for and valuing each other.”

Valuing Clover teachers’ contributions to the school is vital to everyone’s success, according to Kunicki. The school encourages and supports personal and professional development for staff members, whether that’s taking a mindfulness course or attending Montessori workshops. “It’s really important that we all lift each other up and have time to recharge,” she says. Clover teachers get wellness days, for example, which are days off to use at their discretion.



Head of Schools Erika Lacey says the school offers teachers responsive, customized professional development based on their own interests and the needs of the students in their class. “It all depends on our student body from year to year. Children’s social-emotional needs have peaked in recent years, so we’ve invested in teacher education in that area. But we also find learning opportunities for individual teachers who are experiencing unique challenges with one or more of their students.”

Offering teachers autonomy in their classrooms is another way the school supports teachers, says Mason. “We’re encouraged to bring our unique backgrounds into the classroom in whatever way we like. I have a degree in theatre performance, so music and movement are a huge part of my teaching.”

### **Character education**

Grace and courtesy are fundamental parts of the Montessori curriculum, and its effects shone through the students we met at Clover. They were consistently polite, friendly, and open in our conversations, while showing consideration for each other—for example by offering everyone a chance to speak, including the quietest participants.

Even the youngest learners receive age-appropriate lessons and guidance on the importance of being polite and helpful in their interactions. “One of our main focuses for the young children is laying the foundation of excellent communication,” says Nina Mason, a pre-primary teacher. “We believe in speaking to them the way you hope they will speak eventually. We talk to them about kindness and compassion and respect—those big, important words.”

Cultivating empathy in the classroom is a central focus, and teachers deliberately model this trait. “My son is very shy and reserved and really takes his time getting comfortable with people and new situations,” says one parent of a pre-primary student. “The

Clover teachers have always supported him and never pushed him to do things he wasn’t comfortable with. He’s now very outgoing and chatty and is friends with everyone in his class.”

Freedom and responsibility are in careful balance in a Montessori curriculum, which creates daily opportunities for teachers to explore character education. By elementary school, this includes role-playing, regular classroom meetings, true stories of heroes and role models through history, and discussions about specific morals and virtues. We heard the virtues of grace and courtesy mentioned several times by students and teachers. “Our teachers have high expectations of their students, for example that they will be gracious and courteous not just inside the school, but when they’re out in the wider community,” says Amy Gataveckas, principal at the High Park Campus.

The mentoring among students that naturally takes place in mixed-age classrooms is inherently character-building, says Tracy Durisin, principal at the Midtown Junior Campus. “We’re always telling students that as you move up in this school, you also give back. Our internal community is designed to cultivate good citizenship and good character. The older students help to do the laundry for the toddler classrooms, for example, and bring around the vegetables they’ve grown for everyone to try. They also greet the youngest students in those first days of school when they may be nervous, and later become reading buddies.”

The school also encourages service and good citizenship outside the classroom, such as fundraising for local organizations, food drives, and participating in charity walks. They’re also helping to raise conscientious global citizens that care about their community.



## Academic Support & Wellness

The Clover School can accommodate children with a variety of learning strengths and challenges. Mixed-age Montessori classrooms are ideal environments for students traditionally classified as gifted, who might become bored within the structures of a grade-specific curriculum. On the other hand, students who may need extra support in some or all areas of learning can progress at their own pace, without the stigma of “falling behind” their peers.

“Our teachers can meet the needs of so many different types of learners, including those who may have gaps in their skills or particular struggles” says Amy Gateveckas, principal at the High Park Campus. “We see these things as evidence of the fact that every child is different. We take the child in front of us and say, ‘Okay, where are they soaring and where are they having trouble, and how can we best work with them?’ We also focus on confidence-building, which is often the critical piece in supporting children’s academic, social, and emotional success.”

Inclusion is the primary goal, according to pre-primary teacher Nina Mason. This approach aligns with the values the school tries to instill in students, especially the importance of kindness toward all members of a community. “We’re always looking for ways to include rather than exclude,” she says. “We give them the best possible learning environment while helping the other students see what each child brings to the classroom and celebrating differences.”

