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PRIVATE SCHOOL REVIEWS

Prestige School

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Written by Glen Herbert

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.

For reviews of more than 300 leading Canadian private schools, visit www.ourkids.net/private-school-reviews

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Preface

“Our goal was never to have a big school. Our goal was to give knowledge to kids who want to learn.”

—Olga Margold, Principal, Prestige School

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.

About Our Kids

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,

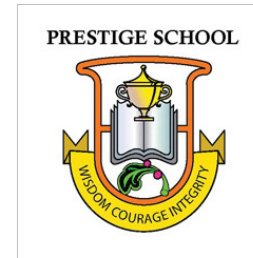
providing a detailed look at the offerings, the traditions, and the culture of each school. Titles published in this series to date include:

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| 1. Académie Ste-Cécile International School | 28. Merrick Preparatory School |
| 2. Académie Westboro Academy | 29. Metropolitan Preparatory Academy |
| 3. Albert College | 30. Miss Edgar's & Miss Cramp's School |
| 4. Appleby College | 31. Niagara Christian Collegiate |
| 5. Athol Murray College of Notre Dame | 32. Northstar Montessori Private School |
| 6. Banbury Crossroads School | 33. Pickering College |
| 7. Bayview Glen | 34. Prestige School |
| 8. Bond Academy | 35. Ridley College |
| 9. Branksome Hall | 36. Robert Land Academy |
| 10. Brentwood College School | 37. Rosseau Lake College |
| 11. Cambridge International Academy | 38. Royal Crown School |
| 12. Columbia International College | 39. Royal St. George's College |
| 13. Crescent School | 40. St. Clement's School |
| 14. Crestwood Preparatory College | 41. St. John's-Kilmarnock School |
| 15. Elmwood School | 42. St. Margaret's School |
| 16. Fieldstone School | 43. St. Mildred's-Lightbourn School |
| 17. Glenlyon Norfolk School | 44. Sunnybrook School |
| 18. Havergal College | 45. The Bishop Strachan School |
| 19. Hillfield Strathallan College | 46. The Clover School |
| 20. Holy Name of Mary College School | 47. The Country Day School |
| 21. Hudson College | 48. The Mabin School |
| 22. Kenneth Gordon Maplewood School | 49. The York School |
| 23. Kingsway College School | 50. Toronto Prep School |
| 24. La Citadelle International Academy of Arts
& Science | 51. Trinity College School |
| 25. Lakefield College School | 52. Upper Canada College |
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| 27. Meadowridge School | 54. Woodland Christian High School |

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Table of Contents

1. Details	11
2. Introduction	13
3. Basics and background	15
4. Academics	23
5. Student population	33
6. Co-curricular programs.....	35
7. Pastoral care.....	38
8. Parents and alumni	40
9. Getting in.....	42
10. The takeaway.....	46



Details: Prestige School

Founded: 2003

Enrolment: 290

Grades: Preschool to 12

Gender: Coed

Living Arrangements: Day

Language Of Instruction: English

School Focus: Academic

Developmental Priorities: Balanced, intellectual

Curriculum: Traditional

Curriculum Pace: Accelerated

Academic Culture: Rigorous



Introduction

During a visit to the Toronto location of the Prestige School I asked a Grade 8 class what they felt they all had in common. A girl in the front row answered immediately: “We’re smart.” She was seconded by others in the room, one adding, impressively, that they are all “thirsty for education” and “want to learn a lot.” Clearly, they also aren’t shy. Whether they arrive that way or become that way in their time at the school—most of the students in that class had been enrolled at Prestige for three years or more—is hard to say, but it is likely a little bit of both.

The school does not identify as one specifically for gifted students, though, in our experience, those students I talked to are right. They are smart. More importantly, every day they have the benefit of coming to an environment in which they do not feel a need to hide how smart they are. They are proud of that and broadcast it to strangers and friends alike, which, sadly, is not something you can say for all schools. The Prestige School is an environment in which it’s cool to be smart and where social currency is gained through academic engagement. The students want to learn and they know that the other people in the room do, too. A graduate of the school, speaking of her classmates from her time at Prestige, said, “Whatever question you ask, they always know the answer ... They just read it and they can answer the question right away.” In her mind, “A typical student at Prestige [is] the one who can answer any question.”

As true as that may be, perhaps it is less about knowing the answer and more about having that freedom, that comfort, to speak up, raise a hand, and offer it. They can answer the question, and they do and they enjoy living and learning in an environment where they can share what they have learned with others and where their peers have the confidence to share what they have learned with them. Some schools announce themselves in grand ways, but Prestige is quieter, more intimate than that. There aren't any ivy-covered walls or clock towers. Instead, there's that girl, at the front of the class, with the confidence to say, "We're smart." After all, knowing one's talents and weaknesses—and being able to speak about them—is where authentic learning begins.

