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PRIVATE SCHOOL REVIEWS

Miss Edgar's & Miss Cramp's School

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

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Preface

"We are required to think very deeply in the world, not just absorb it and consume it."
— Lauren Aslin, head of 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 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 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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15. Lynn-Rose Heights Private School
16. Meadowridge School
17. Metropolitan Preparatory Academy
18. Miss Edgar's & Miss Cramp's School
19. Pickering College
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Location: Montreal, Quebec

Founded: 1909

Enrolment: 320

Grades: K to 11

Gender: Girls

Living Arrangements: Day

Language of Instruction: English, French

School Focus: Academic

Developmental Priorities: Intellectual, balanced

Curriculum: Progressive

Curriculum Pace: Accelerated

Academic Culture: Rigorous

Motto: Non Nobis Sed Urbi Et Orbi ("Not for ourselves but for the community and the world")

Introduction

Something that the best girls' schools share is a sense of iconoclasm, a quiet yet persistent revolutionary impulse. While it may not seem so at Miss Edgar's and Miss Cramp's School (ECS) at first—if you arrive in the morning on a school day, you'll see lots of crisp, smiling girls being greeted by crisp, smiling teachers—that's true here, too. It was founded in 1909 by Maud Edgar and Mary Cramp, two trailblazing educators who were determined to open a school—not just any school, mind you, but one that would advance the cause of gender rights and equality. It was the time of suffragism: as women, they couldn't own the property that the school inhabited, nor could they elect officials to change that law. Yet they forged ahead, believing to their core that the school would play a role in quite literally changing the world.

"We were created because girls weren't where they needed to be," says Lauren Aslin, the current head of school. And she adds that this is something that remains true today. Women are under-represented in some key aspects of the workforce, and their talents and their voices are under-utilized. "So, the job, the mission, is not done," she says. "If you're coming here, you're aware that your daughter is joining a milieu where she is going to work towards gender equity." The school is one where she'll be participating in "the spirit of activism, which of course is self-agency," and grow into a keen awareness "that your care and your advocacy can make a difference, even when you're young."

That's a big, important idea, and while the school addresses it head on, there's a playfulness, too. This is a place for young people, after all, and in the day to day, that's how it feels. When it was decided that pants should become a uniform option ("You know," says Aslin, "if a girl is crawling around doing robotics, she wants pants!"), Aslin organized five taxis to take students to clothing stores to try on options, take photographs, and then report back. Aslin herself accompanied the Pants Uniform Team, or P.U.T.: "I had in my taxi four girls and it was hard for them to go, try stuff on, and then step out and be photographed. So the first thing I did was try on pants that really didn't suit me. … I stepped out and they went 'Whoa!' and I said 'Bad eh!?'"

It's not a moment that is central to the life of the school, though it's telling in the way it exemplifies its culture. "We do things that way here," Aslin says, meaning collaboratively, creatively, maybe a bit quirkily, in the awareness that we are all different people, each with our own talents, personalities, and anxieties. From choosing uniforms to developing programs and curricula, it's a place that acknowledges that, in Aslin's words, "every girl has a learning profile," and that we all bring our own exceptionalities to whatever we do.

In terms of curriculum and delivery, ECS has long been a leader in girls' education, and it has continued the theme with the launch of the Entrepreneurial Platform in 2019. Founded upon a dedication to challenge-based learning and real-world application, girls engage in collaborative projects reflecting their personal areas of interest. They don't just imagine themselves as entrepreneurs, or learn about the means of building businesses in the abstract. Instead, they advance plans and meet with people who actually do those things, then work together to craft and execute solutions. A cornerstone of the program is an Entrepreneur in Residence. For the launch year, the Entrepreneur in Residence was Dr. Gina Cody. The program was somewhat dirsupted by the COVID pandemic, though the program and the intention behind it nevertheless says a

lot about the culture of the school. Cody was the first woman to earn a PhD in building engineering at Concordia University, and she went on to serve as executive chair and principal shareholder of CCI Group Inc., a Toronto-based engineering consulting firm. When she retired, she endowed Concordia with a gift to establish the Gina Cody School of Engineering and Computer Science—the first engineering faculty in Canada named after a woman, and indeed one of the first in the world.

Cody says that, at Concordia, "I was treated equally … being a female or being from another country didn't matter. It was how well I could perform." That ECS seeks to pair students with people like Cody says a lot about how they want the students to comport themselves in the world. This is a place where girls are asked to dream big, yet are also given opportunities to learn from people who demonstrate that it's not just about dreaming, it's also about doing. "Find a problem and fix it," says Aslin. "Don't blame and shame, but respectfully address the problem and suggest solutions." Those are the values that Aslin seeks to exemplify through her leadership at ECS, just as the founders did all those years ago.

