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PRIVATE SCHOOL REVIEWS

Branksome Hall

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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

“First and foremost we’re educators of girls, and trying to understand how girls learn best, what girls need to feel successful, and what success means to any given girl.”

— Karen Jurjevich, principal

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

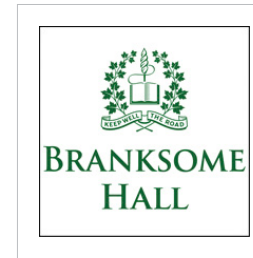
over years of work. The *Our Kids Private School Reviews* series of book-length reviews is aimed at information-seeking families, providing a detailed look at the offerings, the traditions, and the culture of each school. Titles published in this series to date include:

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|--------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Appleby College | 15. Lynn-Rose Heights Private School |
| 2. Bishop Strachan School | 16. Meadowridge School |
| 3. Branksome Hall | 17. Metropolitan Preparatory Academy |
| 4. Brentwood College | 18. Miss Edgar's & Miss Cramp's School |
| 5. Columbia International College | 19. Pickering College |
| 6. Crestwood Preparatory College | 20. Ridley College |
| 7. Elmwood School | 21. Robert Land Academy |
| 8. Fieldstone School | 22. St. John's-Kilmarnock School |
| 9. Forest Hill Montessori | 23. Sunnybrook School |
| 10. Havergal College | 24. Trinity College School |
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| 12. Hudson College | 26. Woodland Christian High School |
| 13. Kenneth Gordon Maplewood School | 27. York School |
| 14. Lakefield College School | |

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Details: Branksome Hall

Location: Toronto, Ontario

Founded: 1903

Enrolment: 900

Grades: JK to 12

Gender: Girls

Living Arrangements: Day, boarding

Language Of Instruction: English

School Focus: Academic

Developmental Priorities: Intellectual, balanced

Curriculum: Liberal Arts, International Baccalaureate

Curriculum Pace: Standard-enriched

Academic Culture: Rigorous

Motto: "Keep Well the Road"



Introduction

Branksome Hall has a lot to recommend it, including a long history, stellar buildings, and an impressive list of alumni. It's one of the highest-profile girls' schools in the country, with a reputation of strong leadership and a vibrant approach to academics. If you asked about the best schools in the country, this is one that would invariably be on every list.

Despite all of that, when we asked deputy principal Karrie Weinstock what it means to be a good school, she didn't refer to any of those things. Instead, she said, "It's a million small conversations" between students, faculty, peers, mentors, and staff. "I believe every girl comes to school every day wanting to be the best she can be. And then to meet adults and peers in that environment who are similarly aspiring—it's a very good mix. That to me is a good school."

That's telling of Branksome's culture and its ability to resist stereotype. Given the school's reputation and location within the city, some might assume that students comport themselves with an air of entitlement. In our experience, the opposite is true: the students realize the opportunity that attendance has offered them, and, by and large, they endeavour to make the most of it. They're a tribute to the work of the school—fun, active, engaged, and engaging—and a demonstration of the values that the administration seeks openly to propagate.

When we asked a Junior School student why she wanted to come to Branksome, she said, "I wanted to go to a school that

would push me and had a bigger community and more opportunities. I was getting bored and I wasn't getting enough out of school. It just wasn't interesting to me, and I felt I could do more." She says that with poise and confidence, not an "um" or "uh" to be found. "I love debating. I like making statements that I feel strongly about and standing up for something I believe in." (She says, "I like to get here at 8"—right when the school opens. Why so early? "I just feel better prepared for the day." Nice.) The students are impressive, but just as importantly, they aren't always that serious.

When we visited, there was an arts assembly at which a fairly recent alumnus was speaking. She showed some of the artwork that she did when she was at the school, from formal studies to the doodles that she did on her math book. She liked art, and the faculty liked that she liked art. They encouraged her, but they also introduced her to new ideas and new areas of interest. That love of art—"all I wanted to do was draw," she says—was given a path to where she is now, working within a prominent landscape architecture firm, designing public spaces.

As that and other examples suggest, this is a place where girls are encouraged to grow their passions and to develop them in intentional, productive ways. It's a place where the students' horizons are regularly pushed and broadened. "There are great opportunities for us to expose girls to things that might feel a little atypical," says Heather Friesen, Head, Curriculum Innovation and Professional Learning and Branksome Hall's faculty seeks to take all of them. "It's pretty great," she says. That she chooses to express it in that way—casually, with a sense of wonder and spark, even after having spent decades in this environment—is pretty great, too.

Weinstock says the concept that has guided her over four decades with the school is that "it isn't what mark your child gets, or what top university she gets into. It's 'Who is the human being that is walking out into the world?' ... How will you shape a better world? And it can be in a small context, in the context of your family or your neighbourhood. Or you could be hugely

aspirational—as so many of our girls are—on the international stage. And there's no judgment. It's just that sense that it's not all about you, it's about you in relationship to others. And I think if we've succeeded with that awareness, then," at the end of Grade 12, "that's a Branksome girl graduating."

Leadership

Grace McCallum stepped into the role of Principal at Branksome Hall in 2024, bringing with her nearly two decades of experience leading international and independent schools in places like China, Germany, and Brazil. McCallum has a strong background in academic excellence, strategic planning, partnerships, and building projects. But beyond her impressive resume, what truly drives her is a passion for girls' education—especially in areas like STEM, leadership, and entrepreneurship. Known for being an innovative and community-oriented thinker, McCallum shared her excitement about returning to Canada with her family to join a school whose vision and mission resonate so deeply with her own educational ideals.

McCallum worked closely with Karen Jurjevich, the outgoing principal who had been with the school since 1998. Jurjevich led Branksome Hall through one of the longest and most successful leadership periods in Canadian education. Karrie Weinstock, Head of Branksome's Centre for Strategic Leadership, highlighted the great dynamic within the leadership team: "We have a really great partnership," Karrie says. "We give each other a lot of space, and we're very connected in our approach to things."

