

OUR KIDS

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PRIVATE SCHOOL REVIEWS

Toronto Prep School

The Our Kids Review



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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.

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Preface

“Getting to know the strengths and challenges of every student is our priority. Nobody gets lost in the crowd here.”

—Principal Pete Tsimikalis, Toronto Prep 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 daughter; the one that offers the right challenges and the necessary supports; the one where she feels comfortable and included; the one that allows her to grow into a sense of herself and her place in the world; the one where people laugh at her jokes, and ache in the same places. The one where she knows, 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. Appleby College | 19. Pickering College |
| 2. Bond Academy | 20. Prestige School |
| 3. Branksome Hall | 21. Ridley College |
| 4. Brentwood College School | 22. Robert Land Academy |
| 5. Columbia International College | 23. Rosseau Lake College |
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| 8. Elmwood School | 26. St. Clement’s School |
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| 13. Kenneth Gordon Maplewood School | 31. Toronto Prep School |
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| 17. Metropolitan Preparatory Academy | 35. Woodland Christian High School |
| 18. Miss Edgar’s & Miss Cramp’s School | |

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Table of Contents

Details.....	11
Introduction	13
1. Background and basics	17
2. Academics	24
3. Student population	38
4. Wellness and care.....	40
5. Getting in.....	45
6. Parents and alumni	47
8. The takeaway	49



Details: Toronto Prep School

Founded: 2009

Enrolment: 430

Grades: 7 to 12

Gender: Coed

Living Arrangements: Day

Language Of Instruction: English

School Focus: Academic

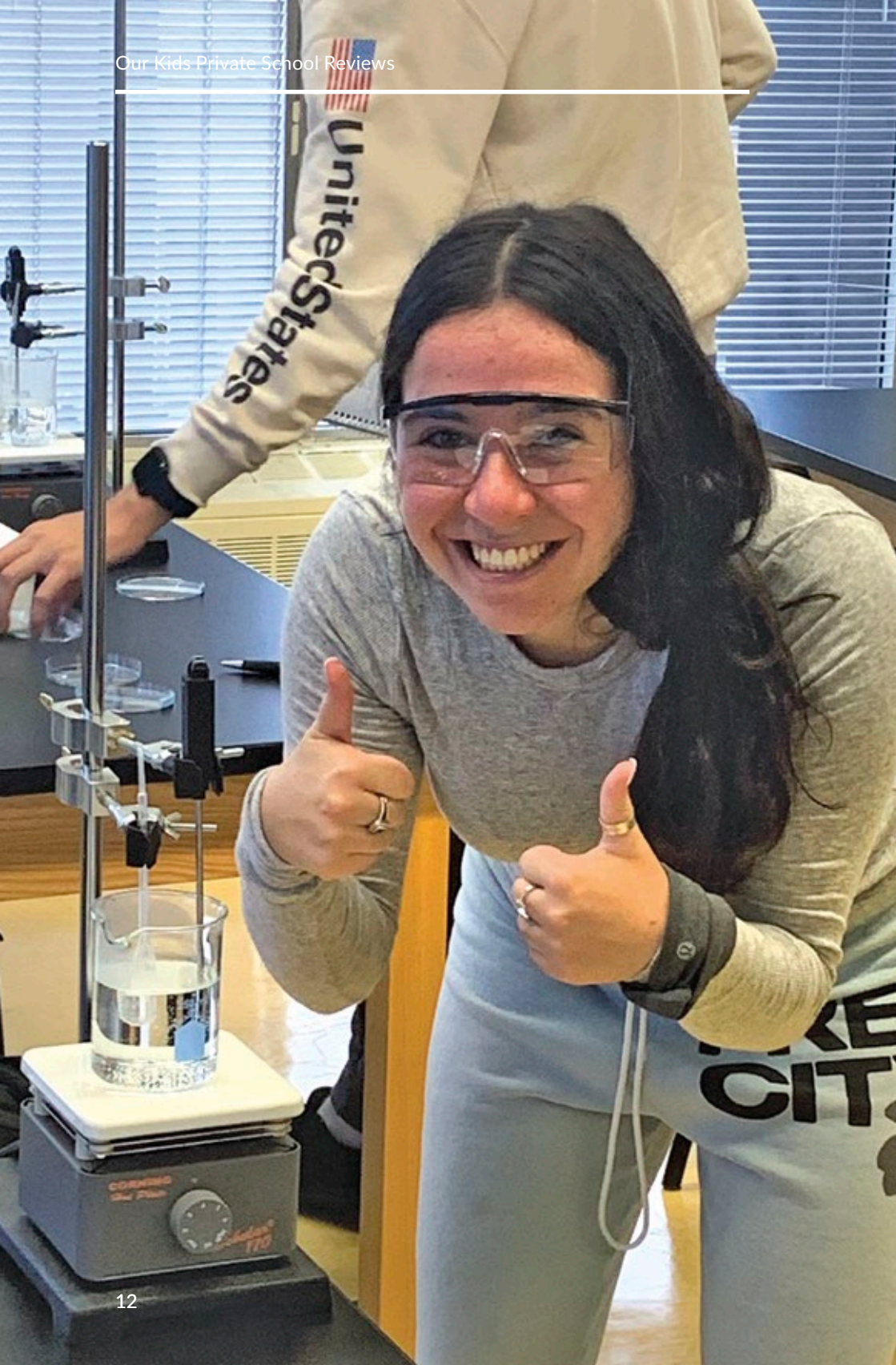
Developmental Priorities: Balanced, Intellectual

Curriculum: Traditional

Curriculum Pace: Standard-enriched

Academic Culture: Rigorous

Avg. Class Size: 14 to 16



Introduction

You won't find any of the trappings of traditional private education at Toronto Prep School—no uniforms, manicured lawns, or stately architecture. It's a modern institution to its core, firmly rooted in the realities of being an adolescent in today's world. This makes it a preparatory school in the truest sense. TPS meets students where they are academically and socially, ensuring they receive the individualized support they need to reach their post-secondary goals.

