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PRIVATE SCHOOL REVIEWS

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## St. Mildred's- Lightbourn School

The Our Kids Review



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# **St. Mildred's- Lightbourn School**

## The Our Kids Review

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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

Every private school is unique, with its own character, facilities, programming, culture, and reason for being. No private school is right for every learner, but for every learner there is a right school. Your task—and it isn't an easy one—is to find the right school for your child; the one that offers the right challenges and the necessary supports; the one where she feels comfortable and included; the one that allows him to grow into a sense of himself and his place in the world; the one where people laugh at their jokes and ache in the same places. The one where they know, without question: those are my goals, these are my friends, this is my school.

## About Our Kids

We know how hard it can be for you, as a parent, to research private schools. For more than two decades we've published Canada's most trusted annual private school guide, building on insights gained over years of work. The *Our Kids Private School Reviews* series of book-length reviews is aimed at information-seeking families, providing a detailed look at the offerings, the traditions, and the culture of each school. Titles published in this series to date include:

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| 15. Elmwood School                                       | 41. St. John's-Kilmarnock School        |
| 16. Fieldstone School                                    | 42. St. Margaret's School               |
| 17. Glenlyon Norfolk School                              | 43. St. Mildred's-Lightbourn School     |
| 18. Havergal College                                     | 44. Sunnybrook School                   |
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## Details: St. Mildred's-Lightbourn School

**Global. Innovative. Individualized.**

**Location:** Oakville, Ontario

**Grades:** Junior Kindergarten to Grade 12

**Gender:** All girls

**Living Arrangements:** Day school

**Enrolment:** 560 students

**Founded:** 1891

**Curriculum:** Progressive, Reggio Emilia

**Curriculum Pace:** Standard-enriched

**Academic Culture:** Rigorous



## Introduction

Rooted in its rich history as a pioneer in girls' education, St. Mildred's-Lightbourn School (SMLS) has grown and evolved into a place where girls can forge their unique educational paths in a caring, close-knit community.

The school's vision—"Young women empowered to challenge and transform the world"—is evident in every aspect of its programs. SMLS students, known affectionately as "Millies," discover their individual talents and passions in an environment that genuinely values every girl's voice. The students' confidence is palpable, as is their enthusiasm for how they're going to apply their knowledge and skills in the real world. While more than 130 years have passed since the school's forward-looking founders laid the groundwork, SMLS has kept its commitment to equip and inspire girls to pursue their ambitions.

The school's leadership in girls' education has also persisted over the decades. SMLS is the only all-girls school west of Toronto accredited by the Canadian Association of Independent Schools. Head of School Catherine Hant has dedicated her whole career to single-gender education. She is a strong advocate for an all-girls education, having had her own transformative experiences in girls' school settings, and she leads a faculty that shares this view.

The academic program at SMLS is rigorous and expectations are high. Yet the culture is supportive in every respect, and there are natural mentorships among students, connecting the youngest and oldest students in both intentional programming and in unstructured ways in their day-to-day interactions. Teachers strive for personalized learning, where they take their cue from girls' strengths and interests in presenting the curriculum and formulating assessments.

Experiential learning is integral to students' experience. Five "Signature Programs" in Global Citizenship, Professional Internship, STEM & Robotics, Active Healthy Living, and Arts

& Design offer opportunities to apply knowledge gained in the classroom to real-world challenges.

About three-quarters of students spend their whole pre-university academic careers at SMLS, so the curricular and co-curricular programs are designed for continuity. “Students enjoy an interconnected path here, and we foster this warm and supportive community, where teachers and staff get to know every student, every family,” says Hant. “This allows us to create personalized pathways for each girl, giving them the building blocks they need to reach the next stage.”

One large building with multiple extensions and additions houses all the students, with distinct sections for each school. This architecture offers a sense of separateness and autonomy for the older girls while creating an overarching closeness across the grades. Students across all grades cross paths in the hall, attend assemblies together, and share dining spaces as examples. All of this allows for natural connections across the grades, and the result is a family-like environment that values both independence and mutual assistance.

“The comments from new and prospective families highlight our small-school feel, warmth, and sense of community,” says Head of Admissions and Enrolment Sarah Scandrett. “They feel it as soon as they come through the doors.” The long-time parents we spoke to agreed, adding that SMLS is a place charged with energy and activity. Co-curricular activities are plentiful and varied, so that every girl can find her niche. “I watch my girls go into school on a daily basis with enthusiasm and energy,” says one parent. “They’re always excited about something going on inside or outside class.”

While SMLS welcomes students from every faith, it’s an Anglican-based school. In practice, this involves weekly chapels—often more like assemblies—with themes centred around universal values such as equity, justice, belonging, and well-being that gives students opportunity to lead presentations and share experiences

and learnings with one another.

Building character and fostering wellness in students is paramount at SMLS, says Denise Power, the Dean of Students, Well-being, and Inclusion. “It’s about providing opportunities for the girls to get to know themselves and take risks in a safe, caring community. Everybody looks after everybody here.”

## Basics

Enrolment hovers around 550 girls at SMLS, which sits on 10 acres in the heart of Oakville. While many students live in the Oakville area, an extensive busing system widens the school's catchment area far past the town's borders. This allows broader access and choice to an education of this caliber that would not otherwise be available to many families.

The first view of the school off Linbrook Avenue, a stately residential street in Oakville, is striking. It looks precisely as people tend to imagine private schools. The main administrative building, where visitors enter, has a Georgian façade complete with gables and forest green shutters. Inside the doors, the foyer continues the theme with pillars and multiple chandeliers. Yet the whole place has a welcoming—even cozy—feel. The elegant but comfortable waiting area for visitors feels much like a living room in a well-appointed home.