McCallum has a warm and approachable presence and excels at connecting with students. Like Jurjevich before her, McCallum keeps her office door open most days, making sure she's accessible and well-known to the students. Overall, the leadership team at Branksome Hall is driven by a clear vision and enthusiasm that have helped shape the school's culture—a big draw for families who choose to send their children here.

Thanks to the strong foundation built by previous leaders, Branksome Hall is in a great position to keep moving forward. Beginning in the 1990s, when many private schools in Canada were facing challenges like declining enrolment, Branksome Hall completed a major capital campaign and saw strong enrolment numbers. That was the perfect time to rethink the school's culture and programs, making sure they were ready for the 21st century. Jurjevich was brought in to lead this transformation, focusing on a student-centred approach and strengthening the school's academic profile. Reflecting on her time at Branksome, Jurjevich said, "They really wanted someone who would connect with the girls and had a deep understanding of programming and curriculum."

One of Jurjevich's significant achievements was introducing the International Baccalaureate (IB) program. Jurjevich felt that the IB "defined not only a curriculum but also helped us understand who we are as a community." She also opened a second campus, Branksome Hall Asia, in South Korea, further strengthening the school's commitment to international education.

Now, under McCallum's leadership, Branksome Hall is building on this solid foundation. McCallum brings fresh energy and ideas, continuing to champion the school's student-centred approach while also introducing new initiatives. Her focus on women's leadership, STEM education, and personalized learning is guiding Branksome Hall into an exciting new chapter, furthering its well-deserved reputation as a leader in innovative education.

Branksome Hall is known as a school that others look to when it comes to innovation, especially in STEM. That reputation is sure to grow with the upcoming creation of a new 34,458-square-foot Innovation Centre and Studio Theatre, which will be renamed in honour of Karen Jurjevich. Once completed, this new space will highlight the school's commitment to growth and leadership.

1

Background/basics

Branksome Hall is an independent girls' school occupying a 13-acre property in the Rosedale area of downtown Toronto. Founded in 1903, the school offers a liberal arts education and includes a Junior School (JK through Grade 6) and Middle and Senior Schools (Grades 7 through 12). It is an International Baccalaureate World School and a university preparatory school.

The social organization of Branksome Hall reflects a British model, with houses (called clans), uniforms, and prefects. The campus includes about a dozen buildings, some of which are heritage homes that predate the establishment of the school (including the two that are now home to Branksome's 54 boarding students). But the campus also boasts some strikingly modern facilities, including the Athletics and Wellness Centre (AWC), completed in 2015. The AWC has the feel of a commons and provides a focal point for student life. Designed by MacLennan Jaunkalns Miller Architects, it's intended as a statement of the values of the school, particularly around the integration of academic, social, and athletic activity. Per the architect's brief, the building was designed to "encourage students to pass by and see athletics—inspiring involvement in the athletic community ... with visual connections to nature and the ravine." It does that and more.

As the buildings attest, the school has defined itself through its ability to evolve. It opened as a non-denominational school at a time when that wasn't the norm in the city of Toronto.

Bishop Strachan School and Havergal College were already established, and the Anglican Church was a foundation for both of those schools. Likewise, St. Mildred's-Lightbourn School and St. Clement's School were both up and running. Branksome Hall was conspicuous for providing an alternative.

The founder, Miss Margaret Scott (it was something of a quainter time, and all female faculty members were referred to as "Miss") wanted it to be a school for everyone, one that would look to the future rather than the past. Her vision for that future was one in which women raised their voices and took a seat at every table. In that, she led by unwavering example. The Weston Drawing Room at 10 Elm Avenue retains the feel of the school 100 years ago. It's dominated by a portrait of Miss Scott that, nice as it is, probably doesn't do her justice. She looks serious, maybe a bit prim. She was forward thinking, outspoken, and convinced of the power of girls to change the world for the better. She taught manners as a means of imparting lessons of self-respect and as a means of comporting oneself forcefully in the world. One student recalled hearing Miss Scott saying, "Get down on your knees, girls, and thank God there are no men in heaven." It's hard to imagine her portrait saying that.

Branksome Hall grew and quickly cemented a reputation as an environment that was vibrant and progressive. But not everyone loved it. One visitor described the atmosphere as one of "riotous confusion" (though, to be fair, she was visiting on Halloween). Alumnus Jean Ross Skoggard remembered that "a friend's mother removed her from Branksome Hall Junior School because she was 'having too much fun' and sent her to Havergal, which she hated. I'm afraid that her personality was adversely affected consequently."

Others found a home here precisely because it was such a breath of fresh air. Teachers were young and spirited. Mary Hamilton, director of physical culture, was an expert in Swedish gymnastics. There are photos of her and the girls dressed in white athletic bloomers, practising it on the lawns.

The Weston Drawing Room is also where Dr. Edith Read held sway once the school moved to the current location in 1912. Read, the school's second principal, served in that role for 48 years, imprinting a character on the school that remains today. "She was quite a woman ahead of her time," says Jurjevich, "[in terms of] the things that she stood for and her love of the girls. And she was quite feisty." She was also keen to chart new paths for women, encouraging them into new areas of activity and influence.

Outdoor education was conspicuously part of that larger project: it was new, groundbreaking, and unique, and it developed resiliency, strength, and character. Says Jurjevich: "she was unafraid to get the girls to experience things that may have been new or different." The school owned a property north of the city and Read called it the Winter Playground. She wanted the students to learn to ski, and she led by example, learning to cross-country ski herself. "She pushed. And for her time she was quite ahead of the game," Jurjevich says.

She was also a canny business person, insinuating herself in a world of business at a time when it was almost exclusively a man's world. She bought properties, fielded donations, and managed the business of the school. All of that took her into environments where most women weren't seen as equals—but she was. She simply demanded respect, and, from all accounts, she got it.