Individuality is a guiding principle at TPS, says Principal Pete Tsimikalis. "Getting to know the strengths and challenges of every student is our priority. Nobody gets lost in the crowd here." In short, this isn't a place for kids who like to stay under the radar and minimize their engagement with the school community.

Teachers know the names of all 430-odd kids across Grades 7 to 12, which contributes to the strong school-wide sense of community. In all our interviews, the word most commonly used to describe the feel of TPS was "warm." Sandra Birkett, head of the English Department, says this warmth comes from the top down and shows up in the general atmosphere. "The administration and teachers model a friendly, welcoming approach, and it definitely trickles down to the students. The kids here are just happy to come to school every day. In the morning, you'll see them wandering into teachers' rooms to say good morning and how are you—whether or not they have a class with that teacher."

It's no coincidence that TPS has a family-like culture. Former

principal Steve Tsimikalis, who died suddenly in September 2021, and his wife Fouli, Head of Admissions, founded the school together in 2009. Their son Pete, who became principal at the start of the 2021–2022 academic year, was previously Assistant Head of Admissions, while their daughter Maria is Head of Guidance.

In our tour around the school with Pete, just a week after losing his father, the new principal pointed out how his father's legacy can be seen and felt everywhere. From the impressive new addition to the facilities completed last year to the values of hard work and integrity that permeate the TPS culture, Steve's impact is readily apparent. We interviewed Steve a few months before he passed away and have kept many of his comments in this review because of the profound and lasting influence he had in shaping TPS over 12 years.

The teachers we spoke to said that they're treated like extended family. "Staff meetings often feel like family dinners," said Steve, in describing the work culture at TPS. "There's lots of laughter, but also straight talk about how we're all meeting our obligations to provide an optimal possible learning environment for our students." According to Pete, workplace politics don't get in the way of the school's mission. "We voice our opinions freely, sometimes disagree, but have a shared commitment to the students that overrides everything."

One parent says she chose TPS because it was immediately apparent that they "get" families. "The instant we met Fouli and Steve, we felt the warmth and friendliness and the genuine interest in not just our child, but also in us. They invest in the whole family. They're close-knit themselves and we wanted a nurturing, welcoming environment for our child." Other parents echoed this sense that the school genuinely cares for each individual student: "For us, TPS was a place where we felt our daughter would be completely supported during her high school years in whatever way she needed and wanted to become her best self."

And it's not just parents who appreciate the caring community. Several students commented on the school's unique vibe. "When

we talk about the TPS family we don't mean the Tsimikalis family," says one Grade 11 student who has been at the school since Grade 7. "It's about how students feel a sense of belonging and connection here. It comes down to the school's size—not too big but not too small—and the way the teachers and administration treat us with respect and kindness."

The Tsimikalis family made a big decision in 2020 to enrich the learning environment at TPS by opting to join the Globeducate network of international schools. The network includes over 28,000 students in more than 55 schools and online programs in Canada, Spain, France, Italy, the UK, India, Portugal, and Malaysia. "We'd taken our school to a certain level and were looking for a way to expand our students' international opportunities," said Steve, who made this pivotal decision with his family and TPS staff members. "We were lacking in exchange programs, for example, and now we can offer phenomenal exchanges across the world."

Once pandemic travel restrictions are lifted, student will have the chance to participate in international academic competitions and events focusing on sports, music, and art. Until then, there are many virtual programs to choose from that expand the school's already substantial extracurricular options. TPS encourages every student to belong to at least one activity or group, which range from the standard offerings—such as chess, math, photography, debating, and art clubs—to the more unique—such as comics and gaming, investors, Jewish culture, and tea clubs.

In the classroom there's a strong emphasis on creating the right learning experience for every type of learner. "The culture is supportive and encouraging, no matter what academic level you're at," says Educational Strategist Adam Rosenbaum. His full-time job is to guide and mentor both teachers and students as they find the most effective educational approach. You don't need straight As to get into TPS, but you do need to demonstrate a willingness to work hard and improve with the wide range of academic support available. "Our philosophy is that students' work ethic should

always exceed their talent and intellect,” said Steve, articulating his often-repeated belief on student achievement. “If they’re maxing out their work ethic, we’ll be happy with whatever results they get, whether it’s going from a 60 per cent average to 70 or a 94 to 95.”

The academic program is rigorous and geared to preparing students for post-secondary education (99 per cent go on to attend university). Yet both teachers and students agree that the culture is more supportive than competitive. “It’s not that there’s no competition,” says one senior student. “But it never gets to the point of being detrimental to ourselves or others.” For the size of the school, the range of electives in high school is impressive. “TPS offers truly exciting and diversified classes, covering a vast array of topics today’s students are most interested in,” says the parent of one graduate.

The teaching approach at TPS is rooted in the conviction that strong teacher-student relationships are the foundation for learning. “My dad always said that true learning only occurs when teachers push students beyond their comfort zones,” says Pete. “But he also said that students need to trust their teachers and believe they have students’ best interests at heart for it to work.”

A steady current of character education runs throughout not just the academic program, but the whole school. As one parent puts it, “It’s not that kind of showy display of character education in marketing material and posters. It’s more baked into the culture and quietly present in everything. Everyone is expected to treat each other with respect.” It’s readily apparent that respect is the most important value at TPS, and instilling it is a top priority. According to another parent: “There’s an overriding element of conscious mutual respect that’s both modelled by the staff among themselves and with the parents, as well as expected by the students to both staff and other students. Kids simply do not get away with behaviour that’s disrespectful to themselves and others.”