One parent, whose daughter struggled with behaviour that might be called “problematic” in traditional classrooms, shared what she calls her Clover “success story.” “From day one, the administration and teachers were supportive and collaborative with us,” she says. “There was nothing adversarial in our relationship, as there can be when dealing with children’s challenging behaviour at schools. I never felt intimidated. Our daughter’s best interests were at the centre of everything. They approach everything from a love of children and a drive to help them reach their full potential. They’re not afraid to work with you and your child.” The Clover School meets children where they are and works together with students and their families to build an education journey forward.

Special Programs Director Cameron Arias helps support mindfulness programs at the school. He’s a mindfulness advocate and shares strategies with the school’s teachers and students on simple breathing techniques to support their well-being when things feel tough. Arias also plays a key role in the school’s wellness programs. “I’m a huge advocate for mindfulness,” he says.

On a more formal level, Clover partners with Goldminds, an organization that provides research-backed mindfulness classes for children. “These classes offer our students effective strategies to improve emotional self-regulation and resilience, but we also integrate mindfulness across our whole curriculum,” says Bosnar-Dale. “It’s part of our commitment to promoting healthy habits and self-care practices in children from a very early age. In our classrooms, we teach children to nurture their minds, bodies, spirits, and hearts. Mindfulness is just one of the daily habits of self-care that we encourage.” The parents we met singled out the school’s explicit inclusion of wellness across its programs as a key draw. “They put great focus on maintaining mental health at the school by providing a safe space to discuss emotions and practice mindfulness, which is something you don’t see in many traditional schools,” says one.

Clover students enjoy daily physical education, whether in the campus gyms or—whenever possible—outside. The school brings

in specialists to instruct a variety of sports over the year, including martial arts, tennis, soccer, track and field, and skiing. Healthy eating is also a wellness theme, with the vegetable gardens as a centerpiece and a lunch catering program designed to inspire nutritious food choices.



## Extracurricular

The Clover School offers a surprisingly rich variety of extracurricular activities given its size and the proportion of students who are old enough to participate. Students of all ages at all campuses can participate in clubs that run the gamut from art, board games, and chess to cooking and running. “Our teachers initiate the clubs based entirely on students’ interests and requests, so we don’t have to worry if kids will show up,” says Dawn Whitehead, principal of the Midtown Elementary Campus.

When we visited the High Park Campus, Cameron Arias was chatting with members of the new Dungeons & Dragons club he started with a student. “She approached me earlier in the year about the idea, and I said I’d be happy to collaborate with her,” he says. “We try to make our extracurriculars an extension of classroom learning, whether that requires students to do some research and organization or it involves them honing their leadership and collaboration skills.”

In the sports realm, Clover belongs to the Small Schools Athletic Federation, which allows students to compete beyond the intramural with other similar-sized schools across the province. “Our kids always participate in the track and cross-country meets,” says Kunicki.

Students regularly leave campus to visit libraries, art galleries, museums, or even grocery stores. These outings are meant to enhance the children’s life skills and confidence, so they’re

responsible for much of the planning and organization. “Students take the lead with a teacher as their shadow, allowing them to make mistakes and learn from them,” says Head of Schools Erika Lacey. There are also occasional overnight trips, such as when Clover students attended the Montessori Model United Nations in Chicago and the Claremont Nature Centre north of Pickering.

For families looking for summer programs, Clover runs a camp at two campuses for Clover students and members of the wider community. Children from 18 months to 6 years can attend the Midtown Campus camp, while the High Park Campus offers camp for those 18 months to 10 years. “The summer program for the toddler and pre-primary classes are essentially the same as the regular year, since this age group thrives on routine and consistency,” says Arias. “For the older children, the summer is a little more like a traditional camp in that there’s a lot more fun and play, with special guests and a variety of outings.” This is an opportunity to try the school for interested families who haven’t been in Montessori or at Clover before.