1 Basics and background

It may not always come first to mind, but Miss Edgar's and Miss Cramp's School is rightly considered one of the most compelling and most distinctive girls' schools in the country. That being said, the campus itself is charmingly understated. It sits at the intersection of two quiet, tree-lined streets in Westmount, a suburb of Montreal, and occupies two connected buildings: one being a house that the school moved into in 1964, and the other built to extend it a few years later. "I think it's cool to think about how it used to be a house," a student told us. "And then it transformed into something bigger." Some of the floors and stairways creak a bit, which only adds to the feel. In the Junior School, classrooms literally move up as they advance through the grades, with Grade 5 on the uppermost floor, sitting just beneath the gables. "I love how, for the last year of Junior School," says a student, "we have the attic. You work your way up." The view from that room is also the best in the building, looking out over the city skyline and the St. Lawrence River beyond.

Instruction is divided between the Junior School (Kindergarten through Grade 5), Middle School (Grades 6 through 8), and Senior School (Grades 9 through 11), though they all sit comfortably together as a whole, in a sense, rather than each set apart on its own. Students of various grades pass each other in the halls, and they meet together at least once a week for an all-school assembly (the Heads' Assembly) on Monday mornings. Cross-generational

interaction is rightly seen as valuable, and mentorship programs, both formal and informal, provide for opportunities for one-on-one and small group interaction.

There's a pleasant bustle to the school, and sitting in the vestibule on a school day is a good introduction to all of it. There are students coming in and greeting teachers; parents checking in with the office staff, sharing notes from the weekend. Everyone seems to know everyone not just by name, but also what they did on the weekend and what book they're reading. Where some schools have larger entries or wider hallways, ECS benefits from the opposite, with smaller sitting areas dotted throughout the school lending a sense of closeness, coziness, and safety. As we walked through one day, led by two students from the Senior School, we came upon some girls in the upper hallway on their lunch break, with one playing a classical piece on a baby grand piano. Seeing us, the pianist was startled. "There's people!", she exclaimed. The moment underscored how comfortable the students feel; it's less an institution than a home, and students feel it's their private space and make use of it in that way. It's a place where they feel they can let their guard down. "They feel very comfortable; they're very familiar with their teachers," says Danielle Lecuyer, the head of the athletic department. "By the time they get to middle and high school, they're very comfortable, and the girls who come in and join them quickly follow suit." That's true even within the administrative suite, with students feeling as at home in the head's office as they do in the drama classroom or the common areas.

As you'd expect in a school of this age, focus, and pedigree, there are some lovely cultural elements that recall the history of the institution and all the women who have come before. A hall that joins the two buildings is lined with wooden plaques listing all the graduates to date, inscribed and gilded. The school song is the one that was adapted by Isabelle Adami in 1910 when she was 15 and a student within the original cohort. The song is

appreciated in its way, if with an air of exotic mystery. "It's very long!" said a Middle School student we spoke with. It is, and the meaning is somewhat veiled. "It talks about writing our names on the Great Pyramids," the student told us, believing it was in reference to the plaques. "Our names are on the boards, and they stay there forever. Just like the pyramids are there forever." Students learn one verse of the song every year from Grade 1 to Grade 4, at which point they've mastered the whole thing.

The archivist, Morgannis Graham, is using the school as a case study in how private schools support their curricular and administrative functions. She's also an alumna and a parent of ECS. "There's such a rich history in this school," she says, something she feels is revealed in a variety of tantalizing ways. She mentions a series of letters from a boarder named Mary Mack who was in the initial cohort along with Isabelle Adami. Among other things, Mack was present in 1918 at the time of the Spanish flu, something she writes about in the letters, among other more mundane things. "It's such a glorious little snapshot," says Graham of those letters. "She was very critical. She was not fond of her teachers; she had words about the food." Graham often takes letters like those into classrooms to share with students: "It's a really good way to engage with the younger girls." No doubt it is. It grants a sense of place, particularly when you can look at a photo of a sports day from the 1960s or '70s. "They're doing these weird events, and we're not quite sure what they're doing. But that's really fun," she says. While there are some differences, such as outfits and hairstyles, there are lots of similarities that students also readily notice. When they're studying the war years, for example, the archives bring history to life in a very personal way.

The influence and legacy of the founders remains apparent if you know where to look, as Graham does. "I think they were very driven," she says of Edgar and Cramp. "They didn't let a lot of things get in their way," with the pesky and ongoing question

of financing being one of them. Given the many benefactors they were able to bring on board, especially in the earliest days when the school was little more than a good idea, Graham feels they must have been very compelling. "People were sold by their ideas and their vision of a school. People were lining up to help them, saying, 'yes, we are going to support you and we're going to make this happen.' So they must have been very special."

By all accounts, they were, despite the prim portraits that hang in one of the meeting rooms and which have been duplicated many times in print over the years. "I say to the girls that I know they look like old ladies," says Aslin, "but the reality is that you have no idea how smart these ladies were. Miss Edgar was educated in Paris. They understood the importance of arts, and language, and science." Both Edgar and Cramp lived on site with the girls through the duration of their tenure, and were otherwise involved in every aspect of school and student life. Even after they retired and moved out, they remained ubiquitous, attending all the events and stopping by regularly just to check in. "They were very dedicated," says Graham. "It was their world. They put everything into this school. And then when they did decide to retire, they basically gave the school to the old girls. … They made it a non-profit, incorporated it, and then said 'Okay, now the board is all made up of you, of graduates.' So, for years, it was just old girls that were the administration of the school. Then it ended up going to parents, and expanded out a bit more after that, but they had complete faith in their girls. It was neat."