1

Background and basics

When Steve and Fouli Tsimikalis launched TPS in 2009, they had 25 and 20 years respectively of teaching and administrative experience at another private prep school in Toronto. Steve said those were good years and they felt proud of what they accomplished there, but they’d long dreamed of striking out on their own. “We wanted to take all the great things we’d learned and apply them in a new school—but with some nuances,” he said.

Their timing was less than ideal, coming on the heels of the recession, but they were willing to take the risk. Pete Tsimikalis remembers that his parents spent the spring before the school’s fall launch visiting people’s homes to talk about TPS. “They were going to parents and saying they could help their children become better students at their new school, but they didn’t have a location or teachers yet,” he says. “It’s really a testament to their reputation and passion for the project that over 70 families said yes.”

By September, they’d secured the current location and a staff that included several teachers who are still there today (some followed them from their old school). In terms of the student body, it was carefully hand-selected. “We didn’t have an entrance exam, and we never introduced one,” said Steve. “We’re not academic snobs, but we may be character snobs. We turned away at least 20 students that first year because they weren’t a good fit. They weren’t bad kids, but we didn’t see them putting in the effort we expected or being respectful community members.”

By the end of the first year, TPS had grown to more than 90 students, and it didn't take long to reach today's population of 400-plus students. The facilities evolved in tandem, but class sizes remained fixed at 16 or fewer. The Tsimikalis children, Pete and Maria, joined the school in its early years, cementing it as a family business. While they acknowledge that this arrangement wouldn't work for some families, they see it as a distinct advantage and key to the school's success.

Pete points out that, even with Steve gone, the family still has a multi-generational perspective, which balances Fouli's experience and wisdom alongside his and his sister's more youthful take on education in today's world. He also says there's a healthy separation of roles within the family. "We each do our own thing during the day, then we debrief after school and tackle the important issues."

TPS is located on two stories of a low-rise office building at the corner of Davisville Avenue and Mount Pleasant Road in midtown Toronto. Across the street on one side is a good-sized green space, June Rowlands Park, while the recently renovated Greenwood College School sits on the other corner. Principal Pete Tsimikalis says the clear view of Greenwood's state-of-the-art campus is a constant reminder that TPS's strength lies in its teachers, not its building or grounds. "We know we can't compete with their facilities, and we don't try," he says. "We often look over and laugh a bit. It keeps us humble, but also proud of what we have here. If students and families are set on a campus surrounded by green fields, we're not the school for them."

While you might not guess that there's a school in the building from the outside, once inside it's surprisingly easy to forget you're in an office building. "When I give tours to prospective families, they often comment that it has a university feel to it," says Pete. While one of the hallways is shared with other tenants in the building, the rest of the space is exclusively for TPS students. The classrooms are spacious and bright—many with floor-to-ceiling windows, such as

the art studio and the cafeteria for Grade 7 and 8 students. There are multiple student lounges and communal gathering areas with couches and other comfortable seating. Championship banners and truly impressive student artwork line almost every corridor. In some areas, there are so many paintings that it could pass for an avant-garde gallery.

In 2020, an expansion brought the school from approximately 42,000 square feet to 60,000, with a new theatre that boasts its own control/lighting booth, a fully-equipped fitness facility, a STEM lab, and a media lab complete with a full green room—not just a green screen—for video production. Still, there are limits to what can be done within the confines of an office building. So the school takes full advantage of the plentiful supply of amenities nearby. Students sometimes take their sports outside to neighbouring parks. Pre-COVID awards nights and the prom took place at the Eglinton Grand event venue, while commencement ceremonies were usually at the Ontario Science Centre.

The school day runs from 10 a.m. to 4:10 p.m. Mondays to Thursdays and 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Fridays. Teachers are always available for extra help from 9 a.m. to 10 a.m. The later start is based on the science of the teenage brain, says Pete. "When he started the school, my dad did a lot of reading on adolescent sleep patterns because he'd recognized over his years teaching high school that teens avoid morning classes. Their brains are wired to stay up late and sleep in, and this is our way of accommodating their peak learning times."

While TPS may not look like your traditional private school, it maintains one time-honoured custom: the House System. With four houses named after Greek mythological creatures (think Centaur and Phoenix), it's a framework for intramural, athletic, charity fundraising, and community competitions. Students receive points for their Houses when they participate in any aspect of TPS life, from volunteer work and good deeds to academic achievement.



Leadership

Even though TPS is now officially a Globeducate school, it's still the same place that Steve and Fouli Tsimikalis created. According to everyone we spoke to, they've always been the heart and soul of the place. The Tsimikalis's unwavering dedication to the school allowed it to grow and evolve quickly, says Mariola Mayer, Head of the Art and Fashion Design Department. "They're innovative, always trying different things to make the school better. It's truly impressive how much they've expanded our offerings to students in such a short time."

Steve Kinnear, who joined the school a year after it launched and is now Head of the Math Department, says Steve and Fouli were mentors and visionaries from the outset. "We were essentially a start-up, and start-ups depends on their leaders to succeed. They got us from our relatively humble beginnings to where we are today."

Newly minted principal Pete Tsimikalis was a close witness to those early days, as TPS was at the centre of his family's life in many ways. He was part of the Admissions Department, working alongside his mother Fouli, even before TPS officially opened its doors. It was a busy time, as he was still playing professional hockey. After an all-star career in the Ontario Hockey League, he played in the American Hockey League and in Sweden before retiring in 2011.

With professional sports behind him, Pete directed his energies to post-secondary education, earning an undergraduate degree at the University of Toronto and a master's degree at the University of Oxford. Today he's working toward his PhD at the University of Toronto, focusing on ancient Greek and Hebrew texts. Part of his doctoral work involves teaching at the university. "All of my academic experiences have deepened my understanding of the expectations TPS students will confront in the years ahead, and how we can best equip them to succeed," he says.