The administrative building itself wasn't part of the school's early days. It was completed in the 1960s, coinciding with the amalgamation of the two founding schools. Once visitors are past the entry suite, it's a modern academic setting. The teaching spaces are crafted to meet the needs of innovative programming and teaching styles, thanks to a 14-year capital campaign that ended in 2011. The final phase of that development included substantial renovations that resulted in new classrooms; a dining hall, kitchen, and servery; and a senior library. Rooms that had been classrooms before became music labs; what was once the library became the student centre.

The hallways are broad, and teaching spaces are bathed in natural light. There are views onto a main courtyard, and many of the classrooms have direct access to the outdoor play spaces. Everything is LEED-certified and includes geothermal heating and cooling, greywater collection, drought-tolerant landscaping, and light-coloured roofing to keep interior spaces cool.

A single building houses the junior, middle, and senior schools, though the levels have their own territories, entryways, and atmosphere. The junior school has spacious outdoor areas with just enough play structures to encourage active and imaginative play. In many of the junior areas, there are intentional spaces created for learning, collaboration, and curling up with a favourite book. The classroom spaces are created with students in mind, with corner pillows, window benches, and chairs where girls can curl up and read a book. Many classrooms have flexible, modular furniture that can be adapted to suit particular lessons, projects, or student needs.

Asked about their favourite places on campus, the students pointed to a few common spots: the Learning Commons (as the two libraries are known), the outdoor classroom, various “learning nooks” scattered throughout the building, and the Student Lounge, with its soaring ceiling and lush plant wall. Senior students favoured the Senior Student Lounge, a smaller space reserved just for Grade 12 students.

SMLS is currently updating its master plan to further align with the school's academic vision. “We have state-of-the-art facilities now and want to continue creating learning environments that will support personalized learning and serve the whole student,” says Hant. “We see SMLS as so much more than a building where classes are taught. Our purpose is to provide transformative, personalized education for students, something that inspires and challenges our students, and we are on a path to do just that.”



## Background

The school's long history continues to shape its current mission and values. St. Mildred's-Lightbourn—as its name suggests—grew out of two separate institutions that merged to create the school we know today. Both shared a mission to nurture girls' holistic education and champion their world-changing ambitions.

The earliest incarnation of SMLS was founded in Toronto in 1891 by the Sisters of the Church, an Anglican community of women founded by Mother Emily Ayckbown. By 1893, they had moved four times, ultimately settling in a grand Georgian home on Beverley Street in Toronto. The school became St. Mildred's College in 1908.

The Lightbourn School was also Anglican, though it was founded in Oakville in the 1920s by a renowned teacher. Ruth Lightbourn began as a tutor for the children of John Guest, then headmaster of Appleby College. Resourceful, experienced, and spirited, she became the go-to tutor, and in time launched her own school.

The establishment of each school occurred in eras of social change for women. In the case of Miss Lightbourn's School, women's right to vote was relatively new and women were just starting to gain acceptance at post-secondary schools. Both founding schools felt a deep sense of responsibility to prepare students to become leaders and innovators. From the first days of each school, girls took part in the full range of academics alongside a vigorous athletic program—things that were atypical in girls' public schooling at the time. They were pushing the boundaries of what was seen as socially acceptable.

In 1969, the two schools merged under the administration of the Sisters of the Church, and in 1986 the Sisters turned the school over to a permanent board of governors. When it opened, SMLS was the first all-girls school in Oakville. It remained the only one for many years and is still the most prominent one and it's accredited by CAIS.

## Religion

While SMLS retains its formal association with the Anglican Church of Canada, it is a multi-faith-based school with a firm emphasis on inclusiveness. As one student put it, “We learn about Anglican values, which are really just general values related to how to be a good person. They also teach us about the values and traditions of many other cultures and faiths.”

Head of Admissions and Enrolment Sarah Scandrett says some parents want to know exactly what the school's Anglican heritage means for students. “We honour our Anglican roots, but we have very broad diversity in terms of students' religious and cultural backgrounds. A few families assume we're Catholic, so I have to correct that and emphasize that our views are much broader.” Students in the junior school take religious studies, which includes an exploration of multiple faiths.

The most salient reminders of the school's Anglican past are in the weekly chapels, thrice yearly Eucharist (Holy Communion) services, and the presence of a part-time Anglican chaplain. Chapel talks don't follow the Anglican service, but instead are used to gather the school and engage them in big issues and ideas. When we visited, the focus was on Breast Cancer Awareness Month. Chapels also honour other cultural celebrations, highlight big announcements, and mark student achievements. As for the Eucharist services, attendance is mandatory, but partaking in communion is not.



## Leadership

Catherine Hant's arrival at SMLS in 2023 as the new head of school was a homecoming in two ways. First, she was a Millie from grade 4 to 6 when her father served as the school's chaplain. Second, and perhaps more important, Hant was returning to the place where she felt happiest during her schooling. The short, but formative, time she spent at SMLS convinced her of the deep value of all-girls education and shaped her future career as a teacher and educational leader in girls' education.

"It was a bit of a full-circle moment," says Hant, describing how it felt to come back to the school. "I learned first-hand the difference that an all-girls education could make, and since then I've seen so many examples of girls flourishing in this model." Her observations come from a 29-year career at The Bishop Strachan School in Toronto, where she started as a teacher and rose to several senior administrative roles, including the director of admissions and principal of the Junior School.

After her brief stint as an SMLS student, Hant attended public school through high school graduation. The contrast between the two experiences was stark. "I'd been immersed in a single-gender environment that encouraged girls to have a voice, develop some confidence, and try their hand at lots of things without any preconceptions about what was appropriate for girls and what was appropriate for boys," she says. "Then I was thrown into a setting where I felt very intimidated by the boys and cautious about how I would share my ideas in a classroom setting. I pulled back a lot. The only area I felt I could be confident in was sports."