## Student Body / Diversity

Ensuring every student and every family feels like they belong is a priority at the School with Heart. Like most independent schools in the Greater Toronto Area, The Clover School attracts students from the neighbourhoods surrounding the campuses. The families at each campus reflect the cultural diversity of the surrounding neighbourhoods, and there's a concerted effort to celebrate every child's unique contribution to the school community.

At the High Park Campus in particular, a large proportion of the students are local. "While a minority of our students travel from further west, I'd estimate that at least half of our families can walk to school," says Principal Amy Gataveckas. "There's a strong feeling of connection to the High Park and Junction neighbourhoods, where students see each other at the park and ice cream shop."

The midtown campuses have a similar split between local families and those from further afield, though Midtown Junior Campus principal Tracy Durisin noted that in recent years she's seeing more families who are willing to commute. During the same period, an increasing number of families from abroad have chosen The Clover School for their children. The unique curriculum and Clover student experience makes student transfers seamless because Montessori is an international method of education.

Clover invests time and resources in advancing equity, diversity, and inclusion at its campuses. One strategy it's already adopted is diversifying curriculum content. "We want to ensure that all

children see themselves in the stories we tell and the books, music, and art they see around the school," says Gataveckas. When it comes to cultural celebrations, the school invites children to share their traditions. "Students tend to really enjoy teaching their peers about their culture or religion," says Whitehead. "It builds their confidence to know that everyone is so accepting and excited to learn their traditions."

Our discussions with Clover students highlighted just how much they had absorbed the lessons on inclusivity. Unprompted, several elementary students spoke about how everyone is welcome at their school and described special events where they tasted new food and learned about different cultures. A parent we met echoed their enthusiasm: "I feel like they put a lot of thought into the causes they support and the events they put on," she says. "They present social issues in a way the kids can relate to and understand, even very complex things like Orange Shirt Day or Pink Shirt Day. My young son came out with a basic understanding about residential school and bullying because there was that thoughtfulness put into it by the staff."

The school has a diversity and inclusion committee responsible for ensuring that every aspect of programming and operations considers issues around equity, diversity, and inclusion. One key area of focus has been hiring. Gataveckas, who helped staff the new High Park Campus in 2021, says having faculty members reflect the diversity of Clover's students is a crucial commitment. "It helps people in our community who are underrepresented see themselves reflected in our teachers and staff members, so everyone feels comfortable sending their children here."





In addition to tuition, there are fees for extended care and meal program options, as well as activity fees for the primary and elementary students which cover most field trips.

## Getting In

The admissions process at The Clover School is intended to ensure that prospective students and families will feel at home in the school's culture and share its heart-centred values, says Admissions Director Stephanie Marchment. "Our goal is to find out as much as we can about where a child is socially, emotionally, and academically so we can help them feel supported at Clover and set them up for success," she says.

Admission to the toddler, pre-primary, and primary programs is on a first-come, first-served basis, with priority given to returning and former students, siblings, and those previously enrolled in other Montessori schools. For new families applying to the elementary school programs, the process is similar to other independent schools, where applications must be accompanied by paperwork such as previous reports cards and any educational or behavioural evaluations. All new applicants pay a one-time application fee. Children can apply at any age, and they don't require Montessori experience. "We're interested in students from diverse educational backgrounds who are curious and motivated to learn," says Marchment.

The final step in the elementary admissions process is a school visit for an age-appropriate assessment and interview. "Children visit the program level where they would be placed so teachers can see them in the environment and observe how they interact," says Marchment. "Then we put all the pieces together to decide whether the school is a good fit and if we can meet that individual child's needs."



## Parents

The Clover School encourages and supports parents in bringing the Montessori approach into their home, so that teachers and parents are working as partners in each child's journey. "We ask families to collaborate with us in encouraging their children's independence, creativity, and self-confidence, because those are our ultimate goals," says Durisin. "We're not asking parents to read all the Montessori books and become experts. We're the educators and that's our job. But we like to think of the school as an extension of the home, and it's nice when the reverse is true because families are implementing our suggestions and building on the progress we make here." Elementary teacher Elizabeth Roschman says parent cooperation makes all the difference: "The children who really excel have parents who are on board and making some effort to support our philosophy at home."