During our tour, Pete highlighted the changes he's made in his office to make it his own while still honouring the legacy of his father, who occupied it for 12 years. He's maintained a dedicated

swathe of wall space dedicated to rotating student art, for example. Students take great pride in having their work displayed here, and he has no intention of changing that. There are also several family photos, but one in particular stands out: a colourful pop art portrait of the elder, Steve Tsimikalis. "Before he passed away, my dad asked me to hang it in here so he could always be watching over my shoulder as I took on the job of principal," he says. "I had no idea how meaningful it would soon become."

Pete operates according to a set of beliefs about education passed down from his grandmother. Steve's parents were immigrants from Greece. His father died with Steve was 2 years old. Raising him alone on social assistance, she always put his education first and instilled in him her belief that education opens up more choices in life. Tsimikalis notes that his father shared his story with TPS students as part of his effort to inspire a sense of gratitude and responsibility in this relatively privileged group. "He wanted them to be aware of their parents' effort and investment in getting them to TPS," he says. "I plan to continue sharing this message and reminding them to say thank you through their hard work."

Another practice Pete intends to uphold is his father's commitment to being firmly entrenched in the daily life of the school. "My dad never hid away in his office, and neither will I," he says. Walking the halls during our tour, he knew the name of nearly every student we encountered, and there was no tell-tale chilling effect when we wandered unannounced into classrooms in full swing.

While he's carrying on many family traditions at TPS, Pete is, of course, leading the school from the vantage point of a younger generation. His energy and enthusiasm suggest there may be some new or refreshed approaches on the way. He conveys a deep commitment to many of the leading issues confronting young people today, for example, including Indigenous reconciliation, anti-Black racism, and equity for LGBTQ+ communities. Not that these matters weren't addressed at the school before, but it will be interesting to see what comes next.

2

Academics

In keeping with TPS's emphasis on individualized education, the academic program is demanding yet adaptable enough to support students at both the mid and highest ranges of ability. The school's aim, quite simply, is to maximize every student's personal potential so they can gain the skills needed to succeed in university. The teachers and admin we spoke to admitted that this resembles a platitude, but they agree it's the school's main differentiator. "We're not a school with a single academic specialty, like science or arts or business," says Head of Science Eric Oest. "Where we excel is in giving a push to students who are bright yet—this may sound like a cliché—not living up to their ability and getting lost in the crowd. In our small classes it's impossible to be anonymous. We hold every student to high standards and expect them to achieve their personal best."

It starts in the senior elementary program, where each of the core courses in Grade 7 also explicitly includes instruction in study skills ranging from note-taking and test prep to proper use of a textbook and time management. In Grade 8, a course on information and communication technology in a business environment supplements the main curriculum. Students develop vital 21st-century capabilities such as designing websites, producing digital presentations, creating spreadsheets, managing databases, and more.

The whole school operates under the semester system, something that may be new to students in Grades 7 and 8, who will likely be used to their classes running the whole year. In the spirit of being a

preparatory school, TPS believes that adapting to the semester system as early as possible better equips students for learning within this model in high school and university. In a similar vein, students in the upper grades can gain experience in seminar-style courses common in humanities at the post-secondary level, where round-table discussions are mostly student-led.

Acquiring broad, flexible skill sets is the overarching goal at TPS, says Tsimikalis. "Content is no longer king in education. Now it's about what you can do with your knowledge. We want our students to have a strong arsenal of relevant skills for the future." With the Ontario curriculum as the baseline, the school takes a flexible, dynamic approach to delivering both core and elective courses. In the English department, for example, Head Sandra Birkett says she and her colleagues are constantly evolving the course content to align with students' interests and concerns, new media developments, and the social landscape. "We sit down every year to look at the new literature that's been published and what's come up in pop culture. Then we consider what students would benefit from reading, and why and how we should add new elements. We also consider student feedback on what's worked and what hasn't in the past year." TPS takes the same approach in designing new elective courses for students in high school. Student interests are the driving force, but so are trends in post-secondary education and the workforce.

For its size, the school punches above its weight in the number and variety of electives. Giving students plenty of chances to explore their talents and interests aligns with the school's emphasis on cultivating the whole individual—their character, social and emotional well-being, and physical health. In keeping with this philosophy, the academic culture is intentionally non-competitive. The teachers we spoke to agreed that they downplay grades and discourage comparisons with other students' marks. "Without that cloud of competition hanging over the school environment, it's just a more joyful, healthy place for everyone," says Birkett.

Not to say that there's any complacency in the academic culture.

There are strong, consistent expectations that students will complete their in-class assignments and homework, coupled with standardized consequences for failing to do so. Being required to attend the Saturday Club (see Academic support below) is one such outcome. “The academic program was tough but fair,” says one parent of a recent graduate. “Students were set up to succeed and they did their best to do that. They had to completely take responsibility for it too. I never did homework again with my child.”

One Grade 11 student we spoke to said there’s a healthy amount of academic striving among students. “It’s not at a level that’s detrimental. It’s more in line with the value TPS places on hard work. Our teachers emphasize that the process—what you put into your assignments—is more important than the single outcome of your grade.”

We noted a school-wide focus on continuous academic improvement. “All the kids want to do well, naturally,” says Educational Strategist Adam Rosenbaum. “But our key message is that you only compare yourself to yourself. This idea becomes ingrained, and it’s not unusual to find students’ marks going up 10 per cent over the year before they arrived.”

Art and fashion design

You can’t help but notice the array of vibrant student art displayed on the walls throughout TPS. It’s not a seasonal or special exhibition, just a day-to-day presentation of student talent. Walking the halls, it’s hard not to be impressed by the calibre—or sheer volume—of work.