Building on her athletic skills, Hant earned a Bachelor of Physical Education at Brock University, then a Bachelor of Education and Masters of Education, both from York University. Her decision to begin her career at an all-girls school was intentional and personal, and she's become a strong advocate for all-girls education over the decades. Deciding to take the next step

in educational leadership at SMLS was a natural choice, she says. "I've watched so many students enter all-girls schools quite timid and cautious, and they've graduated as confident, empowered women."

Hant, who calls herself a people person, was excited to get to know the SMLS community when she took the helm. "My first priority was getting to know the students, families, and staff," she says. "I wanted to learn about their stories and what they love about SMLS. The things I love most about this job are the people, the variety and the positive energy."

Hant relocated with her family to Oakville so that she could be part of all aspects of SMLS life. Every day, in between meetings and all the other demands on her time, she takes a walk around the school to say hello to staff and students across the divisions. She also attends student events nearly every day. "The student truly is at the center of everything we do here, from the decisions that we're making around the facilities and programing to the opportunities we provide to develop themselves as well-rounded individuals," she says.

Along with maintaining a student-centred approach, Hant is committed to upholding the SMLS mission and values, fostering a positive and inclusive school culture that celebrates diversity, and empowering students to go outside their comfort zones. "We have high expectations, but high support," she says. "We hear and respect our students' voices."

Joining a close-knit faculty committed to continuous learning was a strong draw for Hant, who has a Master of Education degree in Educational Leadership and Administration from York University. "We have very low turnover, which speaks a lot to the positive culture at the school," she says. "The staff embrace opportunities to collect feedback and try to improve their practice."

According to Hant, it's all about creating an environment that nurtures girls' confidence and motivation to grow and learn. "We spend more waking hours with children than their families do," she says. "And so this place needs to feel like a place where

they can see themselves and they can be themselves. We're really talking about the development of citizens, of human beings, right. It's a big responsibility that we don't take lightly."

## Single-gender education

The school is confident in its all-girls model. Experience and formal evidence help to inform the case for single-gender education. "There's extensive research that shows girls' school environments add opportunities for young women," says Hant. "For us, it's not about the absence of boys, but the presence of girls. In a school like ours, girls are confident and unafraid to try new things. Every girl is on a team. Every girl can be in the math club. They take all the leadership positions. It is incredibly moving and inspiring to see girls pursue every interest that calls to them."

Hant also points to research that shows girls need each other to learn best, and they can be distracted or intimidated by boys' presence. "Our teachers are experts in girls' learning and our classroom strategies are based on making sure each girl is seen and heard," she says. "This focus on collaboration and personalization affords girls more opportunities for connection and deep academic learning."

The parents we spoke to whose daughters had been at SMLS for several years spoke enthusiastically about these benefits. "It makes the girls feel more comfortable to share their ideas with the class, and I think they're more able to focus on learning," says one. "It allows them to just be themselves, without that layer of potential social issues." According to another, "All-girls [schooling] can easily be dismissed by someone that doesn't understand the dynamics of it, but it has 100% benefited my daughters by allowing them to focus and build their confidence."

Still, parents appreciate how SMLS gives students the chance to interact with boys through special organized activities. It helps that there's an all-boys school, The Linbrook School, across the street. "I love the social opportunities they have with boys, in terms of trips and sports and other activities," says one parent. "It's an important element of any education, and it's managed in a fun and positive way." Another outlet for age-appropriate events with

boys is through the school's membership in the Coalition of Single Sex Schools of the GTA (COSSOT).

It's all about supporting girls in finding their unique voice, says Hant, which can be harder in a coed setting. "We give them opportunities to disagree, have an opinion, and advocate for what they believe in. Advocating, for a girl, is such an important skill in today's world."

## Academics

The curriculum is enriched, personalized, and—increasingly—sensitive to issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion. In short, SMLS is an old school that stays on top of the newest evidence in teaching and learning. The goal is not to produce graduates capable of memorizing facts, but to turn out young women adept at solving complex problems, thinking critically, tapping into their creativity, collaborating with diverse individuals, and ready to be active citizens in their communities.

Since most students start and end their pre-university education at SMLS, the school works exceptionally hard to create a smooth, interconnected path through every grade and stage. "We're very intentional and do a lot of planning, so that there's alignment across the three schools in terms of the girls' learning," says Hant.

Brad Read, the Associate Head of School, Learning, and Innovation, elaborates on this strategy: "We make sure that the sequence of skills, competencies, content, and subject-specific thinking introduced in each grade is consistent and informed by best practices." The school's Signature Programs (see below) extend these purposeful connections to co-curricular activities.

Even in the earliest years, students begin following their curiosity to initiate small investigations into the world around them. When we visited, a Grade 1 class was wholly absorbed in a study of the fall leaves. In the junior school, SMLS draws on the Reggio Emilia approach, which sets the stage for personalized learning in the following years. The philosophy is based on the premise that children are "protagonists in society, capable of posing questions about their world, who want to participate, make their voice heard and who bring their own interests to the learning environment which leads to meaningful and deep learning." Teachers are guides, encouraging students to develop their curiosity and problem-solving skills.

The Reggio Emilia method paves the way for more formal project-based learning in middle school and culminates in major independent studies in the senior grades. “Because there’s a real continuum of personalized inquiry from the early grades to the later ones, the students become very comfortable with it,” says Dr. Scott Pollock, a senior school social sciences and humanities teacher. “A lot of my courses involve students identifying a topic that interests them, conducting primary and secondary research, and then determining how to best present their findings. It sets them up very well for university.”

At SMLS, every aspect of students’ experience—whether it’s math class, basketball practice, debate club, or lunch in the dining hall—is carefully constructed to be part of their growth and learning. But make no mistake, this is a school where students take their classes and grades very seriously. The girls we met were unapologetically ambitious and proud of their academic achievement. In 2020–2021, 95% of senior school students achieved honour roll status. “Everyone’s working toward the same goal here,” says one Grade 12 student. “We’re trying to get into the best universities and follow our dreams.”