Basics and background

Prestige School is a coed, non-denominational day school offering Preschool through Grade 12. Initially established at Finch and Leslie, the Toronto school moved to the current location in midtown in 2013. A second location in Richmond Hill was opened around that time, first as a daycare, and now with a smaller population but the exact same mandate. The catchment area for both schools includes Etobicoke, Richmond Hill, and North York. Some students arrive from the immediate neighbourhood, though a majority commute each day either by public transit or by car. The academic day runs from 9 until 3:50, with before- and after-school care included with the cost of tuition. The school opens its doors at 7:30 and closes at 6, with supervision on site throughout, including invigilated homework support and clubs that cater to all interests.

Olga Margold was the founding principal, and she remains in that position today, lending a valuable consistency to the offering. She works closely with her two Vice-Principals, one based out of each of the school's two locations. Margold splits her time between the two campuses and everyone collaborates and communicates seamlessly. "It helps when you love the environment and love what you do," says Debbie Keough, the Vice-Principal at the Richmond Hill location.

Margold began Prestige with her parents, Tatiana and Leon Issaev. In Ukraine, Leon was a professor of math and physics, and Tatiana was a teacher and served on The National Board of

Education. In response to the effects of the recession that gripped Ukraine in the aftermath of independence in 1991, the family emigrated to Canada and, in 1993, began a popular after-school tutorial program. “Our goal was never to have a big school,” says Margold. “Our goal was to give knowledge to kids who want to learn.” The initial focus was math, buoyed by Leon’s conviction that the Ontario curriculum left something lacking, particularly spark, passion, and a true sense of numerical literacy. So, he crafted a custom curriculum that could augment the Ontario secondary school outcomes. Olga recalls her father cutting and pasting material from math textbooks and writing new material in order to create the program that they still use today. Included within his curriculum was an approach to instruction which, in some ways, was more valuable than the content itself. Leon felt that having trouble grasping a concept does not mean an individual is a poor student. For him, it simply meant that they needed a different approach, to find the way into the material that was right for them. “The amount of patience that he had,” she says as we sat talking in her office, “that’s what he taught me. ... Explain the question. If you don’t get it, I can explain it differently. If you still don’t get it, then, let’s try it another way.”

When I ask the class what they feel makes a good teacher, a student says, “One that will help if you need help and make sure you understand it.” Similarly, a recent alum told us that that is what she valued most about her instructors—their willingness to persist, their ability to find new ways of explaining the material, and the belief that if a student does not understand something the default is not to doubt their ability.

That became a defining feature of Leon’s work with students—that willingness to explain things differently, to trust the intellect of the students in the knowledge that not everyone learns in the same way—and one that Margold credits for the program’s success. “That’s what he taught me, and that’s what I try to do,” she says. It can seem a minor thing perhaps—to persist, to change tack if necessary—but it isn’t, given the relationship that it supposes between

teacher and student. If a student were to fail a science test, for example, some might place the onus for that on the student. She didn’t study, or he didn’t pay enough attention in class. At Prestige, they upend that understanding, beginning instead in the knowledge that all students are capable, and that it’s the job of the instructors to capitalize on that capability.

Another foundational concept that Leon brought to the program, and which remains today, is the belief that no aspect of the curriculum sits in isolation and that there are skills and competencies that are common to all disciplines. While we talk, Olga mentions the common assumption that math is not something that all students need to really dig deeply into, given the ubiquity of digital devices. The thinking goes that we all have calculators on our phones, as well as apps to do any operations that might come up on an average day, such as converting currency or calculating percentages. Doing long division on paper can seem hopelessly quaint. But Margold is adamant that it is an essential element of any educational program worth its salt. “The reason why the students need math,” she says, a bit of passion creeping into her voice, “is because math gives you logical skills for dealing with everyday issues. It could be anything in life. How do you deal with it? You break it down into little things ... to breathe smoothly ... how do you cope with that ... break it down, make it smaller.” As such, the math program is so strong and so integrated within the culture and identity of the school that kids naturally gravitate to it. Most students compete in math competitions—the results and rankings are displayed on the walls of the first-floor hallway—which is not something you see at every school. Moreover, the competitions are not required. Rather, the students see their peers taking part, having fun, and gaining a sense of competency and mastery, and they want to as well. And in one class I saw kids doing calculations and graphing on paper, with pencil, and loving it. Those kinds of things turn heads, and rightly so. A number of the parents I spoke with commented on all of that, and the math program is understandably a principle draw for those who enroll here.