In her work, Read sought to expand the students' understanding of diversity and human rights, often in contrast to the existing cultural and political context. She brought in a guest speaker to discuss the treatment of the Jewish population in Europe at a time when the prime minister was still seeking to have peaceful and positive relations with Hitler. Later, she had Paul Robeson—a black performer and activist who was synonymous with the civil rights movement in the US, at times becoming a lightning rod for outrage—sing at the school.

In a word, she was different. Says one student, "I was 'sent to Miss Read' frequently for being impertinent, being late, getting



my hands dirty. She never chewed me out. She'd send me to the drawing room, where I could curl up and read." (Weinstock's approach today is strikingly similar: "My rule is that anybody who walks into my office walks out feeling better. That's my job. It doesn't matter if there's been a mistake or a transgression; the question is: 'how do we put this together again?' That's the essential humanity of this place. That's why I've stayed here my whole career." It seems to work—even we left her office feeling better.)

"Miss Read admired girls who had initiative," recalled another student. "She wanted people to enjoy life." She admitted girls with disabilities, including epilepsy and cerebral palsy, something that would have been conspicuous for the time. A student left because she was pregnant, and when the baby was born, Miss Read sent her a gift. It's a small gesture, perhaps, but in all her actions she was sending important messages, none of which were lost on the students. They felt heard, valued, and supported.

It's an interesting thought experiment to wonder what she would think of the diversity within the school now, such as the range of activities that the students are involved in, the all-gender washrooms, the active promotion of inclusion, and the sister school in South Korea. While the conversations were different in her day, Read was well ahead of the cultural curve in terms of women's empowerment and social justice, and she was outspoken in her way. She led the school by example, both for the students' benefit as well as that of other educators. That tradition is still very much alive at the school today.

From the beginning, Branksome Hall has seen itself as a women's institution, not simply a girls' school, largely thanks to strong women leaders like Scott, Read, and the others that would follow. The tradition of inquiry around best practices has been amplified over the years, most visibly in the creation of the Chandaria Research Centre (CRC), which opened in 2016. The CRC is tasked with researching excellence in girls' education and has almost instantly become an industry leader, offering insight

not only into girl's education, but education in general.

The CRC is built on earlier foundations, including a decade-long partnership with The LaMarsh Centre for Child and Youth Research at York University and, in particular, Dr. Jennifer Connolly. "One of our key goals is developing a culture of research here within Branksome Hall," says Friesen, "and to continue to develop that research culture within our faculty and within our community." With the establishment of the CRC, Branksome Hall became one of the rare few school-based research centres of its kind in North America.

More specifically, the CRC's mandate is to bring together academic research and the student experience within the school, and to provide a space to freely innovate. "They're always asking questions around difficult topics," says Dr. Mira Gambhir of the faculty. "Being a research centre in a school setting, you want an environment that's not afraid to pursue those questions. And I think that's what this space offers, and that's the environment that the school is." The CRC is a demonstration of the school's commitment to growth, inquiry, and best practices. Decisions aren't made from on high, but rather only after hearing from stakeholders—including parents, alumni, teachers, and students—about real, lived experiences.

The studies undertaken are varied, ranging from those you might expect (such as fostering resiliency through athletics) to those that you might not (such as the place of humour in effective teaching practice, based on measurable health impacts). The latter was a two-year Junior School project that was completed in 2018, and the findings have now become part of the core curriculum. Another recent project looked at outdoor recess: "In IB programming, the schedule is very much defined," explains Gambhir, "so we were looking at what were the spaces for free time and play in the Middle School years—which is a big time of transition, from Grade 6 to Grade 7." One of the teachers, who is also a research strategist, designed a study to look at creating

digital-free recesses. The findings of that study were used to form policy around unstructured periods of time and use of digital devices. The Road After study looked at girls' experiences as they moved into their post-secondary lives. "The reason that we pick particular projects," says Gambhir, "is because of an absence in the literature and trying to inform studies that can contribute to wider scholarship. ... It's about that cycle of questions you might have as a teacher, and being supported to answer it and then share it back and deliberate outcomes."

Should families care? Yes, actually, they should. It can seem academic and removed, though even just three years into the project, the Centre has cut an impressive profile of informing development, academic delivery, and student life. The knowledge that no change is adopted in any aspect of the school without first considering its effect should be comforting. Where other schools might adopt wobbly chairs based on the marketing material that comes from the company that builds them—or perhaps only in the belief that anything new must have merit—the reasons for adopting them, at Branksome, are understood in a much more objective and informed way. That students themselves are involved in these studies only adds to the richness of the experience—they learn research skills first hand, knowing how and why the work will go on to have a real effect on the student community.

"Even Einstein asked questions"

—poster on the wall of a classroom in the Junior School
Academics

In all of the classes, at all grade levels, students follow a trans-disciplinary, inquiry-based approach to learning. Instruction is guided by big questions and overarching understandings. Friesen says, "We are identifying and [being] intentional around what the

core skills are, but also providing opportunity for kids to be more creative and go beyond just practicing the core skills."

"The emphasis on multiple perspectives goes right back to our roots," says Jurjevich. Central to the decision to adopt the IB were the curricular attributes it shared with the school's long-standing traditions. The liberal arts is at the heart of that, which the task force saw as a great strength. "The IB is teaching and learning," says Jurjevich, meaning that it describes how the curriculum is both developed and delivered. But she's quick to add that "first and foremost we're educators of girls, and trying to understand how girls learn best, what girls need to feel successful, and what does success even mean to any given girl," including paying attention to "the social-emotional element, the well-being underpinnings that are necessary for a girl to be her best self every day when she comes to school."

"Schools like this always struggle with external folks who like to measure 'numbery' sorts of things," Friesen says with a chuckle. "Does success mean how many kids got to X type of university? Does success mean they got a score on the IB exams of whatever? Does success mean how many students were Ontario Scholars? From the outside world, those can be interesting questions, [but] they're questions that we push back against a lot because we really want to be able to offer a program that is accessible to a wide range of kids [in terms of interests and talents] and success might not look like it fits into one of those [external] bands." Friesen feels that the best measures of success are personal and individual: "Are they happy? Are they engaged? Do they want to come to school in the morning? When they're here, is there something interesting and stimulating that makes them want to stay longer? Do they feel the forward momentum?"