While SMLS focuses on preparing students for post-secondary experiences, the school also intentionally nurtures an interest in learning, setting the foundation and desire for intellectual growth for life. Throughout the grades, students can test their skills and increase their confidence through a wide variety of academic challenges, ranging from spelling bees and speech competitions to lit quizzes and math contests. Yet there’s no evidence of an academic culture where inter-student competition is the norm, as at some other leading private schools. “It’s competitive only in a personal sense, where we’re trying to continually improve,” says one senior school student. “But it’s not cutthroat. If you’re studying in the library and need help, you can ask anyone in your grade—or even older students—and they always say yes.”

For girls seeking an extra challenge, Reach Ahead credits

allow Grade 8 students to take certain Grade 9 courses, and senior school students can take up to three Advanced Placement (AP) courses at a time. “I think the academic program is designed so the girls can grow and push themselves,” says one alum and parent of two graduates currently attending Queen’s University and the University of Toronto. “I know some parents might wonder if the transition from a fairly small school to a large university is difficult, but I can say from experience that SMLS students are highly prepared.”

Crucial 21st-century skills such as digital literacy and core competencies such as public speaking sit alongside each other in the curriculum. “The school is very good at familiarizing the girls with the latest technology to enhance their learning,” says one parent of a junior school student. “Some classrooms have a touch white board, which is something I don’t think many schools have.” Yet students also learn to communicate with individuals and groups the old-fashioned way, starting with short talks to small groups of peers to presentations at all-school chapels. “I’ve been really impressed over the years by how much public speaking the girls do at every age,” says one parent of senior school students. “I’m amazed at the girls’ comfort level when speaking to large groups of people.”

SMLS has long been known as a centre of innovation, and there are many good examples of that, both large and small. For one, the senior school uses virtual reality headsets in several courses, including biology—where they tour the body from the inside out. In a social sciences course, students use them to create a virtual tour of a country or region. There are also less obvious innovations, and some of the quieter ones may have more lasting effects. Each year, for example, students engage in the Global Read Aloud project, which pairs them with peers overseas to read a book together and share their thoughts and ideas.

Like most private schools, SMLS is actively engaged in applying an equity, diversity, and inclusion lens to its academic



programs. “We use a culturally-responsive pedagogy in everything we do,” says Read. “In all subjects where it’s possible, we ask students to look at the content through the eyes of individuals from different backgrounds and experiences.” In some classes, teachers have multiple entry points for these discussions. “We spend time looking at inequality and inequity and exploring concepts such as racism, sexism, and homophobia,” says Pollock. But even in classes like math, where the relevance isn’t immediately obvious, SMLS teachers find a way to integrate these ideas. “In data management, students might choose to investigate the statistics on gender or racial income disparities,” says Aaron Warner, a senior school math teacher.

The parents we met noticed and appreciated the fact that SMLS constantly adapts its academic programs to reflect the world outside the classroom. “The teachers go well above and beyond what’s required,” says one. “They encourage girls to try to solve complex problems that connect to the real world.”

## Pedagogical approach

Many schools boast about personalized learning, but SMLS walks the talk. Teachers lay the foundation for this individualized approach by getting to know each girl—not just their academic strengths and challenges, but their hobbies outside school and even their families. At a relatively small school where most students spend upwards of 14 years, this is eminently possible. “There isn’t a teacher here who doesn’t know every girl and can celebrate her gifts,” says Hant.

The girls we met, particularly those in the senior school,

seemed to recognize the efforts to know them as whole individuals, not just students. “It feels like the teachers target their teaching to every student individually and accommodate their needs,” says one. “They don’t just give one type of lesson or assignment and expect everyone to figure it out.”

Parents had glowing praise for the faculty’s dedication to their daughters. “They’re exceptional in their level of caring,” says one parent of a graduate. “One teacher, for example, knew my daughter so well that he found a way to affirm her instincts about her future directions. He helped her come to the right decision.” Says another parent of two senior school students, “The girls develop very positive relationships with their teachers, so they’re comfortable going to them about academic and non-academic things.”

When students know they’re seen and heard in the classroom, they can take the lead in directing some of their own learning—something SMLS encourages. “We always allow students a voice and a choice in how they learn and how they demonstrate that learning,” says Read. “We cover the curriculum, of course, but we can empower students to drive how that happens.”

Even the youngest learners have a say at SMLS. “We’re conscious of shifting power away from the teacher and [toward] helping the girls develop their individuality,” says Grade 1 teacher Anne Currie. “We let them choose their own books based on their interests and sit where they’re comfortable.” By middle school, the teachers look for ways to foster students’ more advanced skills and knowledge. “We’re lucky to be in a place where most of our students are at, or above, grade level, so as educators our role is to push them toward enriching learning experiences,” says Grade 7 teacher Dahlia Serag-Hosten.

In the senior school, teachers encourage students to run with their interests and tackle new concepts on their own. “In the civics final project, the girls choose a social issue and create a personal action plan for how they could make a difference,” says Pollock. “It gives them space to think about what mark they want to leave



on the world.”

Assessment is active, ongoing, and follows the Assessment for Learning (AFL) model, which is designed to help instructors find individual learning styles, personal strengths and deficits, and then work to address them. SMLS was an early adopter of AFL, recognizing it as a better method of gauging student success.

In the same way that the school partners and collaborates with parents and students, the faculty and staff engage in a highly collaborative work environment as well. The teachers we spoke to agreed that they can turn to any colleague—across the grades—for help with a particular student or pedagogical challenge. Faculty members also feel empowered to use their own best judgment in trying new things. “Just like our students have a voice and choice in their learning, I feel that my voice is heard as a teacher,” says Serag-Hosten. “We’re encouraged to come up with our own ideas based on our knowledge of our students and their best interests.”

Professional development is frequent and extensive at SMLS. Sometimes it involves bringing in leading experts or sending teachers to the latest courses, but just as often it happens internally. The school sometimes runs a professional development “carousel,” where faculty members set up booths to showcase the variety of expertise they can share, based on their additional training.