The real depth and diversity of student works come out at the annual Arts Night, a celebration of visual arts, multimedia installations, and music. “The arts are deeply valued here,” says Mariola Mayer, Head of Art and Fashion Design. “The fact that student pieces are showcased throughout the halls is just one example of the strong support the admin

offers our program. This investment shows up in the incredible skills our students develop. We have people come to our Arts Night that aren’t family members—they’re just looking to purchase the students’ work. It’s that good.” Mayer is most proud of the fact that several TPS students have gained entrance to prestigious arts schools not just in Canada, but in the U.S. (Parsons) and U.K. (St. Martin School).

Beyond the traditional visual arts, TPS offers fashion design courses in a separate, light-filled studio containing sewing machines, dress forms, and other tools used in the field. Mayer, a former designer with an international career, brings her experience to bear in these classes. “My time in the fashion industry and teaching at the university level allows me to share what the real world of fashion is like in terms of the hard work and standards of professionalism,” she says. “Students learn the language of fashion, the business, and the practical aspects of cutting and sewing garments.”

The school’s music and drama departments come together each year for a lavish musical theatre production, which is also attended by members of the local community beyond TPS families. Students’ interest in musical theatre has grown so much over the years that the school began offering courses specifically in musical theatre, and TPS’s recent expansion included the addition of a new theatre.

Athletics

Sports are important at TPS and have a central place in student life, but there are no free passes for student athletes. “Our family has always put a high value on athletics in our own lives, but we consider them an adjunct to education, which is the first priority,” says Pete, who has always coached several TPS teams and draws on his experience as a former professional athlete. “Our rule here is that participation in sports teams is a privilege, not a right. You do all your schoolwork and you’re a respectful member of the TPS community, or you’re not playing.”



TPS is happy to accommodate elite-level athletes who require extended time off school, but only if they're willing to put in the effort to work ahead of their planned absences. "We don't play catch-up when it comes to sports," says Tsimikalis. "It's the same for any extracurricular activity, whether it's going on auditions or travelling for concerts."

"We encourage every student to make physical activity an integral part of their lives at TPS, whether that's working out in our brand-new fitness facility with our certified trainers or joining a team"

In addition to artwork, the school's halls are lined with banners for the red and grey TPS Spartans. The school is a member of the Small Schools Athletic Federation (SSAF) and the Toronto District College Athletic Association (TDCAA), which includes membership in the Ontario Federation of School Athletic Associations (OFSAA). For a relatively small school, TPS has put in a good showing in these leagues, especially in skiing, snowboarding, swimming, cross-country, tennis, and track and field. Hockey is another area of strength, with two wins in the York University Hockey Tournament Championships. An annual Athletic + Spirit Awards Night equals the Arts Night in celebrating student athletic achievements. On the less competitive side, an annual winter tradition has evolved over the years in recreational hockey. TPS staff and students meet every Wednesday morning at Leaside Gardens for a game. "Everyone is welcome, regardless of their skills—or lack thereof," says Pete. "It's all for fun."

The school offers about 20 sports and 48 teams in a regular year, with all the basics covered and a few you might not expect (bowling, curling, and golf). "We encourage every student to make physical activity an integral part of their lives at TPS, whether that's working out in our brand-new fitness facility with our certified trainers or joining a team," says Tsimikalis. Over 65 per cent of

students typically take part in competitive or recreational athletics.

Most TPS teachers coach at least one team, an intentional move on the part of the admin to develop strong teacher-student relationships outside the classroom. “It allows us to get to know students in a different way,” says Tsimikalis. “The team dynamic is different from the academic course dynamic. It’s more lighthearted and fun, and that experience of having fun at school is known to make kids want to be at school and do well.”

Pedagogical approach

While TPS welcomes students who may never get As despite their best efforts, it also has its fair share of high-achievers who end up at top universities in Canada and beyond. Accommodating this academic diversity drives the individualized approach. “We make lots of room for students who are excelling by giving them creative outlets to explore concepts and skills that are related to, but beyond, the core curriculum,” says Kinnear. “At the same time, we’re there for the kids who are struggling, finding the most effective methods to help them understand.” One parent we spoke to says it’s not unusual for TPS teachers to completely revamp the standard course material to make it more engaging and accessible for all students. “They work outrageously hard to ensure every child reaches understanding of the content,” she says.

Several teachers said that creativity and collaboration among teachers across the grades and strong communication with parents are key to meeting the needs of different learners. “We start by observing and assessing exactly where students are in terms of their skills and knowledge,” says Oest. “Then it’s about boosting their confidence by working with them in their areas of strength and building capacity where they’re having trouble.” For those students who need more help than teachers can provide in-class time, TPS has a full program of extra support available (see Academic Support below).

The teaching philosophy also relies heavily on relational learning, which involves fostering strong teacher-student relationships. This requires that teachers be willing to invest the emotional energy it takes to truly know their students beyond what they see on the surface in class. Pete says he chooses new hires based not only on their experience and qualifications, but on their dedication to going above and beyond. “That’s my number one condition—that they’re passionate teachers. They have to believe that, if you support students and hold them accountable, they can do amazing things.”

TPS parents and students who contributed to this review couldn’t say enough about the depth of commitment to students shown by teaching faculty and the positive, nurturing environment that creates. “By far the best thing at TPS for me was the teachers,” says one recent graduate (repeating a common sentiment among her peers). “They seemed to really care about teaching and it didn’t feel to me like it was just a job to them.” The parents we spoke to also felt that the teachers genuinely cared about their children. “The students are heard at TPS,” says one. “They’re seen, cared for, and liked. When a child feels this foundation of care is prevalent, they want to attend school and inevitably do very well.”

Like all schools in today’s digital-first environment, technology has a pervasive presence in TPS’s pedagogical approach. Tuition includes a MacBook Pro laptop or iPad with specialized educational software. Transitions into and out of pandemic lockdowns were essentially seamless, according to the parents and students we spoke to, and hybrid learning options were available. For the 2021–2022 year, however, the school decided to shift back to full in-person learning—with a few exceptions for extenuating circumstances.