The current location is the third. The first was on Guy Street near Sherbrooke, which they vacated out of necessity because the owner and the school's primary benefactor, Mr. Horn, passed away. While his estate kept it going for some years, the relationship became increasingly precarious. "It was a whole panic at first," says Graham of when the school was ultimately faced with the reality of having to find a new location. "They had little

money. It was in the early '40s. It was very touch-and-go for a bit. They didn't know if they were going to make it." But they did. After a brief period in a building at Cedar and Côte-des-Neiges, they moved to Westmount, where the school is now. Up until that point, there had been a boarding program, though the zoning authority for Westmount nixed the idea—"which I think was heartbreaking for them at the time," says Graham.

Given its long life, there's a real sense that, whatever it is, the school has been through it before. The flu pandemic, wars, the Depression, polio, the social and civil rights movements of the '60s and '70s—all of those things are well documented in the extensive archive and gives depth and dimension to the life of the school. "Everything we value comes from the beginning," says a current student. "Everything has led up to how we are now, how we learn, everything we do, even our uniform—it started from day one, which is why I think it's important to know our history, and what happened and how we came to be."

Leadership

> *"We are required to think very deeply in the world, and intentionally—not just absorb it and consume it."*
> *— Lauren Aslin, head of school*

ECS is governed by a board of directors that is responsible for strategic and financial planning. It also appoints the head of school. The leadership team includes the head of school, academic leads, as well as directors of finance, operations, and advancement. It is responsible for overseeing the academic and co-curricular programs, human resources, finance, admissions, community relations, and fundraising.

Lauren Aslin is the sixth head of school, though she first arrived two decades ago as director of IT. In that role, she wrote

the first IT curriculum for all grades, Kindergarten to Grade 11, something that was cutting edge for the time. "I had a very high understanding of what that technology should be," she says matter of factly. "So I did that." In time she became acting head (she says, "the students would ask what that was, and I'd say 'I'm not the head, I'm just acting like one. So how am I doing?'") and was appointed head of school in 2017. "It gave me the opportunity to recalibrate and bring back some of the things we've had in the past," she says. "Because sometimes we lose things. … Like our Heads' Assembly, where we gather as a community—all of us, Kindergarten to Grade 11 faculty and staff—and we think about something that matters in the world."

In demeanor as in action, Aslin is, by any measure, a strikingly dynamic leader. She can speak in political terms, and does, and isn't prone to gilding any lilies. She mentioned "power tables" (the sites of power within Canadian culture) a few times when we visited her at the school, as well as climate justice and gender equity, yet it never feels polemical. She doesn't talk like other heads or academics do, which can be both surprising and disarming, perhaps, if also a breath of fresh air. When we spoke in her office one morning, she described affirmative action as "a flaming neon arrow that points to a problem." She talked about the need to allow students to be active learners rather than "obedient puppets." She described the classrooms and labs as "kitchens of learning." Aslin hopes that students see the school as a place they can express their true selves—to be, in her terms, "weirdly me"—while also appreciating the skills, talents, and personalities of others. In all of that, it's hard not to smile in her presence: she's expressive, forthcoming, and as passionate about social issues as she is about just being with people and sharing a laugh.

It needs to be said that, while relatively new to the role of head of school, she's nevertheless been actively contributing significantly to the academic and social culture of ECS for more than two decades. If the students see this as their home, Aslin

does, too. Walking through the halls with her, it's clear that she knows the students by name, and that they know, respect, and enjoy her company. It's difficult to imagine a person more suited to lead this particular school at this particular moment in time. For her part, she says "it's a pretty wonderful gig."

2 Academics

"They're going to question everything, and I couldn't be happier when that happens. Because if they aren't questioning, they aren't thinking."
— Lauren Aslin, head of school

The delivery of the curriculum at ECS bears some similarity to the International Baccalaureate: challenging yet reflective, principled and balanced, project-based with culminating activities that require students to work through problems authentically and over a longer arc of time. But in not being an IB school, it also has the benefit of the freedom to set its own course. "You have to really look," says assessment lead Sharleen Casement, "and decide whether you're following a program or a philosophy." She feels the need to question whether you are being deliberate or doing something just because, well, that's the way it's always been done. "At the moment we're following a philosophy that has a lot of strong ties to programs that people really value and adhere to, but we can pull from all of the best," Casement explains. Isabelle Roy, Middle School academic lead, agrees, adding that the goal is "to put the student at the centre of their learning. To be, as much as we can, research based. Put forward the best practices in teaching."

"Challenge-based" is the term more often used at ECS to describe the approach, rather than "project-based" or "inquiry-based," in part because it references both academic and personal introspection.