## Character education

Character education is front and centre in all the Signature Programs (see below), just as it is throughout every aspect of the SMLS student experience. “The teachers weave the school’s core values into the kids’ days,” says one parent of two senior school



students. “There’s a clear expectation that the girls will live with honesty and integrity and show responsibility for their actions both at school and in the community.”

A day doesn’t go by at SMLS without a discussion of character. In class, during advisory sessions, at chapel—it comes up wherever and whenever there’s an opportunity to reaffirm the school’s values. Incorporating student voice in all of the school’s activities is a priority at SMLS, and that includes teaching and practicing good character.

Student leaders set a theme at the start of each school year, and then make presentations on that theme to the student body throughout the year. They issue small-scale challenges to encourage the development of good character, and the beauty of doing this all together means that the students feel and realize that they are part of something larger than just themselves.

## University preparation

SMLS gets girls thinking about their post-secondary plans earlier than most schools. Not in a rigid way where students are expected to have clarity on their future, but in a nurturing, encouraging way that builds on the school’s aim of promoting self-knowledge.

Starting around Grade 7, the girls engage in workshops designed to identify their strengths and interests. At appropriate points, those workshops address the mechanics—things like resume-building and interview skills—though they’re also constructed as a way for girls to test-drive some of their ideas.

It’s a process of discovery, not just planning. And it’s often fun. A number of years ago, the school created the mock interview,

providing opportunities for students to experience interviews and auditions firsthand. In one instance, an alumna studying musical theatre at Long Island University in New York led workshops to prepare students for their auditions to the drama program at Julliard.

A standout feature at SMLS is the Grad Seminar, which is mandatory for all Grade 12 students. It’s a dedicated weekly class where girls get into the nuts-and-bolts of the application process while also gaining insight into the practical, social, emotional, and financial challenges of post-secondary education.

From September to December, the Grad Seminar focuses on researching universities, programs, and scholarships and fine-tuning applications. Two Grade 12 girls we spoke to were applying to top American schools, so they were getting help with their entrance essays. “We learn everything you could possibly know about applying to university in the Grad Seminar,” says one. “My friends from other schools are always asking me how I know about unique programs and scholarships.” Another student echoed that sentiment: “It really helps in reducing the stress of all the things you have to do in your graduating year to get into your dream school. We get individual attention, and it opens doors that we’d never know about because we can’t look up every university program on our own.”

Once all the applications are in, the rest of the year is dedicated to examining how to stay well and succeed during the crucial transition to independent living. Students engage with recent SMLS graduates to learn from their experiences. “We talk about important issues such as managing money, maintaining good physical and mental health, coping with larger workloads, academic integrity, safety, and so much more,” says Read.

## Co-curriculars

The end of the formal school day at SMLS signals the beginning of a rich array of activities that fall under the umbrellas of five Signature Programs (see below). “For a relatively small school, we run large-scale co-curricular programming,” says Denise Power, the Dean of Students, Well-being, and Inclusion.

There’s no formal requirement that students get involved, but the majority do. “My daughters always want to do more than our schedules can accommodate, so the only real problem we’ve had is that they can’t do it all,” says one parent of two students. For girls who have significant commitments that are external to the school—athletic, artistic, or otherwise—SMLS offers more than flexibility. “They embrace students’ talents, whether the girls practice them inside or outside the school,” says one parent of a young musician. “My daughter was asked to play piano at chapel, which gave her a moment of pride that she’ll cherish.”

The senior students we met illustrated just how eclectic co-curricular experiences can be at SMLS. One had played virtually every sport and was a member of the stock market club, for example, and another had dabbled in cross country while focusing on the Prefect Council and Diversity Committee. “From a young age, the school makes it a priority to expose us to so many different experiences so we can figure out what we love,” says the latter student. And if there isn’t a club or group for a particular student interest, they can create one.

“We believe the best learning starts with an understanding of self, and the Signature Programs are a gateway to that understanding,” says Read. “They put students in new contexts and situations where they might feel a little bit uncomfortable, because that’s where learning happens.”

The philosophy of the Signature Programs reaffirms one of the school’s central approaches to learning: creating a safe, supportive

place where girls can try anything, succeed or fail, and absorb the valuable lessons and knowledge that come from the experience. “The beauty of the Signature Programs is that girls are putting themselves out there—and risking public failure—every time they step on the stage, walk onto the field, or demonstrate their robot and hope that it works,” says Power. “They get to discover what they’re good at, what they love, and how they can make an impact.”

To keep track of their co-curricular efforts, students create Learner Portfolios—documents where they reflect on all the activities they’ve tried—starting in middle school. “Along with their concrete activities, the girls record their strengths, areas of need, possibilities for future careers, future wishes, and how they might plan a pathway toward that. We are teaching our students to be self-aware and to be lifelong learners,” says Hant.

## Signature programs

### 1. Global citizenship

To produce true global citizens, SMLS extends students’ learning beyond the school’s walls. The aim is to expand the girls’ perspectives and give them a sense of their place in the world, but also to instill in them the value of service. “We want them to recognize that we can only truly serve our communities when we engage in connecting with and understanding others who have walked different paths,” says Hant. “The hope is that they will see that using their gifts to be of service is the fullest expression of one’s life, and that the quality of their own life comes from the quality

of their contributions.”

There are countless opportunities throughout the year for students to support local and international organizations through events at the school and in the community. From food drives to visits to retirement residences, the girls learn how their efforts can make a difference. While some private schools only require students to meet the community service hours requirement of the provincial secondary school curriculum, SMLS expects girls to start earning hours in middle school through the Junior Duke program. It’s a stepping stone to the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award Program, an internationally recognized program that challenges youth to push their boundaries in improving themselves and their communities. All senior school students must achieve at least the bronze level in the Duke of Ed, but many reach the silver and gold level.