This cooperation is beneficial for all students, but particularly helpful for younger children, "We're constantly observing and storing information about what's working and what's not for children, then sharing it with parents," says primary teacher Amy Carter. One parent offered the example of her son who was struggling with potty training at home, though was fine at school: "The teacher was very supportive and offered constant guidance." Other parents in the toddler and pre-primary program also commented on the schools' comprehensive support and reporting. "From the time my son started at Clover I've always been very impressed by the level

of detail in the daily reports," says one. "It went far past the basics to include information on what activities he enjoyed and how he was working on his fine motor skills. Now that he's older, he's excited to show me his folder and all the work he's doing." Apart from classroom reports delivered through a comprehensive student record-keeping system and portal, school-wide communications include monthly newsletters, staff blogs, and social media updates.

Parents can take advantage of free webinars, workshops, guest speakers, and other resources offered by the school to expand their knowledge of the Montessori philosophy or gain insight into issues such as children's sleep, nutrition, and behavioural challenges. "There's no pressure to participate or judgment if you don't, but we know that when parents get engaged, the child tends to be more successful," says Lacey. "We love to include parents in our conversations about Montessori education."

There are no parent councils at Clover's campuses, but our conversations with parents and staff made it clear to us that the school welcomes family involvement and strives for a strong parent-school connection. "We're always telling families, 'Call us anytime, email us, stop us at pick-up time, reach out in any way if you have questions or concerns,'" says Durisin. High Park Principal Amy Gataveckas told us that, based on her experience teaching elsewhere, Clover is especially open with parents. "Our teachers aren't just willing, but eager, to share what they're doing in their classrooms. They take a lot of pride in this community and in their students. I always say to parents, 'What we're doing here is really special, but it's not a secret.'"

The school welcomes parents into the classroom for "Watch Me Work" sessions, which are exactly what they sound like: opportunities to observe students on an ordinary day. "It's a way for parents to experience the Montessori philosophy firsthand, because it can be quite hard to explain," says Nina Mason, who notes that parents tend to be amazed by what their children accomplish in the classroom. "Sometimes children don't show all that they can do

at home, so it's helpful for parents to see their capabilities." Amy Carter agrees, adding that many parents don't have any firsthand experience with Montessori. "They love the idea of it but haven't seen it up close. It's fun to show them the materials and let them interact with them."

There are also school-wide events for families such as apple picking, movie nights, a fall festival, a winter market, and a spring picnic. Opportunities for parents to connect without children include coffee mornings, wine and cheese evenings, art shows, and a Facebook group for each classroom. "Not only has Clover been a great experience for both of my children, but it's also provided my wife and I with a community of parents who are equally interested in child-led learning," says one parent.

The parents, students, teachers, and administrators we met at Clover consistently described a warm and comforting—yet also inspiring and intellectually stimulating—environment at the school. With impressive leadership continuity since its founding, Clover has remained true to its founding values while keeping pace with social and educational developments. In short, it's a school that nurtures the mind, health, soul, and heart of every child.

## The Takeaway

The Clover School's tagline is "The School with Heart" and it's found throughout their signature, four-pillar curriculum. The school's priority is to develop resilience and a forward-thinking mindset in every child so they can lead the change of tomorrow. Clover students lead with heart as they're encouraged to build communities inside and outside the classroom, and they're challenged to think creatively as global citizens. The Clover School combines Dr. Montessori's century-tested pedagogy with a whole-child approach to learning with joy, which promotes social, emotional, and physical well-being.



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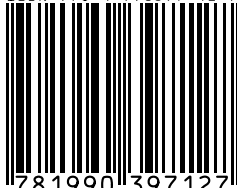
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ISBN 978-1-990397-12-7



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