That sentiment is shared throughout the faculty. They have a desire to take every opportunity to expand students' horizons in meaningful, substantive ways, exposing them regularly to new ideas, people, disciplines, and perspectives. Amanda Kennedy,

head of the Junior School, says that a core principle that she keeps top of mind is this: “if you see it, you can be it.” Even from a very early age, that means exposing girls to big ideas, and little ones too, as well as the people that exemplify them. Alumni come to the school regularly to talk about their paths after leaving and how those paths were informed by the work they did at Branksome.

Professionals (sometimes parents of current students, but not always) also come in to speak. In our experience, that’s true across all the grade levels. When Max Eisen won the Canada Reads contest in 2019, both students and instructors commented to us that they had met him and spoken with him when he came to the school. Formally and informally, instructors are keen to avail students of those types of personal interactions. When Branksome Hall’s administrators reached out to invite Gloria Steinem to the school, the feeling was that the worst thing she could say was no. Well, she said yes, addressed the student body, toured the school, and spoke with students in the hallways. One had written a paper on Steinem, and her teacher got them together, they discussed the paper, and Steinem signed it. The school also brought in Cheryl Pounder, an Olympic athlete who was on Canada’s national team at the 2002 and 2006 Winter Olympics, and Dr. Ashley Stirling from the University of Toronto to talk about resilience. A student commented that “I learned that resilience is more than just about overcoming obstacles,” and more about thriving.

That’s what Kennedy means by “if you see it, you can be it.” If you see leaders, you can lead. If you see scientists, you can begin to imagine being one yourself. If you recognize passion in others, you can begin to recognize it in yourself. Inspiring students with real-life examples is a core aspect of program delivery, and the faculty is clearly dedicated to it.

Branksome Hall Asia



In 2009, Branksome Hall was invited to create a school in South Korea at the invitation of the Korean government, and the first classes were held there in January 2012. The country was building a new city on Jeju Island—literally creating a city where one had never been before—and education was a key part of the planning. Their goal was to have four or five world-class K-12 schools, later adding colleges and universities. Together, they would create a global education centre within the larger civic context.

To date, there are four schools on Jeju Island, of which Branksome was the second to establish itself there. It was a striking move for all parties involved. “We didn’t just say we wanted to be part of the world,” says Weinstock. “We created another version of ourselves. That’s big and bold, and I think we became bigger and bolder.”

It’s also a striking environment. Jeju is a volcanic island and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, given its geologic history. The campus was designed by architect Pit Li Phan, and it’s starkly different from the Canadian campus. The

buildings are low, allowing views of Mount Halla from points throughout the campus. The intention was that that building would fit into the natural landscape.

Branksome Hall Asia exists unto itself and doesn't share an administration, faculty, or staff with its Canadian counterpart, though the relationship between the schools is significant. All Grade 9 students do a study abroad program hosted there. With that, "they start to make connections with their Korean sisters," says Jurjevich. Each is assigned a sister while in Grade 8, so they meet them for the first time in Grade 9, providing an opportunity to work together in person. The faculty work together on creating and developing joint curricula. That said, it's perhaps less an administrative relationship between the schools than it is a personal one. The facility in South Korea was created not to extend the brand, but very much to extend the student experience, both in Canada and South Korea.



2 Academic environment

“We don’t just have lofty aspirations,” says Weinstock. “We’re prepared to do the hard work with each girl to take her where she wants to go.” She adds, “part of that is greeting all the students as they arrive each day, and saying ‘Hi, we’re glad you’re here.’” That’s exactly what Weinstock was doing on the days that we visited: standing outside the main doors, saying hello.

With us, she spoke passionately and quite movingly about the need to adopt an innovation mindset. “I think what an innovation mindset does, is it’s looking to meld the creative, the critical, the imaginative, but never lose sight of the human.” She notes that a challenge that faculty faces is around the intersection of humans and machines, balancing the technology at hand (as in the STEM areas) with the people who work with it and make decisions about how to apply it. “What does that intersection point demand of us to teach girls?” She feels the school is required to challenge them to “be bold, to come in with more questions than answers, to engage, to be curious.” The goal is to work on those deeply personal skills of communication, collaboration, and building relationships. The value of STEM instruction is “the excitement of those things coming together”—tools, people, and a growing sense of ethical responsibility.

Faculty are keen to employ project-based learning. A telling recent example is the introduction of the Astro Pi Challenge, an international research and coding competition. 2017 was the

first year that Canadian students were eligible to participate, and Branksome was one of the first Canadian schools to be involved. The challenge was to design a study, using the Raspberry Pi processor, to run from the International Space Station.

“We had a huge brainstorm,” says Alexa Vasilakos. “We took up the whole whiteboard space in the classroom, brainstorming what we could do, and we narrowed it down from there.” Alexa was a Grade 10 student at the time. Through the course of that brainstorming session and the days following, the class of seven students divided into three groups, all taking up different ideas, developing them, presenting them, coding them, running the programs, and interpreting the results. A year later, Alexa and her partner in the project, Adele Crete-Laurence, got a notification from the European Space Agency (ESA). They had won.

“It sounds really crazy,” admits Adele, and there’s certainly an element of that. Adele and Alexa chose to study light pollution through compiling, comparing, and interpreting luminosity levels of cities and countries. In the process, they interacted with the ESA, an intergovernmental organization of 22 member states dedicated to the exploration of space. They took part in an international conference with members of the agency and like-minded students from around the world. They also had a chance to interact with Tim Peake, an astronaut with the ESA. They asked him about the challenges that he faced in his journey to becoming an astronaut, something that was perhaps of particular interest to Adele, who got her glider pilot’s licence last summer.

While the lessons of the Astro Pi Challenge were many, the most enduring experience for the girls was to learn something about themselves. Alexa says that “I never saw myself as someone who would get involved in STEM, and [it was amazing] to get involved, and to really push our limits to see what we could do.”