The Global Citizenship Signature Program offers students a broad range of real-world experiences starting in Grade 2. Young Millies start with adventures close to home, such as overnight trips to an outdoor education centre and winter camping. By senior school, many of the girls travel the world on service trips, cultural exchanges, and experiential learning excursions. “The trips get progressively longer as we get older and more used to being independent,” says one Grade 12 student. “As you get older, you can see that they’re building skills and confidence in us.”

Parents told us how much they appreciate the impact of the program on their children. “The trips and experiences mold the girls into the type of people who actually make a difference in the world,” says one. “They become educated on relevant global issues.” Another comments, “The school promotes the value of courage, taking the road less travelled, challenging yourself to be bold, and embracing the spirit of adventure.”

But these trips aren’t vacations. Students know that they’re travelling the world with a mission: to gather knowledge and insight first-hand and bring it back to the classroom. Trips to France, for example, include culture and language learning components, and

in 2019 students also met with regional immigration organizations to discuss issues around refugee populations. Trips to the Bahamas include prepping specific projects on ocean ecology and sustainability and connecting with students and faculty at schools on the island to discuss local stewardship programs.

When the girls return, they deliver presentations and reflect on what they experienced and how it applies to the curriculum. “It enhances their learning, but also the learning of their peers,” says Power. “Developing global citizens within our community is the responsibility of everyone in the building. It’s not siloed. Students don’t just go off, have an experience, and then come back.” Every foray into the wider world integrates with the curriculum in substantive ways.

SMLS is a member of Round Square, an international association of independent schools committed to internationalism, democracy, environmental stewardship, adventure, leadership, and service. Among other benefits, membership affords Millies the chance to attend school exchanges in over 40 countries and attend an annual student conference.

In 2022, two senior school students became the first Canadian recipients of a prestigious prize from Round Square in recognition of their founding of a grassroots advocacy group to promote greater awareness of Indigenous rights. “We just wanted to shed more light on Indigenous communities for young people, so we started an Instagram account,” says one of the founders. “It’s amazing to see how much it’s grown since then.” Their group, The Indigenous Foundation, now has over 30 team members and thousands of followers on social media.

Travel is optional and comes at an extra cost, but the majority of students go on trips, building up to international travel in the senior years. The options are many and varied, and in a typical year students visit about a dozen countries.



## 2. Professional internship

The senior school students we met spoke confidently and knowledgeably about their post-secondary plans, but also about their specific career goals. As the school intends, the girls know themselves well by the later grades and have a clear vision of their next steps. To help them get there, they can take advantage of the Professional Internship Program in Grade 11. It's a customized, four-week placement across a broad range of industries that—in combination with related coursework—earns students an OSSD credit.

To ensure it's a learning experience of the high calibre SMLS expects, students work under the close supervision of a mentor in appropriate career settings. Previous organizations that have placed students include Ernst & Young, The Hospital for Sick Children, and Gap Medics.

"I feel like the internship really prepares us for the real world by immersion in a professional work environment, instead of going a few mornings a week like some other co-op programs," says one student, who had a placement at McMaster Children's Hospital. "We also have to do a lot of reflection on what we learn in our placement portfolio." As in all activities at SMLS, it's not just about the experience, but what students discover about themselves through the experience.

## 3. STEM and robotics

In 2019, 58% of the graduating SMLS class chose a STEM-related post-secondary program. It's a ringing endorsement of the strength of the school's STEM and Robotics Signature Program. Contrast this with a recent Statistics Canada report that found only 11.8% of female high school graduates enrolled in STEM-related bachelor's degrees, versus 14.7% of male high school graduates.

SMLS got ahead of the game when teacher Sarah Sils introduced robotics in 2002. Her goal wasn't simply to get girls

interested in robotics and engineering but to expand the sense of what was possible in the entire field. She organized outreach activities where robotics team members shared their knowledge with other girls' schools just launching programs. Notably, in 2018, the SMLS team hosted an all-girls team from Afghanistan, working together to build a robot and participating in a regional competition.

In 2018, Sils received the Prime Minister's Award for Teaching Excellence in STEM in recognition of her groundbreaking work at SMLS. Under her leadership, the senior robotics team—known as SWAT (St. Mildred's Women Advancing Technology) 771—holds the title of being the first Canadian, all-girls team. But not just any team. It remains the only Canadian team to win the prestigious World Engineering Inspiration Award at the FIRST Robotics World Championships.

The progression to SWAT 771 begins early. At every step, coding instruction in the curriculum prepares students to apply their skills to hands-on challenges in clubs. In Grades 1 to 3, members of the robotics club use LEGO bricks to build models of real-world scientific concepts. The clubs build small robots from Grade 4 through 7, then move up to designing, building, and programming large, complex robots in SWAT 771.

Robotics is the largest co-curricular program at SMLS, something that doesn't surprise senior school math teacher Aaron Warner. "The girls in SWAT 771 are just so passionate about it, and it's kind of infectious when the younger students see that—especially when they win competitions," she says. "We make sure all the girls get early exposure to that passion, because robotics involves much more than just coding. It teaches girls so many crucial life skills, such as creating business plans, fundraising, and meeting deadlines with time management."

SWAT 771 team members demonstrate significant depth of commitment. "It's just an amazing community of girls who want to learn more about robotics and STEM," says one student,

who serves as the team's electrical co-lead. "During build season, before competitions, we stay after school twice a week until about 9 p.m., and we come in for full days on Saturdays. It's a lot, but it's all worth it in the end."

#### 4. Active healthy living

"Sports, fitness, and just general well-being are so important to us here," says Director of Athletics Carly McClements. It's telling that she puts these three things together, because they carry equal weight at SMLS. Competitive teams do very well in a variety of sports, and there's real pride in that. But the overall message to students is that they should strive for a healthy, active life—whatever that looks like for them.