Students aren't challenged in the sense of lifting an increasingly heavier bar, or working through increasingly obscure algebra problems, but "challenged just to be better," says Sarah Neeff, director of student experience. "Better people, better citizens, stronger in terms of their knowledge base—there has to be a balance between all of that. It's important that the students are challenged academically and non-academically. You can't have a focus in one area and not the others." It's not about getting the right answer so much as it is about responding and relating to the concepts. "Recognizing those things," says Neeff, "and being able to help the student figure out what would make her experience better while still maintaining certain standards. … That's what makes a good school."

Neeff's role, director of student experience, was created to help bear that out. She's tasked with working with teachers, administrators, and students to maintain a longer view, one focused on enhancing the delivery of the curriculum by fostering the students' relationship with it. Neeff uses a visit by Greta Thunberg as an example of that. The week after we visited, Thunberg was scheduled to speak in downtown Montreal. A march was planned and students had been voicing the desire to attend. That, of course, could be simple enough to achieve: take the day, organize rides if necessary, and go. But Neeff chose to see it in more substantive terms, and to look for the opportunities it provided to advance aspects of the academic program. Yes, we can go, but how can the student experience be heightened? What happens when they come back? How do they share the experience with others? How does that event—not only what it means, but the posture that participants take toward it—say about what it means to be a citizen, in terms of both rights and responsibilities? What does it say about us and who we are? All instruction, says Neeff, is handled in that way: as an opportunity to do more. "It's not just the traditional sense of school where they go to class," she says. It's about seeking out authentic experiences that support the skills and knowledge described by the curriculum. Yes, at some point you need to learn the times tables, and students do.

But there's an understanding that even something as quotidian as the times tables will be learned better within a context of engagement and real-world application.

"There is still a belief," says Aslin, a tone of weariness creeping into her voice, "that you can talk knowledge into someone. But you really can't." Learning happens best, she says, when students are involved in events, projects, and activities that matter to them personally. The role of instructors, she feels, is to help guide them, making sure that instruction is flexible, lively, and responsive to student interest, while remaining academically relevant. Co-curricular programs extend classroom learning, perhaps most obviously under the rubric of the Academic Innovation Projects. In a fairly recent example, Grade 4 students conducted interviews with seniors as part of a language arts unit titled "The Inner Heroine." There were hard skills relative to the literacy outcomes (good grammar and communication) as well as academic development (setting goals, organizing time, and meeting deadlines). What the students will remember decades from now, though, is the experience of reaching out to people, engaging with them, and hearing their stories. All those lessons will remain, from how to engage others using open questions to how to structure a report, but the experience will remain as well. Both sides—learning and living—are seen as essential.

In another example, students looked at the environmental impact of the fashion industry. The lesson started with a foundation concept—"Did you know that it takes hundreds of gallons of water to make one pair of jeans and that our landfills are overflowing with clothing waste?"—and students worked to find solutions that could ease the environmental impact. They planned to launch and run a pop-up shop to sell gently used and repurposed clothing. When COVID closed the school, the students pivoted and donated the clothes to a shelter. There were clear connections to the core curriculum, including math (calculating volumes of water and managing money) with a high level of natural interest. The outcomes were based in skills—active listening, reasoning, collaboration, and

reporting—while pointing to some key themes, including how personal and cultural circumstances contribute to who we are and how we interact with the world around us. That approach carries on into the middle and upper grades, where students are required to participate in a year-long project that combines research, action, and the communication of findings and results. There is an expressed desire to be as criteria-based as possible, says Roy, "to help the student really know where they are and what the teacher will be looking for."

In that and much else, instruction is student-centred in all the best ways. "If no one knows who you are," a Middle School student told us, "you don't really learn as well. If a teacher doesn't know your qualities and your strengths, then you won't learn as well." While other schools might have their own definition of what it means to be student-centred, at ECS that's ultimately the nut of it: being known and bringing the talents and interests of the students into the conduct of the classroom. "When I first started," says Aslin, "I said to the head, 'there are two ways you can do curriculum: you can do it to people, or you can do it with people.' And when you do it with people, you get curriculum that's relevant and powerful. When you do it to them, it's just your best guess, and you're just one person." Learning is conducted in partnership, so all students can be "creators of what they're doing," says Casement, to ensure the learning is meaningful, lasting, and profound, as opposed to looking only "to the next test, to the next moment."

STEM is a focus, with classroom instruction augmented through co-curricular programs. After-school clubs include robotics and 3D math. There are clubs as well as competitive teams, including one that competes in the annual Shalheveth Freier Physics Tournament. The music program is notable as well, with a wider range of offerings than you might expect in a school of this size, and a quality to match. As we walked through, a class was rehearsing a jazz vocal version of A-ha's "Take On Me" that was as fun as it was beautifully performed. The students were loving it—the song, the interaction, and just the joy of singing together.