As much as it was never the goal to have a big school, or perhaps even to offer a full academic program, in time it became clear that the logical next step was to open a school proper, which they did in 2003. Up until that point, they had been working primarily with secondary students, so the school began there, with the secondary grades. Over the next few years, other grades were offered, beginning with middle school and then elementary and, finally, the pre-school program. “It was kind of backwards,” admits Margold with a chuckle, knowing that a more typical model of school creation is to begin with the elementary grades and then grow the program up as the students advance. In any event, within a few years they were enrolling students, as now, from the primary through to graduation.

Leon and Tatiana Issaev remain involved in key aspects of the life of the school—Tatiana helps with the daily operations of the Richmond Hill campus; Leon helps out in the tutoring center—and otherwise provide a touchstone for the academic approach that defines the school. While the staff has grown considerably, Prestige still feels like a family business, which in many ways it still is. Staff regularly note that they feel like they have entered a family; given that the leadership model is so flat, and that they feel their voices are heard, that their ideas are valued. The program retains all those custom elements that Leon and Tatiana set as the academic foundation all those years ago, and Margold maintains a distinctive leadership structure and has kept the lines of communication open, fluid, and casual.

While the school does not have a specific classroom curriculum around character, it has nevertheless long been an important part of the offering. There are character education assemblies held every month where classrooms give presentations on the character trait of the month and awards are given to those who exemplify them. “In the beginning, when we were first opening,” says Margold, “I wanted the students to have good social skills, know right from wrong, to have the whole experience.” That dedication remains today. Says Vice-Principal of the Toronto campus Yana Abramov, “for us, it’s very important when a child is passing by in the hallway,

that they say ‘Hello.’ They won’t just pass by. They’ll say, ‘Hello Miss Margold’ or ‘Hello Miss Yana.’ They’ll be courteous. It’s very important that they are dressed well. All those ‘little but big’ values. Those things aren’t going to change.” Relationships are valued as well and are seen as a function of the size of the school and the connections that the community shares with one another. “We have close relationships with the parents,” says Abramov. “When something happens, I pick up the phone to call Mom and tell her what happened. That won’t change.” Parents agree with all of that. “Having a uniform, and having certain rules,” one tells us, “they do set the kids up for certain expectations and certain understanding, which I think ... will help them in the long run.”

One of the best ways to get to know a school is to visit it, and that’s true here, too. Drive up, walk in the door, take a look around. But, it’s important to remember that it can only show you so much. The proviso being that a school is not a building, it’s a community of people that gather there every day, and Prestige is a particularly good example of that. The current Toronto property is leased from the TDSB. It’s down a quiet residential street (one happily with no exit, which means that there isn’t any through traffic whipping by). In an earlier life it was a Catholic elementary school, built at a time when school architects liked a lot of straight lines. Were it created for the Prestige program, the gym would be bigger and the athletic fields outside would be regulation sized. Perhaps there would be a common space, maybe a cafeteria, too. When I walk around the building one early fall day, Olga Margold, the principal, notes that the Toronto location was a primary draw when they moved here. It’s accessible by car and public transportation, a quick walk to Yonge/Sheppard or Downsview TTC stations. It’s also an enclosed space, bordering on mature residential neighborhoods. There are lots of trees. Still, “it’s a bit challenging in terms of what you can and can’t do,” Margold admits with a sigh. This is because of the lease agreement and the limit it can place on physical improvements. “There are certain restrictions, and any changes have to go through the board.”

But, again, the school isn't the building. Which is why it's important to visit on a day when classes are in session. The school is the people. It's the teachers greeting students in the hallways, and the kids rushing in at the bell. It's Miss Jennifer prepping a vocabulary test, and the sounds of children playing soccer, heard passively through an open classroom window. It's the supervisors outside in the play spaces before and after school, and the Grade 4 class fidgeting as they stand in their uniforms for the national anthem. All of it is comfortable and quietly charming, which is just as it should be.

The Richmond Hill school, unlike Toronto, has taken over a commercial site, but is nestled into a suburban, residential neighbourhood off Major Mackenzie Dr. The location backs onto a city-owned parkette and elaborate play structure that serves as its schoolyard. As the school has grown, it has continued to expand its footprint. It's a bright airy space, with tons of colourful student work and teaching resources on the walls. The building is divided into elementary and high school sections, with some shared spaces.

The building was first used to house the school's daycare and tutoring centre, and grew into a school of its own. Starting with kindergarten and growing its way up alongside its students, the Richmond Hill school has grown to accommodate students through Grade 12 and now has a full and enriching high school program

"We have been following the students and expanding our program each year as we continue to expand our academic programming," says Richmond Hill Campus Vice-Principal Debbie Keough. "This location came about because of an expressed need in the area," she explains. "Parents from the math school were asking if Olga would open a full school in this area and we were happy to accommodate that need, making our advanced curriculum accessible to more families."