Overall, it seems TPS teachers view technology as a tool to enrich and supplement more traditional teaching strategies, not replace them entirely. “Technology doesn’t make everything better,” says Birkett. “There are times when it’s important to put the computer down and pick up your book and pen to learn the same way students did 100 years ago. We have a really nice balance, where

we take the value from all the cool tech resources that are available now while preserving the value from more traditional resources.”

The teachers themselves have very positive things to say about their colleagues’ dedication and about the collegial atmosphere among the staff. The retention rate is high, with many teachers either having been there from the school’s start or shortly thereafter. A strong professional development program ensures every staff member—veteran or fresh out of teachers’ college—stays current. Beyond the usual PD courses, however, TPS brings in experts on new and emerging social issues that directly affect students. “We love to bring in outside people who are leaders in their fields to help us all understand how to talk about sensitive topics and handle students’ concerns,” says Pete. Most recently, TPS invited experts on anti-Black racism and gender diversity to speak to the faculty.

Academic support

The morning bell may ring at 10 a.m. at TPS, but all teachers are in their classrooms every day at 9 a.m. to provide extra help and test preparation. After school, individual subject tutoring and coaching is available from 4:30 p.m. to 6 p.m. Then there’s the Saturday Club, which runs from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. every weekend, except on holidays and long weekends. Students can take the initiative to attend any of these sessions on their own or be mandated to attend by teachers and/or parents. It’s a network of support that’s integral to the school’s conviction that, if students’ efforts exceed their abilities, they will maximize their potential.

“In the earlier grades, we’re quite prescriptive about what students must do to improve their performance,” says Rosenbaum. “We don’t tell them they need to do better in math, for example. We tell them they need to stay after school a certain number of times each week and attend the Saturday Club until they have a firm grasp of whatever concept is giving them a hard time.” Students

with diagnosed learning differences who might require Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) with curriculum accommodations (not modifications) are welcome at TPS, but it’s not just them accessing the extra assistance. It’s also students who need to edge up their already high marks to qualify for elite university programs.

Once students are in the higher grades, they’re encouraged to self-advocate and seek help on their own when they need it. “We back off on the prescriptive approach to foster the independence students will need in university,” says Rosenbaum. But no student is ever off the radar at TPS. “We have policies that ensure transparency and communication with parents when marks fall below certain levels, but I always put the marks in context of the effort it took to achieve them,” he says.

The school seems to have fully embedded academic support in the TPS culture, so much so that there’s relatively little stigma attached to it. Rosenbaum says students have normalized the routine of getting help when necessary, and some have voluntarily made it part of their daily routine. For those who prefer more privacy, there are smaller break-out rooms available in the after-school and Saturday programs. Everyone we spoke to agreed that Grade 11 and 12 students tend to be the largest consumers of extra help as they work to increase their grades for university applications.

According to one student and his parent, the school’s approach to academic support is practical and can benefit students at any level of achievement. “I initially thought that TPS was a sort of remedial school, which was completely wrong,” says the parent. “In fact, they just take a common-sense approach to giving every kid everything they need to help them learn to the best of their ability. For us, this was more of an opportunity than a necessity.” According to her son, the extra hour of teacher assistance each morning made all the difference. “You can count on that help always being there, and you don’t have to come in at lunch or make special arrangements,” he says. “It was really beneficial for me.”



Post-secondary preparation

True to its name, TPS provides students with comprehensive support on the path to post-secondary education. “We’re incredibly involved in terms of long-term planning and facilitating applications,” says Head of Guidance, Maria Tsimikalis. “It’s essentially a one-to-one process with students.” The school’s university placement rate is a testament to the success of this method.

In the early grades of high school, meetings with guidance counsellors are generally informal and ad hoc. Things get serious within the first two weeks of Grade 12, when students receive an individualized package of documents to help in the selection of schools and programs. “At this point, we start narrowing down their ideas and ambitions,” says Maria. “We map these to potential programs and assess their feasibility and suitability based on the student’s personal profile.” Subsequent meetings involve a transcript analysis and setting goals for the interim reporting period.

The result of these preliminary meetings is a list of programs matched to students’ specific interests, marks, and objectives. “I think this is where we set ourselves apart from other schools,” Maria states. “We give students lots of time at the table and lots of individualized attention. As much as the guidance counsellors encourage students’ sense of agency in decision-making, however, parents are invited to attend at least one meeting in Grade 12. “They’re a vital part of the whole discussion, and the school always prioritizes full transparency with families,” says Fleming.

Close interaction between students, parents, and guidance counsellors continues through to December, when the formal application process launches. He and the other TPS guidance counsellors carefully review every application and provide assistance with essay editing and other fine-tuning as needed.

Globeducate

As a member of the Globeducate network of more than 50 international schools, TPS offers students and teachers unique opportunities to learn with and from their peers worldwide. “For the staff, it means we can collaborate with colleagues from a wide range of educational settings,” says Rosenbaum. “We can see what types of teaching approaches are working for them in their part of the world, share our own experiences, and tackle common challenges together. For TPS students, this partnership opens up so many exciting avenues to create contacts with kids from other countries and join forces to explore global issues.”

Between now and 2022, all Globeducate schools are working toward Eco-Schools’ “Green Flag” status, a globally recognized benchmark for promoting sustainability in education. TPS is the latest Canadian school to join the Eco-Schools Program, and it’s currently hard at work on an environmental strategy aimed at achieving the International Green Flag Award. The 2030 Globeducate Agenda underwrites the United Nations Global Sustainable Development Goals, and discussion of these goals is central to many Globeducate student events.