In 2017, the school formally signalled its commitment to offer students more options for physical and mental well-being through several program improvements: partnerships with community fitness programs, an expanded number of teams, professional coaches for some teams, and "Wellness Wednesdays."

Every Wednesday afternoon, SMLS girls and staff swap their uniforms and professional attire for athletic gear. Junior school students stay with their classes and participate in special themed activities that blend physical and experiential learning, such as getting outside and exploring the grounds. For middle and senior school students, classes end early to accommodate an hour of activity. Participation is mandatory, but the choices are abundant enough to accommodate every preference and skill level. From power yoga and fitness bootcamps to martial arts and a walking club, there's something to get everyone up and moving. For girls who favour meditative activities, there are options like sewing. "I think the emphasis on choice is a really key component, especially when you're dealing with teenage girls," says one parent.

For the many athletes at the school who are on one of the 45-odd competitive teams, Wellness Wednesdays are often practice

time. The SMLS Spartans are involved in both the Conference of Independent Schools of Ontario Athletic Association (CISAA) and the Private Schools' Athletic Association (PSAA). In 2018–2019, before COVID-19 derailed inter-school competition, they captured a record 19 championship titles in sports ranging from cross country and volleyball to swimming and ultimate frisbee.

## 5. Art and design

The rich array of co-curricular opportunities in the arts reinforces the school's emphasis on holistic education. Girls on competitive sports teams or those focused on robotics, for example, can still explore their creative sides through visual art, music, drama, and film. Participation in the arts is encouraged as an important avenue of self-expression.

The youngest Millies might join the Drama and Movement Club, and, if it sparks their interest, end up in the middle school musical. Senior school students also put on a much-anticipated annual musical. “The shows are amazing,” says one parent. “My daughter is shy, and her music teacher convinced her to try out for the lead role in the musical one year. We never would have been able to get her to do that, but she had a special rapport with that teacher. She got the part, and because of that she became much more open to new experiences.”

From playing in concert bands and singing in jazz choirs to filmmaking and painting, SMLS students try new things, discover hidden talents, and develop new appreciation for social and cultural differences. While they produce all this great art, they also find their place in the community and the wider world.

## Academic & wellness support

In less forward-thinking schools, the academic support office operates at a remove from the emotional counselling office. At SMLS, there's a consistent effort to make sure those kinds of arbitrary divisions don't occur.

“You can't separate academics from well-being, because in order to learn students need to feel well and strong,” says Power. “So we don't do things in silos here. We have a wide circle of care that works to support every aspect of the girls' health and success.” That circle, known as the Student Support Team, includes school heads, the director of learning strategies, guidance counsellors, learning strategists, social workers, nurses, and the school chaplain.

The physical hub for academic support at SMLS is the Student Success Centre. It's a welcoming space that's home to several learning strategists—experts at addressing different learning styles and needs. “If a student shows signs of struggling academically, the learning strategists work closely with teachers to develop differentiated learning opportunities,” says Director of Learning Strategies Nicola Rieger. That could be one-on-one support in certain subjects, adaptive technology, specific skill-building, or—when necessary—a comprehensive Individual Education Plan (IEP) with targeted accommodations.

For students with an IEP, there's as much emphasis on celebrating their strengths as documenting their areas of need. “We make sure that each and every student feels seen and heard,” says Hant. “It is our goal to ensure that students, no matter what their needs are, feel confident in understanding their unique learning profile. As soon as they're ready, they get involved in developing their own IEP each year, and eventually they lead the transition meetings to the next grades. The objective is for students to understand themselves as learners and advocate for their needs.”

The school takes the same approach in nurturing girls' social,

emotional, and mental health. “Our goal is to empower each student to take ownership of their own well-being,” says Power. “At the end of the day, they have to learn to take care of themselves if we want them to challenge and change the world.” Just as the circle of care springs into action when a student’s grades start to slip, it’s right there when a student shows signs of social-emotional distress.

At some schools, care is often reactive—a meeting with a counsellor when things go wrong—rather than proactive and ongoing. That’s not the case here. The nurse and social worker are known to all the students, in part because they’re in the hallways and popping into classrooms. “We have a lot of programs in place that support self-advocacy, but also creativity, healthy risk-taking, and resilience,” says Power. Teachers are also central to the wellness team. “They’re not just teachers of math, they’re teachers of teenagers and children,” says Power, noting staff receive regular training and education related to youth mental health.

She points to studies that show girls need at least one trusted adult at school that they can turn to for more than academic advice, if they’re going to be successful. In the annual SMLS student engagement and wellness survey, students consistently report that they have at least one person they feel comfortable going to for support. “Our teachers are coaches, club leaders, and mentors. They also run our multi-grade advisory groups in senior school, where the discussions run the gamut from academic to social and emotional issues.”

In our discussions with students, they said they felt the care surrounding them at school. “There’s a lot of emphasis on mental health, lots of presentations and resources, and if you’re having trouble you have multiple people you can reach out to,” says one senior school student. Says another, “I feel like there’s a really nice support system with a group of dependable people around us.”

Parents, of course, are primary members of that support system, and SMLS goes to great lengths to keep them firmly in the loop in terms of students’ academic and social-emotional well-being.

The school partners with parents in designing school-driven supports, but also invites families to take advantage of relevant expert resources such as webinars and books.

“Parents, teachers, staff at the Student Success Centre—we’re all on the same team working to empower students to take charge of their own well-being,” says Power. “We want them to thrive not just here, but when they leave here.”





## Student body/diversity

The youngest and oldest Millies cross paths daily at SMLS, given that they're in the same building. Yet the school also brings them together in deliberate ways. On one hand, the intention is to give girls ready access to positive role models; on the other, it's about cultivating leadership skills. Overall, the goal is to create a close community where every girl has a place.

There are so many ways to connect at the school, from the Signature Learning Programs and advisory groups to the house system and various school councils. There's also the "Big and Little Sisters" program, which pairs middle school girls as "big sisters" to "little sisters" in the Junior School. Middle school students, in turn, are the "little sisters" to Senior School students.