3 Academic environment

"There's laughter in the hallway," says parent Leo Chau. "You see that a lot and that's very special." If someone were of a more severe disposition, they might say that kids go to school to learn, not laugh in the hallway. So I ask Chau how he would respond to that idea, and why he feels laughter is important. "It's important to me because without that laugher there's restraint. These students are all still children, and I feel that through that laugher they have the freedom and the comfort and the confidence to learn. You're only free to express your feelings when you're in a comfortable place." He admits that "we also see them cry, but seeing them able to express all those emotions, and not feeling the need to bottle them up, that's very important and very special." That thought—that a freedom of expression, interaction, relationships, and a sense of comfort comes first—is shared throughout the school community, and is seen as the context for learning.

Class sizes are small, with an average of 20 or so students in each. Is it the right size? When we asked Charles Bossé, head of the French department, he answered without a pause: "I think it's perfect. You can go farther with them. You can do things that perhaps aren't in the ministry program, but you know that they will be able to handle. … We can go see plays and other things that you can't do in a bigger school when you have 35 students in your classroom." Aslin notes that students spend more time in the school than they do at home, especially during their developmental year; as a result,

serving personal needs is regarded as a necessary foundation for serving academic development. "If it isn't a place where I can bring my bruises and my broken bits, as well as my brilliant ideas—and have an idea un-self-consciously and be able to share it—then real learning isn't happening. And it's simply an artificial environment where you have obedient puppets." All indications show that ECS isn't an artificial environment, and the students aren't obedient puppets, something of which Aslin is rightly proud: "They're just who they are, and then you co-create what it is you need in the world. To me it's the kitchen of learning."

Aslin delights in all of it. "I remember we had an open house and the head of school at that time came up, and she looked around and she said, 'you need to clean the lab up for the open house,' and I said, 'we did.' And she said, 'it's terrible, there's stuff all over,' and I said, 'yes, but it's the kitchen of learning. That's what we're doing here.'" She recalls that parents commented that one of the things they loved then—and it's true now as well—is that the labs aren't pristine; the spaces at ECS look like the girls live in them. "And the reality is they do," Aslin says.

The list of extracurricular offerings is broad and varied. All of the clubs were created by students, and while there is always an adult presence, they are all student led. Some clubs carry over from year to year, some don't, and otherwise they are left to very naturally live out their useful lives. "I think parents are sometimes a bit surprised that that's our model," says Neeff. If atypical, it's nevertheless a nice model, one that allows students to raise their voices, to follow their interests, and to have a hand in crafting an aspect of the school culture. Social issues are nicely represented. There's a club for animal respect that started four years ago, created by students who were in Grade 8 at that time. "They just felt strongly," says Neeff, and, with the support of an interested faculty member, they made it so. At the other end of the spectrum, the EyeClub produces The Stall Seat Journal, a publication that is edited, written, and designed by students, and then gets posted in the bathroom stalls. "They have

little articles, tidbits, fun facts," Neeff explains. One edition each May is devoted to the Gender Sexualities Alliance (GSA), another club that, like the others, came from the girls themselves and is open to all students in Grades 6 through 11. The guiding principle, says Aslin, is "get yourself a project that matters to you, and we can do it." Students set the schedules, assume the various roles within the clubs, and then promote the offerings at the school-wide assemblies. "That's self-agency. [The knowledge] that I have the power to influence and affect the kitchen of learning," says Aslin. At the time we visited, some students were investigating how to create a rooftop garden, and no doubt there will be one up there in time.

The school's annual calendar includes all the events and celebrations you'd expect and then some. We polled some Junior School students on their favourite event of the year and, surprisingly, Founders' Day was a stand-out hit. There are speeches and visitors. "It's the school's birthday," says a student, "so we all get cake and sing 'Happy Birthday.' … The youngest daughters cut the cake. It's really fun." The Junior students love it, and are unanimous in the reason why: "We get cake!" Pajama Day is apparently a close second (possibly because, according to a Junior student, "You get banana splits!"). Other favourites include Muffins with Moms, a breakfast where the girls hang out with their mothers, and its corollary, Donuts with Dudes, which brings the fathers into the school. Male role models are welcomed very intentionally at various points in the year, including at an annual Winter Ball. Spirit Week is a favourite, too, and is a school-wide event comprising a week of activities all planned by the girls themselves. Old Girls are involved, and in the past have taken part in a tug-of-war event with the Grade 11 class. Arts Fest is a school-wide talent show that goes on all day. "And it's so much fun seeing the Junior School girls perform," says a Middle School student. "It's amazing." There aren't any truly opulent occasions—the Winter Ball is more homecoming than royal gala—which nevertheless seems fitting. This is a school that wishes to celebrate quietly, cementing all the various relationships in cheerful, collaborative ways.

4 Student population

The student population is 300 and is divided into three houses—Edgar, Cramp, and Adami—led by students elected annually from the Grade 11 cohort. (Prefects and house officials are elected after giving a speech to the school on why they are best for the job.) The school sits at the smaller end of the spectrum in comparison with other schools of this focus and stature, something that is more appreciated than anything else. Students often describe it as small, though they find that to be a strength. "The fact that it is so small is really important," one student told us. "We know everyone. … [And] in sports, there's not a lot of girls who are cut. People can do what they want." The national average is 360, so ECS isn't too far off of that by any means, though students are prone to overstate it perhaps because it contributes to a sense of identity: small but mighty.