“I didn’t really tell my parents much about it,” she says. “Or when I told them, they didn’t really understand.” The result, understandably, got their attention. “My parents were, like, ‘wait, what

did you do?!” Even when I explained it to them, they still didn’t really understand. But they thought it was really neat that we had won an international competition.” Both students tell us that the experience has altered how they see their skills, but also how they would like to build upon them in the future. “I’m thinking maybe [I’ll pursue] aerospace engineering,” says Adele, something that she hadn’t considered seriously before.

Both girls have been at Branksome since JK, and they exemplify some of the things that the school is all about. “They’ve seen the progression of innovation here,” says director of technology and innovation, Michael Ianni-Palarchio. When Adele took part in the mentoring program in the Junior School, she found that “so many things have changed. We see the JKs and SKs with their own iPads. And then I walked into the Grade 6 classrooms and they look like the STEAM room we worked in, and, whoa, it’s evolved!”

Recently, some classes received kits to build and program their own drones. The older girls marvelled at the new resources, perhaps wishing they had had them when they were in the lower grades. In that kind of programming, says Ianni-Palarchio, director of technology and innovation, “it’s about helping our students develop innovation mindsets so that they can be prepared for our rapidly changing world ... they’ll need to be creative, flexible thinkers to thrive and succeed” in STEM fields, or any other.

The Astro Pi Challenge is one example of the approach that’s taken across the school. When faculty say that they are constantly looking out for creative kinds of engagement, they mean it. They are also able to point to numerous examples of working across disciplines in creative and cutting-edge ways. Again, it’s a challenging environment, though it’s also one that supports students to meet the challenges they face, from adapting scheduling, to providing resources and dedicated mentorship.



3

Student population

A distinctive feature of Branksome's learning environment is that it's all-girls. The benefits are varied and keenly felt, particularly around the opportunities that it presents. Beyond the school, people are prone to feel that an all-girls space is about removing the boys, removing distraction. That, however, isn't how the students and faculty at Branksome would express it. It's not about removing boys, but allowing girls a space for greater opportunities and a wider breadth of expression. One student told us that "the fact that it's an all-girls school just makes everyone more comfortable. ... [You come here knowing] that it's a safe space where you won't feel super judged." Another, who arrived from a coed environment, admitted that she wasn't sure if an all-girls school would be the right fit for her, based on stereotypes found in movies and other popular media. The reality, she found, wasn't that. She says, "There's a lot of things that I would never have considered doing, but other girls were here, and they were comfortable ... and I never felt that I couldn't do anything, or that someone was judging me, or I couldn't raise my hand. I think [the all-girls environment] really helped build my confidence. Just to speak up and to know that my voice actually matters, and what I have to say is important if I'm speaking from a place of knowledge."

Those kinds of thoughts are common, particularly around self-expression. Another student felt that in her previous, coed school, "the classes were very rowdy all of the time, [so] I never felt

that I had the opportunity to speak out about anything really. But here there is a lot of emphasis" on speaking out. "If I think what I'm going to say might be dumb, I'm still confident that I can ask my questions, or say anything, and it will be met with seriousness."

Conversations with students and faculty invariably come back to the concept of gaining a voice and the confidence to use it. The middle grade students have opportunities to present a "My Remarkable" during monthly assemblies. "It's to show that there are so many talented people in the Middle School," says a Grade 7 student, though it's more than that. "This year I was asked to do a My Remarkable. ... I was really nervous to go up and speak, and everyone was cheering for me. So I wasn't as nervous, and by the end they were still cheering for me. ... They're supporting you even if it didn't go so well." Another adds that "in that moment, that's the most important thing: cheering them on. Because that's what the assembly vibe is. It's a lot of people taking risks and being vulnerable and sharing something they care about."

That kind of support is common within the school, though it may be especially striking to students who came to Branksome from coed environments. The same is true of the instructors. Scott Harbin, a music instructor, told us about his first experience of the student population, when he was teaching a sample class as part of the hiring process. "The girls were so enthusiastic and there didn't seem to be any hesitation to working with a new teacher, and within five minutes they were jumping up and offering their ideas and that kind of thing."

If there is a commonality among the student population, that's it. Whether they arrive with those character traits or gain them afterward, there is a strong sense of freedom as well as a lack of cynicism, something that was apparent in all our interactions. "They feel comfortable to be themselves," says Harbin, and it's clear that they do. "I do still have an abundance of flute players, but in order to sound good, I've got to have lead trumpet players, and low brass players, and a double bass player. By necessity girls

have to fill every role, so they don't feel like they're pigeon-holed into stereotypical areas."

When we visited, one experience reflected exactly what the students told us. During an arts assembly, we saw that the students who came forward to present were roundly supported, in a way that felt entirely natural and heartfelt—something that perhaps doesn't characterize teen communities in other settings. Staff believe that it's partially a function of being a girls-only environment, though the culture that has been fostered here no doubt plays an important role. There's also a sense of humour that feels natural and welcome. Some of the presentations in the assembly were very serious and deep, but not all were (for example, a student choir sang about lettuce). It all felt like a breath of fresh air.

There are 64 boarding students within a population of 900 across the Junior, Middle, and Senior Schools. The culture of the school is intense yet caring (though the teachers we spoke with who arrived from other school environments noted that they found it more relaxed than they might have expected), and the academic and emotional supports are evident. All students are geared toward achievement and there is a high-achievement mentality all around. They are motivated by dynamic instruction, a pre-existing academic disposition, and a high level of autonomy and choice. Jurjevich feels that Branksome Hall has always been a school that focuses on individual potential, and that there's never been one model of a Branksome girl. The character that each girl brings to the school is seen as a strength of the school itself, something that the faculty regularly work to underscore. A breadth of character, too, is prized.