Academics

The belief that young people are capable of much more than is often expected of them is embedded in the school's teaching philosophy and rooted in its origins. It's typical at Prestige for students to work a year ahead. For example, Grade 5 students are immersed in the Ontario Grade 6 curriculum or, more accurately, in "Grade 6 plus," with a mix of provincial and Prestige-developed materials. "Once you give this information to students at an earlier age," says Margold, "sometimes you will be surprised by what they are capable of." Head of Elementary (Toronto campus), Catherine Ng, explains that from that accelerated baseline, students then have their work tailored to their ability. Teachers engage in a daily feedback loop that tells them where each student is now and where they can go next. "We can adapt and be very flexible in the classroom. Our teachers are ready to offer further enrichment or continue working at the current level until a student has gained greater mastery."

This goes hand in hand with the challenging International Baccalaureate® (IB) Programme, which Prestige School's Richmond Hill campus will be offering in September of 2024. On the path to becoming an IB World School, Prestige—Richmond Hill will offer the IB Primary Years Programme (PYP) for Grades 1 to 6 in the fall.

The IB Programme further enhances Prestige School's high standard of education that it has come to be associated with. This also enables it to offer a distinctive educational experience that not

only challenges students academically but also prepares them to be thoughtful, engaged, and responsible global citizens.

“Every summer, parents are provided with textbook lists for the upcoming school year and the material is always at least a grade ahead,” explains Keough. “But it’s not just textbooks. Teachers engage students in a lot of projects and interactive activities that cannot be done in larger school environments. Our learning is hands-on and well-rounded. We know not everyone loves every subject, so we enrich the program across the board including music, drama, arts, alongside math, science, English, and French.”

The math and science programs are particular strengths. Students respond well to an advanced math curriculum and are introduced to biology, chemistry, and physics as distinct subjects as early as Grade 4. By the time they reach high school, they are familiar and comfortable with topics and units of study that their peers in many other schools have yet to encounter. That holds true for business studies as well. Margold has a commerce degree from the University of Toronto’s Rotman School of Management and believes in offering young people the chance to study business at a high level. The school’s approach to enrichment in all grades is to increase depth and complexity as students master the material rather than provide additional practice or assignments at the same level. In other words, busy work is out and intellectual challenge is in.

In setting high expectations and then working closely with students to meet them, teachers send a clear message: You can do this. You have the ability. Walking through the hallways, the focus on academic achievement is clear. There are displays of student achievement in academic competitions and scholarship programs. They include certificates from the Royal Canadian Legion annual public speaking competition, and from the Pascal, Cayley, and Fermat mathematics contests run by the University of Waterloo. As one teacher puts it, “When you show kids that they are more capable than they think, that they can go further

than they believe, you see something wonderful happen. You see them start to think of themselves as mathematicians and scientists and artists. No, they can’t do everything. But they begin to think more and more about what’s possible. They keep going until they reach their absolute limit—and that is a long way. They take a lot of pride in what they accomplish.”

Put simply, “I find that kids can do so much more,” says Margold, and the school gives them the latitude to do that. “Our Grade 1 is using the science textbook that typically will be used in Grade 3. But kids are capable of learning at that age. If you look at the development, what they can understand and learn at a certain age, that’s what we’ll look at. Can they learn this curriculum? Will it excite them?” Parents appreciate the role that high expectations play in their children’s lives. They witness what educational research has proven: With the right support, young people will rise to the level established around them. “The approach to teaching is very personal. And at the same time, the academic work is challenging. The whole atmosphere is both highly caring and highly demanding. It’s a unique balance.”

Homework is valued, though not onerous. There are weekly spelling and vocabulary tests in Grades 1 to 8, and assessment tends to be more traditional. Also, there are a lot of digital tools available to instructors, and while there is an efficiency to parking children in front of reading or numeracy apps—this particularly when trying to manage larger classrooms—teachers at Prestige invariably favour the interpersonal interactions that give life to what we learn and which bring their own lessons. “We use technology,” says one teacher, “but we do focus on those kinds of back to basics things, like copying from the board, and keeping a tidy notebook and binder. For those elementary years, up until Grade 6, I think that that traditional method is essential.” They are expected to have good handwriting and they learn cursive writing. Teachers check those things, and students are expected to organize themselves and to build traditional study and work habits.