In our experience, the students are polite yet frank, prone to speaking openly; they're collegial and able to listen and share openly with each other. "The teachers really listen to us, to what we think is better," says a student. "Instead of just saying 'yeah, yeah, yeah.'" Adds another, "You can talk about what you don't love, so you can change it." Lecuyer feels that, on a visceral level, the girls are unaware of the fact that there aren't boys here. "It's just so natural for them," she says. "They stick together in a good way. They'll advocate for each other the way a sibling would."

"The girls are driven," says Lecuyer. "They are very outspoken

here in a good way." We asked why that was the case: did the school attract and admit a certain type of student, or do the girls become more forthright because of the environment they find there? Lecuyer says, "I don't know. I've thought about it. A lot of them have been here for so long, and they feel very comfortable, they're very familiar with their teachers—by the time they get to middle and high school, they're very comfortable—and the girls who come in and join them quickly follow suit." The fact that it's a girls' school likely plays a part, too, if not always in the ways that some might initially assume.

"If you were to ask me what kind of girl flourishes best here," says Aslin, "I'd say the high flyers, the quirky, the excruciatingly shy, the introverts." This is to say that ECS fosters a broad range of learners, a broad range of personalities, and a broad range of experiences. There is a sense that the school isn't just a place for academically inclined girls to find peers of a similar bent, but a place to bring a wider range of perspectives together and to promote and celebrate what each can bring to the experience. "They realize it is safe here to be weirdly me," says Aslin, "and in being weirdly me, you have weirdly wonderful teams, and you have a weirdly wonderful community."

Morgannis Graham is an alumna, having attended from Grade 4 to graduation, as well as a current parent of the school. While she has a deep appreciation for what the school can offer, when it came time for her daughter to enrol, she says, "I debated. Is this the right school? Is this the right fit? I wasn't sure." When we spoke, Graham's daughter had started there just the week before, joining in Grade 7. Says Graham,

> "I had a lot of friends who went to coed schools … but I think I really appreciated being in an all-girls school, because you were able to be completely free. I just remember home-room classes and standing on desks with my friends and, you know, ties around our heads and singing songs. And I see it in the girls now. There's just so much singing. They're either singing or crying, it's one or the other. [Laughs.] There doesn't seem to be an in-between with the girls. There's just this freedom to be emotional and to be spontaneous and to be absolutely ridiculous. … Then when I went off to CEGEP, and it was my first time with boys in the classroom, I could see it with all the other girls: they were a little more restrained. … I don't know whether that's always the case, but that's certainly why I decided to send my daughter here. Because I did find—she was in a coed public school—she was starting to become more restrained. And I thought, no, no, no. Let's put you here and see what you can be."

There is less social division between grades, with girls convening more fluidly across grades than you might experience in other settings. "I love it," says a student. "You can have better bonding with the people in your class and in other grades too. Even within the Junior School; it's nice to kind of be a role model to them. It's fun to play around with them, too." Says a Middle School student, "here, you're part of a sisterhood and it's like family." Another Middle School student commented that "if nobody knows who you are, you just sort of float through the school and you just coast your way across the years. … Here, we know each other and have things in common. And if you have a problem, you can talk about it to older people because they've experienced it. And since everyone knows who you are, it's not awkward."

5 Athletics

The school athletics program includes competitive teams, though the stated focus of the physical education offering, per the website, is to "meet the needs of our students." For the coaches, "needs" is less about what the girls wish than it is about the aptitudes students require to be successful on the field and off. "We need to be teaching them commitment, time management," says Danielle Lecuyer, head of athletics and physical education, "and then just the concept of being something bigger than themselves." The overall intention of the athletics program is focused there: to "plant the seeds now" around the benefits of living actively and contributing personal talents to something greater. "That's really the philosophy for us," says Lecuyer, "that is the ultimate."

While the campus doesn't include athletic facilities, the school makes good use of the many local resources, including a field at Murray Hill and the soccer dome there. "It's not necessarily about what you have on your property," says Lecuyer, but rather "if you have the means to provide it in some way."

There is a longer list of competitive and recreational offerings than you would expect for a school of this size. "If a student comes in and there's enough push, and support from other students, we can make it happen," says Lecuyer. Teams compete in the Greater Montreal Athletic Association (GMAA) Division I and III, the Montreal Independent Schools League, and the Canadian Accredited Independent School tournaments. They regularly place highly at

the tournaments, and always respectably, something that everyone at ECS seems to find both delightful and surprising. "There's schools with, like, 5,000 kids," a student told us, "and they're like 'they're going to suck, there's like 300 kids in their school.' But we win. Which is so weird." A member of the faculty said of a recent rugby competition that the ECS team "had no business doing well … [but] they just won. It speaks to the type of girls who are here. They are competitive and want to do well." While the students are competitive, it's important not to underestimate the role of school spirit, which ECS has much more of compared to some of those schools with 5,000 kids: "It might seem like we're a little school, but when it comes to game day, we're all suited up and ready."