There are many students who enrol for a more holistic school experience, rather than only having an eye to post-secondary prep. There is a pervasive understanding that no one is going to excel at everything. Where some schools are transactional—"come here and we'll get you to university"—faculty work hard to keep the students grounded in the here and now, enjoying their time at the school,

not only looking to life beyond it. Harbin says that, by the time they are in the Diploma Program, the students who gain the most social capital are those who are involved in the life of the school, do well, and are socially engaged in positive ways. Likewise, he says, the prefects are chosen primarily because of their ability to engage well across the student population, not because they are star athletes or because they have the most robust social media feeds.



4

Athletics

The athletics program is focused on long-term athlete development. It starts at a young age, building the skills necessary to become competitive athletes, with an eye to introducing habits that inform lifelong activity and well-being. A primary goal of the program, says Kimberly Kniaz, assistant head of the Senior and Middle School, Creativity, Action, Service (CAS), is to expose students to different activities and experiences so that they are able to find something they enjoy that can be used to create a foundation for ongoing fitness, nutrition, and well-being. Leadership skills and competencies are also foregrounded through team sports. Fun is a key priority as well. It's about "having that joy in your day," Kniaz says. "We want the program to set them up for success in personal well-being," she adds. "It's not about what you can do now; it's about what you understand about well-being in a way that helps you evolve as you move forward."

Inclusivity is important, and faculty are keen to involve as many students as possible. To do that, a lot of sports and activities are offered relative to the size of the student population. In the Junior School, there is a no-cut policy—anyone from Grades 4 to 6 who wants to participate on a team is able to. At the Middle School level, there are green teams, groups of students who are allowed to come to practice, practice with the team, and develop skills, but who may not be given opportunities to participate in competitive games and events.

As athletes get older, the teams naturally get more competitive. Katie Flynn, director of athletics, says that cuts are made from time to time, although they are rare. “We try to carve out a spot for an athlete to remain involved, but sometimes cuts are necessary in those older age groups in order to find the balance between remaining competitive and developing student athletes.”

The rowing team is one of the best in the country, and it’s a very committed and competitive program. It’s year-long, and the school has a full-time rowing coach. Fall rowing is a smaller program, though they do train on the lake even as the temperatures begin to drop. The students are keen, to be sure. Training on campus makes use of ergometers, and they are used throughout the winter months along with pilates and yoga training. The rowers are on the water in early spring, and they’re out there every morning. Branksome won the overall national title in 2017, so the training certainly pays off—especially given that they’re competing with schools like Brentwood College School and Ridley College, both of which are renowned and have an easier access to open water.

The school participates in the Conference of Independent Schools Athletic Association (CISAA) and the Ontario Federation of School Athletic Associations (OFSAA) championships. “We don’t really have a marquee sport,” says Flynn. “We don’t really focus on one thing more than another. We try to give attention to all sports equally, and sometimes it just depends on where the talent is, and that’s what drives the success of the program.”

Branksome Hall has had an outdoor education program since before that was even a thing. The emphasis on outdoor education today is centred on the Week Without Halls program, which takes place in the fall. That week, students in Grades 7 to 11 go off campus to participate in traditional camp-style programs hosted at, frankly, some of the best camps in the country: Camp Arowhon, Camp Ahmek, and Camp Tawingo. That said, the program is being developed to make it both more robust and, in some cases,

more clearly aligned with the arc of the curriculum. “We’re actually in the process of re-envisioning it to create more of a link from year to year,” says Flynn. “We really want to create an intentional program that flows from Grade 7 to Grade 12, one that really speaks to the school’s values. Right now it’s a bit patchy.” Nevertheless, it works well even now at building a sense of community, stewardship, and active living.

Facilities

The campus is a bit of a miracle, given where it’s located. It includes buildings in a range of styles, all nevertheless sympathetic to the overall ethos of the place. Outside, there’s a section of Carolinian forest with an outdoor classroom, four tennis courts, a regulation athletics field, a track, and three playgrounds. Views from the classrooms are idyllic—you’d never know that you’re within walking distance of the bustle of downtown Toronto. (In fact, it’s possible that many people who work nearby have no idea that the campus is even here. It’s nicely inconspicuous.)

A typical approach to the school is through 10 Elm Avenue, one of the oldest buildings on site and home to the administrative offices. It’s also where parents drop off students of the Senior School each morning, and where the students are met each day by a member of the faculty. (The days we arrived, Weinstock was out there, as she is many days. When we asked her about it, she said, “That goes back to this being a place where you are welcome and known. So anytime I can do it, I’m there. It allows for lots of informal conversations ... And you notice a lot of stuff when you’re out there.” She feels that if there’s a best means of signalling your values, “it’s always in those small ways.”) 10 Elm is the definition of a Victorian pile: staid, solid, weighty. The Athletics and Wellness Centre (AWC) across the street is a far better example of how the school sees itself: forward-thinking, bright, open, and active. The new facility will extend that identity.

In the course of each day, students move between old and new buildings and instructional spaces. The buildings are mixed, with large Victorian-era homes—this was a choice neighbourhood even at the turn of the last century—as well as ultra-modern ones. One student told us that, when she first arrived, she entered 10 Elm and thought that it looked more like a hotel than a school— “but as you get more into the school, and into the classrooms, you can see that it’s more vibrant” than the porte cochère might suggest. “It’s more of a collage” which lends the school a sense of dimension and interest, she says. She adds that “one thing that Branksome tries to preserve is a lot of the tradition ... but with that come new traditions.”

“I’ve always thought that the buildings were very in harmony with who we were as a school,” says Weinstock, and she means that both in the range of use and design. While the campus is relatively small and property bound, at least in comparison with schools outside the city proper, the students move through a nice range of environments through the course of their days. “Even though we’ve now got some pretty grand spaces—and we’ve carried that way of thinking into the AWC—it’s about your journey, it’s about how you self-actualize.” For those that might remember it, Sherborne House is reminiscent, in all the best ways, of the dorm in the sitcom *Facts of Life*. It feels more like a home than a dorm. There and elsewhere, the use of space is intentional, with nothing put somewhere simply because it needs a place to go.