Throughout the academic year, Globeducate runs international events where schools from different countries visit the host school to participate. These include a Model United Nations, an Academic Olympics, a Virtual Arts Competition, a week-long music festival, Olympic games, and a leadership summit. TPS students interested in honing their French or Spanish language skills can take part in a variety of Globeducate exchanges and visits, including summer courses at schools in Paris and Spain.

3

Student population

TPS is a neighbourhood school, with at least three-quarters of students living within five kilometres of campus. “We’re not a destination school, so our demographics are the demographics of the surrounding area,” says Tsimikalis. There’s also a growing legacy component in the student population, which speaks well of the Tsimikalis’s reputation. “About 25 of our current students are the children of students my parents taught early in their career. Trusting us with their kids is the greatest compliment we can get.”

By all accounts available to us, TPS students are mostly friendly, welcoming, and accepting. “There are strong, trusting relationships between students and staff, but also between students,” says Birkett. “The students genuinely like being together at school. It’s very evident in all the classes I’ve taught over the years. I’ve honestly never had any issues come up when I put them into groups for assignments, which is a bit of a snapshot of the culture of the student body. It creates a lovely environment for teachers, but also for students.” Several parents commented that their children felt a sense of comfort and security at TPS: “The students are well-behaved because of the school’s small size. Our daughters felt safe from bullying and disrespect because there was an attitude of respect and responsibility.”

The admissions criteria (see Getting in below) play a central role in curating the study body, and the Tsimikalis family has no qualms about turning away students they don’t deem to be a good

fit with the culture. “Since the school leaders are very selective when it comes to students’ character traits, we generally just have good kids here,” says Kinnear. “There’s no sense of academic elitism in TPS students. They’re all here because they want to do better—wherever they’re starting from. This creates a comfortable, welcoming atmosphere for everyone.” In our observations, there was no internal hierarchy among students in terms of athletes, academic high-achievers, and those leaning toward the arts. In the words of one student, “TPS is more of a mix of everything. If you want arts, they have tons of arts. If you want sports or academics, it’s all there too.”

Former principal Steve Tsimikalis took a straightforward approach to discipline, which no doubt played a role in establishing a positive environment. Pete Tsimikalis plans to do the same. “Like my dad, I maintain a strong presence around the school, and the kids know I expect them to carry themselves in a certain way, whether that’s in the classroom or on the field,” he says. But TPS is not a “one strike and you’re out” kind of place. With first transgressions, students get the opportunity to learn from their mistakes. As one student says, “This is a really positive environment. We don’t focus on the negatives, but instead on the lessons that come out of things.”

Each school year at TPS traditionally begins with a school-wide, three-day trip to an overnight camp just north of Toronto. It’s both an orientation for new students and a reunion for returning students, but mostly it’s a chance for the whole TPS community to strengthen the bonds they value so much. “Getting out of the city and staying together in a completely different setting allows students and teachers to get to know one another in a much looser, often sillier, way,” says Birkett. “The connections we build there last all year.” There’s an opportunity for everyone to take part in a wide variety of outdoor camp activities. More structured leadership exercises, survival training, and co-operative challenges are also part of the trip, and it’s the official kick-off to the TPS House competitions.

4

Wellness and care

Reinforced by a supportive academic culture that discourages competition and encourages support-seeking, the school pays close attention to the full spectrum of students' well-being. "The staff seemingly have some sort of innate radar that's able to detect when a child could benefit from extra attention, whether that attention is focused on the child's understanding of the subject at hand, or whether attention is required to assist the child with an emotional situation," says one parent. It's not hard to see how this "radar" develops, if you speak to the teachers. They simply know the students well, so they know when things aren't right.

"they wanted us to be good people. They'd always ask, 'How are you? What are your plans this week?'"

Students may find support from faculty and admin staff. There's school-wide messaging that assures students that the entire faculty is available for counselling on educational, career, or personal issues. Of course, this only works if students trust their teachers and have that comfort level with them. And the students we spoke to do. "I would say that all teachers and admin were generally interested in the well-being of their students," says one TPS graduate. "Yes, academically they wanted you to do well, but that wasn't their only

priority. You're more than a mark and they wanted us to be good people. They'd always ask, 'How are you? What are your plans this week?' I always felt that was genuine." According to another: "If you need help with literally anything, any time—even if it's for a different class—they would always be there." Parents also say they value the faculty's accessibility. "There was always an open-door policy," says the parent of one grad. "It was a family dynamic that students became a part of. Their emotional well-being was important and help was right there."

Students can always go straight to a guidance counsellor if they prefer, or a teacher may direct them there if a situation escalates and requires external referrals for support. In the area of university applications, for example, there's a lot of intimidation these days around the grades kids think they need." To alleviate students' stress and manage unrealistic expectations, the Guidance Department helps them adopt a more realistic approach by examining all of the options.

The school's Wellness Centre is a large, bright room with space for individual or group yoga, meditation, and wellness speakers. Beyond this dedicated room, the school's plentiful gathering/lounging spots promote balance, according to one parent. "TPS fosters mental and emotional well-being in students by establishing beautiful spaces where kids can unwind, sit around on couches or at a small table, roll out a yoga mat, and rest."

Outreach

The immense value TPS places on community and family extends beyond the school's walls. "From day one, we make it clear that giving back is part of being a TPS student," says Tsimikalis. One fact alone demonstrates the school's commitment in this area: TPS is consistently in the top 10 per capita schools for fundraising in the Terry Fox Run. The parents we spoke to appreciate this aspect of

students' all-around education. "The school has huge community involvement and tries to instill a sense of ethics and community service to others in all students," says one. "They make it their mission to support a wide variety of organizations."

Well aware that TPS students are generally from privileged backgrounds, and, having been raised by a single mother who struggled to make ends meet, former principal Steve Tsimikalis consistently reminded them not to take their good fortune for granted. "I have no patience for anyone who wastes their advantages," he said. "I want our students to take what they've been given and make the best of it by working hard not only to improve their own situation, but the situation of the community at large."