6 Pastoral care

Too often, it must be said, wellness and care programs are hived off into an office somewhere separate from the daily life of a school. Counselling offices are somewhere over there, and students attend them as they would a dentist: only when necessary, and not entirely willingly.

To ECS's great credit, the opposite is true, and the wellness program would be very hard for students to avoid even if they wanted to. The Learning Commons (TLC) team (Aslin confirms that "the acronym is deliberate") is dedicated and well-staffed. It has evolved into Learning to Learn or L2L (again deliberate), placing clarity and emphasis on how students learn content rather than on simply learning content. Our support team of specialists and teachers is dedicated to developing a personalized support structure for students of diverse needs.

The psychosocial counsellor is a full-time member of the staff, rather than a community counsellor that comes into the school, say, a day a week, which is something of a norm in many school settings. In addition, there are four learning specialists, an academic advisor, and one specialist who oversees domestic and international student integration. That's a full-time staff of seven tasked to deliver a comprehensive program of care. For a school of this size, that's telling of the dedication the school has made to maintain a healthy, supportive environment. This, unequivocally, is a priority.

The size of the student body is itself a benefit to the delivery

of care, due to the proximity and familiarity that staff and students share. The counsellors clearly know all the kids, just as the kids clearly know and enjoy the company of the counsellors. Further, the counselling staff is active in all aspects of school life and goes out daily to meet with students, formally and informally. Darlene Geick, Middle and Senior School counsellor, is involved in new student orientations and on-boarding, so students begin a relationship with her from quite literally the moment they arrive.

Geick also works closely with the learning specialists in the classrooms, doing workshops throughout the year. The workshops aren't graded; instead, they're used to promote life skills and raise awareness around mental health, sexual health, stress management, and substance abuse. Much of this is handled in partnership with a local organization that does preventative workshops, the delivery of which begins in Grade 7. "It's really about having conversations with the kids," says Geick. "Getting to know the reasons why people might engage in risky behaviours. And if [students] have misinformation, [we want to correct] that with accurate information so they're able to make more informed decisions." A popular workshop that Geick leads is called "More or Less Risky," where students are presented with situational cards that they work through in small groups. Then, based on various parameters and supplemental information, they debate the relative risk that the behaviour poses as well as strategies for mitigating that risk. "They're more open and talkative than you would think," says Geick. "It's never sad and silent." Indeed, many of the programs are lighter and more playful, and equally effective.

It seems that they're willing to try anything that seems promising, and they do. That's included pet therapy, meditation exercises, and daily "Mindful Moments" to help Junior School students focus, relax, and look inward. The learning specialists have much the same role as Geick, and comport themselves within the school—being present, leading instruction, providing mentorship—in much the same way as well, if only on an academic footing rather than a psychosocial one. That means working with students, as much as

possible and appropriate, in the classroom and workshop setting to build skills and approaches. Topics include study skills (how to take notes, find key words, manage time, break down a topic to study for an exam) and interpersonal skills, including teamwork, empathetic leadership, and consensus building. "Those are skills that are useful for everyone," says a senior learning specialist. "We're also trying to take away the stigma of the kids coming to see us. We don't like pulling kids out of class."

While there are students here that have learning profiles, says Aslin, "the reality is that we understand that every girl has a learning profile. That there are challenges if you're a super gifted high flyer. Often those challenges come with your ability to work in a team and to make your talent available to the team," as well as those at other points on the spectrum of learning. "It may look like we have more learning needs now than we ever had before, but the reality is that they were always there, and they were just mislabelled as behavioural." To her, the needs aren't as important as the outcomes, and that every girl grow into an accurate understanding of how she learns and gains the tools she needs in order to be successful. "Not all of us are auditory or visual learners, or kinesthetic learners. And so, whenever you use just one route, you're excluding at least two-thirds of your group." Optimally, says Aslin, when the girls hit Middle and Senior School, you don't see the differences, and every girl has developed the aptitudes and found the supports she needs.

Ultimately, health and wellness isn't typically the first thing that parents ask about when visiting a school—they tend to ask about academics, athletics, and co-curriculars, often in that order—though, frankly, they should, and that's particularly true here. There's a dedication to care, made plain through staffing and integration into all aspects of student life. The program of professional development includes mental health. Parent Leo Chau noted that they regularly bring in mental health professionals—psychotherapists, researchers on childhood development—to present workshops with the faculty. He sees that as one of the reasons for the success of the school, and the success of the students that it graduates.

7 Getting in

"We accept girls of all sorts," says Aslin, "because life is lived with people of all sorts. So we make sure we've got ways to support that." The school works diligently to ensure that there is a diversity of interest and experience within the student body. That desire is serviced in various ways, including a robust program of financial assistance.