The Junior School facilities, too, make inspired use of the varying styles and ages of the architecture. A main area includes the wall and gable of one of the original buildings; once exterior, it’s now an interior element. The art room sits within it, and its placement there—with all the angles of the original home—feels masterful. “I got to design it,” says art teacher Allyson Payne. “I also designed this piece of furniture,” she says, gesturing to a central element that holds work and supplies. That day, we watched Payne teach a lesson on cognition, where students would do two-handed

drawings to demonstrate the interaction of the two hemispheres of the brain. It was kind of magical.

There are classrooms of the future, with the range of furniture you’d expect to find there—all the furniture is on wheels, one piece has a treadmill desk, and there’s no front of the classroom—with distinct spaces devoted to group, individual, and large group learning.

By contrast, there’s also Read Acres, the hallway that is home to the very youngest classrooms: SK and JK. The area is somewhat off on its own, and it’s charming in every way: active, playful, cheerful. One day we visited, an SK class was creating art works that were based on what they saw during a trip to the Art Gallery of Ontario. That kind of activity could easily become onerous, though it wasn’t: the students were just playing with ideas, big and small. Another class was using old toys, paper, chestnuts from the yard, and other assorted items to make candelabras. The process was brilliant, and the product was too. The classrooms are within the oldest structure on site, with high ceilings, tall windows, creaky stairs, and lots of carved wood and cast plaster. The students love it, as well they should. The age and those creaks add a bit of whimsy that is entirely welcome, but would be hard to create from scratch.

Weinstock commented that “space does and doesn’t matter. You can put on the most brilliant drama in a shed. So you don’t need it, but I think in this case, with the work we’re doing, it’s creating intentional space, and scalable space. ... It’s finding a space which is dedicated to human imagination.” Whenever there are new buildings, there is a concerted effort to create spaces for students to land, connect, and relax. The furniture moves and is modular, bright, and colourful. The new lockers in one of the refurbished spaces are intended to be written on with whiteboard markers. “And yet we still want more,” says Kniaz. “And as we look to the future of the campus, it’s always one of the key thoughts: where do we create those landing zones?”

The programs make good use of local resources—for example, the hockey team trains at the Larry Grossman Forest Hill Memorial

Arena and Leaside Memorial Gardens Arena—though there is more athletic space on campus than you might first assume. Within the Rosedale Ravine, there are outdoor classroom spaces in addition to the physical education elements.

The two fitness centres on campus are run by two full-time fitness instructors. One is exclusively for Middle School students and the other is for Senior students. They are used for health and physical education classes and sport-specific training, and students can use them for personal training at any time of day that they don't have classes. Employees of the school have unlimited access to those spaces as well. The staff likes it, though it's also a means of promoting active lifestyles. "It's good modelling, that they see the adults in the school being active," says Kniaz, noting that it helps students see that prioritizing time for health is important.

5 Pastoral care

There is a strong, structured, and layered guidance system. Advisor groups meet weekly, with that time focused on relational development and growth, and any issues that arise. The groups consist of eight to 12 students who meet with a teacher or a member of the staff, and they are retained as the girls advance through the grades—same students, same advisor—as much as possible.

There's a lot of intentional work around community and personal well-being, and in terms of overall pastoral care, Branksome Hall is a model that other schools rightly look to. They are at the leading edge. As an example, in 2017, graduates of the class of '86 gifted a donation to promote mental health within the school. One of the initiatives undertaken was a student-created well-being app. Students applied and were given stipends to spend a summer developing the app and its content. In 2018, it was moved into the Apple app store, and a consultant has been brought in to develop other apps as well as evolving the functionality of the original one. Says Kniaz, "It's meant to be an opportunity for kids to have that hands-on accessibility to information, what's going on in the school, programming," and to otherwise engage around well-being topics.

The school has distinguished itself through its approach to issues of gender identity, particularly around two alumni who transitioned and were featured on the cover of the alumni magazine in 2016. It gained national media attention at the time, and well it should. It's likely that it sparked conversations at other schools across

the country, both coed and gender-based, about what it means to be inclusive. Many schools promote the value of inclusion, though they would balk at male students choosing to wear kilts, even though they may be part of the school uniform. At Branksome, there is consistent demonstration that they really mean what they say. The trans-gender working group is an example, as is the open manner in which those values are shared throughout the school community: the gender-neutral bathrooms have signs noting not only that they are gender neutral, but also why.

The work around inclusivity is done mainly in the community blocks. In the fall, there is a deliberate school-wide review of the messaging around inclusivity, anti-bullying, and the importance of creating safe spaces. This is done so that new students understand the values of the school as well as the intentions behind them.

Branksome works notably beyond the counselling and guidance suites, bringing community and wellness activities into the daily life of the school. Where some schools have annual or periodic community activity events, Branksome has them weekly, the most notable being Fit Friday. The intention is to further the sense of community across the entire school, though the experience itself is just a lot of fun. During the community block on Friday mornings, a range of activities is offered, from the very active—open workout in the fitness centres, yoga classes, dance parties, dodgeball, basketball—to quieter, more contemplative community engagements: mindfulness meditation, walks through the campus green spaces, craft activities. All the spaces throughout the school are used, with the exception of study hall.

Administration has adopted limited late start times within the senior grades, reflecting recent and ongoing research around teen sleep patterns (including a study conducted on campus in 2010 through the CRC). Other schools have adopted more substantial late start programs, and perhaps Branksome will in time. For the moment, classes start at 9:30 am on Wednesdays, and early morning sports and team training schedules are altered as well.

There is an on-site health centre staffed by a full-time registered nurse and social worker. Both work with all students in clinic and beyond, supporting discussions and initiatives around wellness and mental health. There is a Peer Support team, made up of students who wear a yellow crest on their kilts to identify themselves so other students can feel safe to approach them to talk. They are overseen by staff who administer the guidance program, including the lead social worker. Students apply for a position within the Peer Support team and go through a full application process, including an interview and training. They address mental health concerns as well as social issues, including bullying, substance abuse, and body image, providing another avenue for students to enter the program of care.