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In some ways, the academic culture reflects the European roots of its founders, with an emphasis on self-discipline and a fairly studious tone in the classrooms. It's a more Socratic method, instead of communicative, and the classroom furniture reflects that, with desks often in rows facing the teacher at the front of the room. "We feel kids need to learn from the basics," says Margold, and the school strikes a comfortable balance between traditional and contemporary educational values. To illustrate, she tells a story of a student in Grade 2 in another school who was asked to describe how the distance from the equator affects the climate, food, and clothing in Ireland. "Fun, right?" she says, clearly thinking that, no, it isn't. "First of all, explain what an equator is!" She doesn't quite roll her eyes. "It's out of nowhere." When she talks about learning from the basics, that's what she means: giving the students what they need to know, over the course of years, ensuring that the work doesn't come out of nowhere and is paced so that students can engage meaningfully with the concepts. She's a strong believer in not throwing the baby out with the bathwater. "Whatever worked for hundreds of years—and we had good scientists, good mathematicians, good writers—just because there are new developments in education doesn't mean that they were taught incorrectly and now we have to change everything."

It's true that academics are ultimately about application and using concepts to interact with real-world issues and problems, and that certainly occurs here. But the learning is sequenced in such a way that students have a facility with the basics before they are asked to apply them. Karen McBean, a Grade 3 homeroom teacher at the Toronto campus, says, "How do you read if you don't know your letters? How do you learn your letters? You learn them by copying them, sounding them out. It's all stepping stones." Implicit within the program is an understanding that there are various modes of inquiry, and that students benefit from them all, including inference, deduction, and being able to access a wide range of sources and resources.

Parents report that the style of instructional delivery, and that trust in foundational knowledge, was a key draw. They see the value in aspects of traditional learning, in part because it is what they are used to as learners. They also appreciate the pace of learning, and the deliberation that it requires, rather than firing off in all directions at once.

Tutorial-style instruction

"For me, the ideal is to perfectly balance an advanced curriculum tailored to each student's needs with lots of personal attention," says Olga Margold. The Prestige School participates in a tradition of tutorial-style instruction that traces its roots to Oxford and Cambridge in the 19th century, and today it remains a cornerstone of their pedagogies.

We tend to think of tutorials as remediation, with students seeking a tutor whenever they need to focus or if they require more support within a specific aspect of the curriculum. As much as that is true—indeed many people do indeed seek a tutorial program for support or enrichment—the concept is actually much broader and has as much to do with how content is engaged with as it does with whatever brings the student to a tutor. Tutorial, as a form of academic delivery, is distinguished from passive forms of instruction, such as lectures and large-class instruction. It's active: rather than students sitting quietly taking notes, they participate in the discussion, sharing what they know and asking questions about things that are unclear.

The basic outline that was established at Oxford all those years ago holds true today, particularly in schools like Prestige.

Students arrive to class having had some personal experiences with the material: they've done the readings, tried to work through the problems, written an essay, conducted investigations. So, they're primed, and not coming at the content cold. That experience with the material then guides the content delivery. Classes tend to be smaller, and teachers work with all the knowledge, experience, and questions that students bring with them into the room. Instruction effectively starts there: teachers work from what students know, home in on areas where they're having trouble, and then build out their understanding of the curricular content.

It's a very efficient style of learning for many reasons, one being that the students tend to be more prepared for the classes. It's also time efficient, given that the instructor isn't required to go over familiar information, reviewing the basics. And it creates learning opportunities that tend to be more distinctly authentic—the students know that the teacher is really speaking to them, not some generic learner in, say, the way a textbook might approach the material. Progress is more closely monitored, and assessment opportunities tend to be more pointed, designed not to assess all students' understanding, but used to probe these students' abilities, to find their deficits in understanding which the instructor can then work to address.

When teachers at Prestige talk about student-centered instruction, that's exactly what they're talking about: individual feedback, a greater depth of engagement with the material, and a more personal approach. The smaller class sizes are conducive to all of that—not just delivering the curricular content but teaching students how to learn—and teachers clearly appreciate the chance to work closely with



individual students. They also share the dedication to a student-centered approach to classroom instruction. There's an understanding that, even with a student population that is academically inclined, some students are stronger than others. There is standard testing, but teachers are able to spend time, giving extra work and attention to students who need it.

Student population

The GTA is a notably diverse region, and the population of both schools reflect that. As you might expect, it's common to hear snippets of different languages spoken in the hallways, though there are other diversities, too, from cultural, to linguistic, to social, to economic. While there isn't a boarding program per se, the school naturally attracts international students looking to gain an Ontario diploma and to acclimate to life in Canada prior to moving on to post-secondary programs in North America. About 25% of the student population identify as international, and that group includes those from Korea, China, Europe, and elsewhere. Some arrive through homestay programs that are arranged by third-party agencies, though a majority of them arrange travel and accommodation themselves, most typically living with extended family. Still others are children of parents who have relocated to Canada for work. That was true for one recent alum, who was born in Ukraine and arrived in Canada with her parents. "That was a good reason for me to go there," she says about enrolling at Prestige, "because it was easier for me to understand the system, how it works." She liked that she was able to interact with others in her first language, while also improving her English fluency.