The application process begins online with an intake form. The application is supported by all the usual requirements that are common for a school of this profile and stature, including demonstration of academic standing and an application fee. Families are then put in touch with an admissions officer to answer questions and otherwise guide the process, which includes visits and completion of the Quebec Association of Independent Schools (QAIS) Common Confidential Report Form and Canadian Cognitive Abilities Test (CCAT). Students entering the Middle and Senior School years must have a certificate of eligibility allowing them to attend English schools in Quebec.

The application process is about establishing the right relationship for all involved, and while there is some reporting and testing to be done, the real force of the application process is around evaluation of the relationship. All girls are invited to spend a day at the school, although "invite" may be the polite way of putting it—that kind of visit isn't a hard and fast requirement, though it is seen as something just south of essential. It's a chance for the student to see what the

school is all about, and whether it appeals to them on an emotional level. For the school, it's an opportunity to take the relationship for a test drive, making sure that all parties feel comfortable and jazzed about the idea. The administration at ECS have no interest in placing hurdles in front of applicants; the process isn't an obstacle course, and it isn't intended to be. One Middle School student who entered the Junior program tells us, "we watched a movie, and I was like 'okay,' and then I met the teachers and was like, 'whoa!'" That's what she remembered of her admission process: it was fun, and she was electrified by the teachers. "They were awesome," she recalls. Says another, "when I came in for my Kindergarten interview, I knew I was already at home. You come in and they ask you some questions. I remember playing a game of blocks and I was thinking, 'like, why am I playing with blocks? It's so easy.'" (She then added a proviso: "But I'm not sure what the process is [now], because that was almost five years ago." It's been a big five years for her. The process is the same now as it was then.) The admission phase is seen as a chance to get things off on the best possible foot. It's an introduction, not an award to be earned or a prize to be won—and to its credit, the school manages the process in exactly that vein. It's a bit of business, but parents and students report that, on the whole, it's an enjoyable and exciting one.

Retention is as important to the school as recruitment. Says Aslin, "we won't accept more children than we can support exquisitely, and we look very carefully at our classroom composition to ensure it's heterogeneous—in other words, so there's diversity in it. Otherwise you don't have the conversations you need; you don't learn the patience and the perspective that you need in the world."

8 Money matters

Tuition is commensurate with schools of similar stature, focus, and quality within the region, and the only surprises, say parents, are pleasant ones. Tuition at all levels includes snacks, supplies, and activities, so it is very much all-in, with the exception of uniforms. In the upper grades, there are ancillary fees associated with some of the co-curricular programs, such as trips, though all are discretionary. There are some modest, one-time fees associated with application and admission, though all is outlined clearly and, again, parents report that there were no surprises.

There is a robust program of financial support, one designed principally to ensure that all students who are a good fit for the program are able to access it. Awards are a means of servicing that goal. In addition, there are bursaries and scholarships available to those currently enrolled, and these are designed with an eye to retention. The school is aware that things change, and therefore it has organized the financial support offering around simply that: supporting families when they need it in order to ensure continuity. When the school admits a student, the feeling is that they are doing so for life—from Kindergarten to Old Girl—and therefore has created tools in order to address any bumps or gaps along the way. It's a personal relationship, and the administration conducts themselves in that way.

9 The takeaway

While the strength of the academic programs is understandably a principal draw, the thing that sets schools apart is their moral ecologies: the values and expectations they prioritize, and the ways of being they demand of the students who participate within them. That's why Morgannis Graham ultimately chose to enrol her daughter at ECS. She saw that, in the coed school her daughter had been attending, she and her peers were becoming more restrained as they edged out of the primary years into young adulthood. Graham wanted her daughter to learn and grow in a setting that would have the opposite effect, one that would allow "this freedom to be emotional and to be spontaneous and to be absolutely ridiculous." One that would expand the spirit, rather than diminish it. One where, in Aslin's words, she could be "weirdly me."

This kind of moral ecology doesn't just happen—it's made. In the case of Miss Edgar's and Miss Cramp's School, it's been in the process of becoming for more than a century. ECS was created to promote women into positions of leadership in social and professional life—as Graham says, to "give them what they need to take on the world"—and that project continues today, demonstrated most obviously in the development of the Entrepreneurial Platform. The administration isn't prone to resting on laurels, but instead consistently reviews best practices and builds new programs to meet the evolving needs of the student population. Administration rightly

takes every opportunity to be introspective, to recollect, and to make sure that all is heading in the right direction.

The results, frankly, are impressive. At ECS, girls know early on that they are expected to dig in, to raise their voices, to stand for something, to value their instincts, and to follow their curiosities. They're expected to trust their intellect just as they trust that of others. The school has formed itself around an ethos of achievement, providing opportunities for authentic engagement with the curriculum and substantial interaction with like-minded peers and mentors. The most striking thing about the school is precisely that. They don't all want to become engineers, or singers, or stock brokers, but what they share is the knowledge that they can. They know that their aspirations will be taken seriously. The ideal student is one who shares that vision, and who has an interest in playing an active role in the school as well as the world beyond.

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