To formalize students' contributions, the school goes above and beyond Ontario's requirement of 40 hours of community service by high school graduation, aiming for 100 hours. The school helps students fulfill these requirements by organizing regular outreach and service events within the school (touring prospective families or tutoring and coaching younger students, for example) and outside (volunteering or raising funds for local charities).

5 Getting in

TPS's admissions criteria align with their core values, so students are selected based on respect, effort, and responsibility as much as previous academic performance. As Pete says, "A kid with a 65 per cent average who works really hard and is eager to learn—give me 100 of them. A kid who has 90 per cent, believes they know everything and won't speak to you—not for us."

Before he became principal, Pete worked alongside his mother Fouli, who leads the admissions team. She's always taken an inclusive, not exclusive, approach in considering prospective students. "The reason we ask for all the paperwork is so we can really dig in and get to know a student and their family, all in hopes of determining whether they're a good fit," he says. The application package material includes a student's statement, parents' statement, teacher and community referrals, previous report cards, student records, and Individual Education Plans and psychoeducational assessments (if applicable).

There's no entrance test, which again fits with the school's philosophy of evaluating academic performance in a wider context. "We should be able to assess a student's academic aptitude from all the documentation they supply," says Pete. "There's a wealth of long-term, personalized information in there. A single, standardized test that students cram for, on the other hand, is often not a great reflection of their true capacity."

While TPS prides itself on accepting students who may have



been under-performing at their previous schools, the expectation is that every student will be capable of managing academic-level courses and aiming to go to university. “We’re completely transparent with prospective parents,” says Rosenbaum. “We do offer a lot of support to students who struggle in a moderate way, but we don’t have the capacity to give students who might be lower functioning what they need to succeed. Over-promising isn’t fair to anyone.”

Interviews with prospective students and parents, together and individually, are a critical component of the admissions process. Unlike standardized tests, they can reveal at least a snapshot of students’ character, which is a pivotal factor in selecting the student body, says Pete. “We’re not shy about the fact that we’re selective when it comes to character. Observing how a student interacts with their parents and with us gives us a sense of their maturity and motivation and whether they’ll be receptive to our values and the supports we offer.”

Tuition is on par with schools of this size and focus and includes a MacBook Pro 13” with an extended 3-year warranty. There are no additional fees for the extended after-school academic help and Saturday Club programs. Parents can expect extra costs for extra-curricular activities such as field trips. The Parent Advisory Council requests a reasonable annual donation—about \$40—from each family to cover its operations.

6 Parents and alumni

Parents are considered an integral part of the TPS community, with open communication about students’ progress and/or struggles valued above all. There’s also a school-wide tech tool that makes this ideal possible. Students, parents, and teachers use a learning management system, which is available as a mobile app, that centralizes all aspects of the school experience. Teachers post their lesson plans, classroom materials, notes, and more, giving parents deeper insight into the daily goings-on. If they have questions, parents can message teachers directly. “Beyond Google Classroom, which everyone uses now, this system offers parents a much more granular view of what their kids are doing at school,” says Oest.

The TPS staff makes a point of getting to know each family well enough that the family feels comfortable reaching out if issues come up that might affect students’ well-being or academic performance. “We’re a family school, and we treat all the parents like family,” says Pete. While he acknowledges that some people might find this unprofessional, his mother Fouli offers her cell phone number to all parents. “If it’s an emergency about one of our kids, they can call at midnight.”

Maintaining a dialogue with parents is a fundamental part of the school’s academic support system. “It all goes back to our policy of transparency,” says Rosenbaum. “We make sure that we understand everything that’s going on—with reasonable limits due to

privacy—that could distract students from achieving to their potential.” Parents are kept firmly in the loop on important issues such as course selection and university applications while still preserving a strong element of self-advocacy among students.

There’s a parents’ association that organizes social events. One parent of a grad who came to TPS from the public school system says it was refreshing for parents not to be called upon to create a sense of community for students. “At TPS, the school took a huge part of the burden of supporting our children and their school experience and made it theirs. Parents were no longer needed as tutors, social conveners, or even fundraisers. Parents had little to actually DO in terms of needs of the school, but rather were able to create social community among their peers as they desired.” Other parents also commented positively on the social bonds among families at TPS. “The school has done a brilliant job of inviting parents to communicate and socialize with one another via various school-based events, and also with encouraging us to communicate outside of those events,” says one.

One of the school’s signature events is an evening of dinner and dancing at a Toronto restaurant for the graduating class and their parents. “We bring together the whole TPS family to celebrate and give out fun awards,” says Tsimikalis. “Kids dance with their parents—not something you see at most grad dinners.”

7 The Takeaway

A rigorous academic curriculum is at the core of the Toronto Prep School experience. The school is dedicated to providing a superior academic program for the children of parents who value the importance of knowledge, technology, individuality, responsibility, and integrity in a safe, nurturing, and highly motivated environment. Core values of hard work, personal responsibility, respect and leadership are also seen as an integral part of students’ success both at Toronto Prep and beyond.

Taking students beyond their comfort zone is seen as opening the pathway to success. For this reason, Toronto Prep doesn’t ask students to simply memorize facts but to have a deep understanding and apply the knowledge they’ve acquired. While a challenging curriculum encourages students to push themselves academically, character development is seen as equally important in the total educational experience. Admittance is not based on test scores alone, but demonstrations of good character, work habits and values of hard work, integrity and respect. The ideal student is one who arrives at the school with a clear sense of where they are going and is able to effectively manage their time and their schedule.

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“The teaching approach at TPS is rooted in the conviction that strong teacher-student relationships are the foundation for learning. ... a steady current of character education runs throughout not just the academic program, but the whole school.”

“While a challenging curriculum encourages students to push themselves academically, character development is seen as equally important in the total educational experience.”

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