The students tend to be outgoing. They are quick to say hello and are keen to talk about their school, which is a telling sign of the comfort they feel. They are academically oriented and are prone to think big thoughts. A teacher commented to us that they don't

have a need to explain to students why it's important to do well at school—they come already knowing that, and academic performance is prized. The range of interest among the students spans a broad spectrum, from acting to electronics, and even in Grade 8 they are already thinking of university programs. When I ask what they want to do, one says, “I want to make an impact.”

With class sizes ranging from 12 to 18 students at the Toronto location, and even smaller at the Richmond Hill campus, and a commitment to enriched education, Prestige School is well-suited for students and families focused on academic achievement. As Margold notes, the school “prides itself on a student body that reflects the multicultural GTA in which both locations are situated.” And indeed, this is something that inflicts the life and culture of the lived experience of the school. “We want our students to be well equipped to thrive in today’s global economy.”

Administration is clear that the size, for the most part, is not an issue, and they aren't looking to increase enrolment numbers at the Toronto location. The current enrollment is just shy of 300 students, which is where the school has sat for the past decade or so. The student population at the Richmond Hill location, meanwhile, is growing steadily. And this is exciting for the administration. While over the past few years the classes have been combined—so you'll see a 1-2 and a 3-4 for example—that's set to change as the school continues to grow. “We have plenty of space to expand and I've been having consistent interviews with prospective families,” says Keough. “We'll accept a student who is a good fit for the school at any time during the year, which works really well for some families.” Even at this setting, however, student population growth isn't the primary goal. “We are a small, intimate family environment and our focus is providing an excellent education for our students.”

Co-curricular programs

The program of co-curriculars is what you'd expect from a school of this size and focus. There are all the expected offerings, including opportunities, through the student council, for students to take meaningful leadership roles. School-wide events dot the school calendar, including drama productions, talent shows, proms, and field trips. There is a Grade 12 prom, as you'd expect, and it's a highlight to be sure. But there are similar, less formal year-end events starting in Grade 7 and up. They are focused around getting students together outside the classroom setting to have a bit of fun.

The signature annual event is the International Café. “It's a huge deal for the school,” says Margold, clearly delighted with it. “Kids love it.” In our experience, they really do—the alumni I spoke with invariably mentioned the event in glowing terms. Each grade chooses a country and spends time studying its geography, history, culture, and traditions. It culminates in an all-day event, with students giving presentations and demonstrations. There's food, music, and a lot of learning. This extensive project connects to the value the school places on diversity. It has many families of European, Korean, Chinese, and Canadian background plus international students in the high school.

Prestige competes within the Small Schools Athletic Federation (SSAF). They participate in track and field, basketball, tennis, and soccer. As the size of the school suggests, there isn't as robust an offering of competitive sports as you'd find in larger settings. Basketball and soccer are offered, both competitively and recreationally. The thrust of the athletic program is participation, fitness, and helping students adopt a healthy, active lifestyle.



Pastoral care

The size of the Prestige School means that no student falls through the cracks when having a tough day, facing conflict with friends, or experiencing difficulties in any subject. “Being in a smaller surrounding, the teachers can really see each and every child and attend to them,” says one parent. “It’s a very tight community in that it’s a small school. You know, if one person is absent, then everybody knows that. So nobody goes unnoticed.” She adds that, “I just want to know that my child is safe, my child is attended to both while on campus and when taking part in field trips, and I know that’s something I can rely on the teachers for ... there is safety there.”

Teachers regularly check in with students when they seem “off” and call home to chat with parents before small issues blow up. Having the same homeroom teacher year after year in the elementary school and the same subject specialists for several years in a row means that every teacher is well positioned to occupy an advisory role as well. “It’s amazing what’s possible when you know every child,” says Yana Abramov, vice-principal of the Toronto campus. “You will not be alone. Whether you’re shy or not, you’ll always find a person to talk to. If you’re sad, people will see it, teachers will see it, staff will see it. Every single person is taken care of.” The teachers and principals have access to a shared, online behaviour log where they track how students are doing and where trouble might be arising.

It helps when homeroom teachers from Grade 1 through 8 move up with their students year after year. Closeness and consistency

provide a big pay-off as students advance through the school. Other teachers, such as Angela Papp, who has taught at both locations but is now based out of Richmond Hill, have a chance to work with nearly all of the kids in the school at the same time. Teaching English to kids in Grades 3 right through high school is a unique opportunity not afforded to many. “We really get to talk to our students, to truly interact with them, I never just deliver a lesson and walk out, I know these kids and they know me.” These relationships are the foundation of Prestige.

Not only do students feel known and understood for who they are, but they also achieve their post-secondary dreams, with 98% of graduates attending the university program of their choice.