Post-secondary counselling starts early and includes both class-work and one-on-one time. One student told us of the post-secondary pathways coordinator—“she’s the best”—who helps with the entire process, from decision making, to timelines, to submission details. She says, “There’s also a really fun board where you can put a picture of a school you got into.” Students pose with a card with a name of the university. “You just pin it to the board, which is really fun. It feels so good to get your picture taken by her and put it up. It’s a nice recognition of what you’ve achieved.”

In all, you’d be hard pressed to find a school that has a more comprehensive, empathetic, layered commitment to student wellness and academic counselling.



6

Getting in

One student told us that the application process itself was one of the reasons that she ultimately chose to come to Branksome Hall: “Personally, I felt as though the application for Branksome was a bit more all-encompassing as opposed to some of the other schools. So, I just felt that this school knew me better. And when I got an offer to go here, I just felt it would be a stronger fit.” The goal of the admissions process is precisely that: to ensure that, when a girl enters the school, she and the school are both clear that it’s the right fit.

A visit to the campus is highly recommended, if not overtly required. The application process proper starts with the completion of an online application form and payment of a relatively modest application fee (in comparison with other schools of this size and scope). The application is supported by all the usual materials: two most recent report cards and any related information that can speak to academic standing. Grade 7 students are asked to supply a portfolio of graded student work, which they will be asked to present along with personal achievements—their particular points of pride—during the interview. That can sound onerous, perhaps, but it needn’t. The school is not looking for evidence that the candidate has begun saving the world; rather, the admissions team is interested in seeing how she presents herself, the relationship that she has to others, and her aspirations.

A student interview is required for students applying to Grade 1 and up, and it can be scheduled via Skype if necessary. The intention

isn’t to grill the applicant, but rather to test the relationship—the school, just as the family, needs to be sure that the fit is right. International students entering Grade 7 and up are required to write the SSAT, while all students (both domestic and international) entering Grade 9 and up are required to write the SSAT.

The admission process can, and should, begin at your first inkling that the school might be the right option. Again, it’s about a relationship—visiting the school, speaking with admissions and other administrators is the right way to begin. This isn’t university, so the application process is far more personal and, frankly, enjoyable.

While boarding admissions are rolling, applications for day students need to be received no later than the beginning of December for entrance the following September. Admission decisions are delivered on the last Friday of February. Boarding admission decisions are delivered at the completion of the admissions process, whenever that might fall (though typically it occurs during the winter months for those enrolling for the following September).

Admissions officers are looking for students who will contribute to student life. The successful candidate will be open to differing perspectives, and keen to engage thoughtfully with others, both in the classroom and common spaces. They’ll be as comfortable asking questions as they are communicating their thoughts. They’ll also be aware of what the experience can offer them personally, and be willing to dive in and make the most of everything the school has to offer.

7

Money matters

Tuition rates are as simple as they come: there's one fee for all students in JK through Grade 10, and another for those in Grades 11 and 12. A registration fee is required when entering the school. Tuition is paid in three installments, though families of day students may apply for the monthly payment plan, which runs a full 12 months throughout the calendar year. Tuition covers instruction. Boarding students pay tuition plus a boarding fee. All other fees are incidental, which is typical for schools of this size and scope. Textbooks are not provided.

The cafeteria fee is absolutely reasonable, though the quality of the food is higher than found in a majority of independent schools. All prep is done on site, and meals include a daily vegan offering that, believe it or not, is the hands-down favourite of the students. If you ask students elsewhere what their favourite cafeteria item is, you'll hear about the muffins, cookies, chicken fingers, and pizza. When we asked here, the response was quick and unanimous: the vegan special! (We tried it, and they're right: it's really good.)

The school doesn't provide laptops, though they are required from Grade 7 and up. However, IT support is offered free of charge, as are loaner laptops should a student's need to go in for repair.

All trips are discretionary, except those during Week Without Halls. In the Junior School, before- and after-school care is offered, though not included in tuition.

8

The takeaway

Branksome Hall is an A-list all-girls' school in the heart of Toronto, proximate to all the resources and aspirations that you'd expect to find there. The long history is evident, though it's not quite the history that some might assume. It's not a history of privilege, but rather of striving to impress upon young women that they each have a voice that needs to be heard. In the early days, over a century ago, that perhaps meant something different than it does today—but the need for a unique environment for girls, and a desire to stretch their gaze, remains at the heart of the work of the school.

The student population is notably diverse—the boarding program adds a nice element as well—though the girls share a desire to be both supportive and engaged. Expectations are intentionally kept high. “The more you expect of a girl's thinking, and her presentation and her behaviour,” says Weinstock, “the more she rises to that.” While that's not etched on a wall anywhere, that's exactly what Branksome Hall is about. Still, there's a human edge to it all. “No child learns math before she learns the connection with her teacher,” says Weinstock. “If the connection isn't there, she's never going to learn as well. This is the enduring value of connection and community.”

There is a seriousness, though there's a good sense of humour and joy as well. (“In Grade 1 we hatched ducks!” a Grade 7 student told us of her first experiences at the school.) The campus's heritage

buildings add to the lustre, though they predate Branksome's founding. Beyond that, the spirit of the school is strikingly modern. Flexible learning spaces have been adopted and developed to foster agency in learning and to integrate movement into classroom instruction. The IB program starts early, as does the view to globalism. There is a buzz of activity, especially in the weekly, monthly, and seasonal events throughout the school calendar. One student told us that "there's always something to look forward to." Certainly, our time in the school confirms that. Branksome Hall sets its sights very high, to be sure, and the ideal student is one who shares its core vision and is able to function in a very diverse, challenging, expansive environment.



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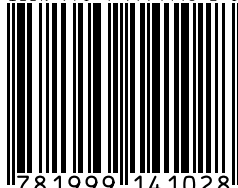
“From the beginning, Branksome Hall has seen itself as a women’s institution, not simply a girls’ school, largely thanks to strong women leaders.”

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