One parent, who has a child in Grade 12, recognizes that a larger school can offer a wider variety of courses. Yet she is clear: “I wouldn’t give up the small class sizes, excellent teachers, and high academic standards my son benefits from here.”

Academic counselling is done on an individual basis. The high school coordinator coaches students through their university applications. Discussion around academic goals begins for most students as early as Grade 9. That said, there’s an understanding that not all students know at that point, or even much later, what kind of post-secondary program they might like to enter. But nothing goes unnoticed, and students who show interest in certain areas are given opportunities to follow them.

“It definitely changed me in a way,” says one alumna when I ask about her experience of the school and the support she felt as a student there. “I think I became a bit more confident than I was before. I was very, very shy at the beginning. But when I came to Prestige it was just so easy. You don’t have to be shy. It’s like, ‘Why would you have to be shy?’ So that made me more confident.” Confirming the tone of the delivery of the academic program, she said that “the teachers always care about your opinion ... they will always ask for your opinion.” I reached her at college, and she added, “Here they don’t do it, which I found very surprising.” Fair enough.

Parents and alumni

“What did attract me to the school is definitely the focus on both math and humanitarian subjects,” says a parent. The size, too, was a factor. “I did want my daughter to have more one-on-one time with the teachers, because when she started school she was a year younger than everybody else. I did want her to have a very comfortable environment,” she says, seeking one that would relate well to the close, quiet environment of the family home. “I did not want her to get lost in the big classrooms,” she says, and was looking for something more personal and intimate.

Parents told us that they value the family feel of the school. The kids refer to many of their teachers by some variation of their first name, such as “Miss Yana” or “Miss Olga,” which adds a lightness to day-to-day encounters. Older students mentor their younger peers, and parents are involved in events and activities. The school prides itself on the elaborate, multi-grade drama productions it puts on twice each year. Students of all ages come together on the stage and behind the scenes, and parents play a supporting role from home. “They made my daughter feel like a part of a family,” says a parent, “and that means a lot.”

Parents very much feel that they are a part of the school. “We see each other at events, and we know each other by name,” one says. “I think what unites Prestige parents is appreciating what [the school] provides.” She feels there is a shared perspective on education. There are many opportunities for involvement, and parents

are able to contribute in any capacity they like, from substantive involvement in the drama productions to simply chatting with teachers at the beginning and the end of the day. Certainly, no parent feels pushed to be involved, though those that wish to are welcome to step in and play a role.

Parents also spoke about the school’s approach to communication. “Teachers hear what parents have to say,” says a parent. “If something is not satisfying, then that’s discussed. It’s a very open communication with the administrative part of the school and the teachers.” Teachers are available at drop off and pick up times every day for casual conversation, email and call home regularly with any questions or observations, and provide a steady stream of academic reports. One father, who has a daughter in Grade 5, notes that the individualized nature of instruction carries over to communication: “The school is very responsive to parent input and also provides regular, clear feedback on student achievement. There’s always a mix of professionalism and personal interest.”

All in all, there’s a shared sentiment that this school is exactly where their children need to be. “For me, English is a second language, and being born in Russia I didn’t feel like I could teach her English properly,” says a Richmond Hill parent of a Grade 6 student. “At school she’s doing very well in English, she’s been writing poetry and winning awards for her poems.” For small kids, this parent says, Prestige is the perfect place. “They take extra care, everything is done in small groups, and the teachers do so much.”

Getting in

In some key ways, the admissions process differs from what you might expect to find (and indeed, what is practiced) at other private schools within this academic market. For one, the process is personal; this is a reflection of the core values of the school. One teacher mentioned to us that the academic program isn't "one size fits all," but rather tailored to the students' needs and, by extension, the needs of the families that enroll learners here. That's true at the admissions level as well. Where some schools have a fairly rigorous on-boarding program, with online application and admissions forms as well as regimented entry exams and interviews, at Prestige parents report that the process begins with a conversation. One parent told us, "We had a screening process for them to see if she was ready for Grade 1, rather than looking [only] at her age." She adds that, from there on, there was a lot of open communication.

Prestige recommends that during the admissions process at least one visit occurs while classes are in session, as the building isn't the school, the people are. In their experience the campus is transformed with the arrival of the students. Families, from the first visit, spend time with administration; they are invited to meet the prospective homeroom teacher; prospective students have a chance to really experience the people and the setting.

It's also common for private and independent schools to designate entry points. Often these correlate to the larger divisions

within the school, such as primary, elementary, middle, and secondary levels Grade 1, Grade 5, Grade 7, and Grade 9. They can also designate times within those entry years, restricting entry to either September or January. Prestige distinguishes itself by not having any designated entry points. Students, if accepted to the program, are able to join at any grade and, in many cases, at any point during the year. The feeling among the administrative staff is that this reflects what the school is and what it intends to offer. During one visit, Abramov mentioned an email that she had been reading just that morning from a family that had to relocate to Costa Rica in October. The move was unexpected and quick (much like when they first arrived at the schools some years prior). The family was sad to have to leave the school, but for Abramov it was a reminder that, sometimes, life is like that. Things happen. Some families are relocating, others are seeking a different academic setting for their learner. The push factors could be anything from apathy, to a need for a challenge, to problems with relationships. Often, those things can't wait, and there is a palpable sense of pride among the administration in being able to meet families at that point.

Classes are small, with a maximum of 18. "It's a good number," says Margold. "There's enough students to build friendships and social skills and at the same time give the teacher an ability to pay attention to every child." That said, given the cap, the Toronto location has a waiting list for some grades.

There are no entrance examinations or formal interviews. Rather, families and students meet with staff casually, comfortably. Students often write a placement test, but it's meant to get a sense of their level within the courses, not as a tool for deciding admittance. They also participate in a trial day to see how they integrate into the classroom environment, both socially and academically. Parents report that the admissions process feels like more a process of getting to know each other, making sure that the relationship is right, rather than one where the student is being appraised or scrutinized. Likewise, they didn't come away from those meetings wondering if

they would get it. They knew, before the formal acceptance, if the relationship was right. Parents report that there were no surprises at any step along the way from initial contact, to enrolment, to their ongoing experience with the school.

One teacher explains that students who come in from another school can thrive here but generally take about six months to catch up to the math curriculum. They are well supported during that time and eventually become as proficient as their peers. The school's math, science, and language programs work well for motivated students who are eager to learn. "We have our particular areas of strength and specialization, and it works for our families," says Margold. "There is no single best school. There is only the best school for your child."

Tuition is what you'd expect for a school of this size, focus, and market, if perhaps on the more economical side. Parents report that there are no surprises, and that extra fees are minimal.



The takeaway

The school promotes three core values: wisdom, courage, and integrity. While those are excellent ideals in themselves and are modelled in the classrooms, hallways, clubs, and teams, it's interesting to hear Margold talk about why they matter as guiding principles. She wants Prestige students to be able to make meaningful choices, rather than have choices made for them. In other words, one of the primary aims of the school is to graduate young adults who have attained a high degree of intellectual freedom. The Prestige School is well suited for students and families focused on academic achievement more than on extensive co-curricular options. Families self-identify as being academically minded. Though students join a variety of after-school clubs and enjoy a modest athletic program, the school specializes in offering a university-preparatory curriculum that exceeds Ministry guidelines.

Those are the things that have become synonymous with the Prestige brand. There's a faith in the core tenets and a trust in the relationships that are shared. Administration is thoughtful, responsive to concerns, and deliberate. The school population remains small so that everyone knows everyone, and so there is meaningful interaction between students across the grade levels. The size, too, means that parents are also known and have ready access to administration when problems arise or even when they don't, with lots of opportunities to check in outside of the usual reporting events, such as report cards and parent-teacher interviews. Good manners

are expected, without feeling onerous, and fun is prized. Class sizes, as well as a high student-teacher ratio, allows for animated group work as well as individual instruction. Language is a key element, with a trust in the cognitive and social benefits of bilingualism, as well as the cultural awareness that comes from simply hearing other languages spoken.

"We always have a plan," says Vice-Principal of the Toronto campus Yana Abramov. "We think ahead of time, we work it through before we put it in play." Prestige sets a high bar for its students, academically as well as socially and ethically. The program is designed and delivered to meet the needs of students functioning at the top of their peer groups. There is a close-knit feel within the student body and an ongoing attention to the needs and development of each student as he or she progresses through the curriculum. The ideal student is one able to thrive in a challenging yet supportive environment. Ultimately, the goal is to foster and encourage well-rounded, free-thinking individuals who have a lifelong love of learning and heightened cultural awareness.



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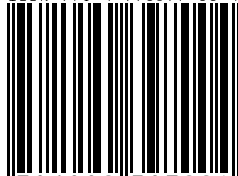
“The Prestige School is an environment in which it’s cool to be smart and where social currency is gained through academic engagement. The students want to learn, and they know that the other people in the room do, too. ...Walking through the hallways, the focus on academic achievement is clear. There are displays of student achievement in academic competitions and scholarship programs.”

“The size of the Prestige School means that no student falls through the cracks when having a tough day, facing conflict with friends, or experiencing difficulties in any subject.”

“The belief that young people are capable of much more than is often expected of them is embedded in the school’s teaching philosophy and rooted in its origins. It’s typical at Prestige for students to work a year ahead.”

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