Senior school students lead many outings and trips associated with the Signature Learning Programs, giving them a chance to interact with younger students in less formal atmospheres. "It's wonderful to see Grade 11 girls and Grade 6 girls having shared memories and inside jokes," says senior school mathematics teacher Aaron Warner, commenting on a recent camping trip. Parents agree, with many extolling the benefits of built-in role models at SMLS. "I think the way the school encourages friendships between the grades creates a positive culture, and it's really important for the little girls," says one parent of a junior school student.

As for the students, they had only good things to say about the integration across the student body—though the senior school students also emphasized the importance of having their own spaces within the building. "I really enjoy when the junior school girls wave at us, and it's nice having them look up to us," says one Grade 12 student. Her friend adds, "It's also good that we have designated sections in the school where the young girls aren't around. I think it's just the right amount of exposure to the little kids without them being right there all the time."

Preparing girls to lead is entrenched in the school's history

and ethos, and all the girls we met had some kind of leadership responsibilities. They exuded pride without arrogance when speaking about their roles. "It's a great way to give back to the school community while developing yourself and becoming a more prominent leader," says the head prefect. "We do a lot of organizing and planning of chapels and other initiatives, but we also get to do fun stuff like compiling a video of all the ways we scared students at Halloween."

School spirit is strong at SMLS, with girls raving about the fun to be had during sports days, lunchtime karaoke, "girls' night in" movie evenings and more. Their enthusiasm came across loud and clear, but so did their maturity and intelligence. "We toured other good schools, but we chose SMLS because of what we heard from the students in the hall," says one parent. "They were really poised and confident when they stopped to speak to us."

Continually asking students if they feel a sense of belonging is a priority at SMLS. It's the first question on the annual student survey. "Inclusion is at the heart of everything we're trying to do," says Read. "We want our students to feel represented, respected, and included in all areas of school life." Since teachers are the role models in class and co-curriculars, he says the school hires individuals that aren't just culturally aware, but culturally competent—meaning they can understand, communicate with, and successfully interact with students and families across cultures.

The students and parents we spoke to, who were from diverse cultural backgrounds, said the school works hard to live up to its aspirations on equity, diversity, and inclusion. "This is a community where we all come together to appreciate each other's differences, so I feel like the school is really special in that way," says one senior school student. A parent of a junior school student who presented at the SMLS Chinese New Year chapel commented that her daughter was excited to share her traditions after seeing peers do the same at Diwali, Eid, and other celebrations. On the flip side, a parent of two senior school students said she's grateful that

her children have this chance to learn from their classmates. “My girls are now so informed about different cultures, not only in the world, but in their own community,” she says. “I think that’s really wonderful.”

## Admissions

Other than Junior Kindergarten, when the majority of Millies join the community, the usual entry years are Grade 7 and Grade 9, and the admissions rate is about 80%. The academic program at SMLS is challenging, and students must be equipped to manage it. But that’s not all the school is looking for in prospective students. “Girls don’t need straight As and don’t have to be at the top of the class they’re coming out of,” says Head of Admissions and Enrolment Sarah Scandrett. “We’re looking for academically capable students who will also be engaged in all that the school has to offer and will contribute to the life of SMLS.”

The school uses entrance tests that have been designed internally. For entry into Junior Kindergarten, the assessment is a more informal evaluation of early numeracy and literacy skills. Parent interviews are also part of the process. “Especially with the youngest applicants, we consider whether the family values our approach to teaching and learning,” says Scandrett. “If they’re looking for an environment where there are desks in rows, direct instruction all the time, and memorization repeated back on tests, this isn’t the right school. But if they’re looking for a school where their daughter will be challenged academically through an inquiry approach that exposes them to many opportunities both in and outside the classroom, where it’s okay to grapple with something and make mistakes, and where girls learn to have a voice, this is the right place.”

Tuition, which covers most curriculum-based field trips and hot daily lunches, is on par with private schools of similar size and stature. Incidental costs include busing, extended care, summer camps, and senior school textbooks. SMLS offers needs-based financial aid, which covers approximately half of tuition for roughly 10% of the student population. Applications go through a third-party service.

## Parents

At SMLS, parents can be as involved as they want to be—or can be, given the other demands in their lives. In any case, the school views them as essential partners in every girl's education.

Communication between school and home is frequent and substantive.

Beyond the typical parent-teacher interviews, there are ample opportunities for families to stay informed on how their daughter is doing and what's going on in the wider school. There's a digital portal with detailed information on classroom learning, weekly teacher reports, a bi-weekly newsletter entitled the "Millie Memo," and event-driven emails. All the parents we met praised teachers' responsiveness to phone calls and emails. "Communication is very open and flexible," says one parent of two students.

The SMLS culture not only welcomes, but encourages, all types of parent and student feedback in the spirit of continuous improvement. "They want to hear from parents, so if there's something that you think you would like to see more of, or something that you're really happy about, or something that you think can be improved, there's an open-door policy," says one parent of a senior school student. "I appreciate that, because it's important as a parent to feel heard."

Members of the school's leadership team, Board of Governors, and faculty often attend Parent Association events (which are plentiful, ranging from movie nights, brunches, and bingos to an bi-annual gala). Parents are also welcome to attend any of the school's weekly assemblies. "It's a very warm community—almost like a big family," says Hant. "We see parents as our partners in our students' development, and so we find ways to connect often."

More than ever before, families are knowledgeable about the latest educational trends and philosophies, says Brad Read, the Associate Head of School, Learning, and Innovation. "They're informed and asking important questions. In turn, we're

transparent about our educational approach and are happy to discuss these issues anytime."

## Alumni

“Once a Millie, always a Millie” is the often-used expression that captures the strong alumnae bonds at SMLS. Graduates keep in touch via newsletters, social media, formal events such as the Alumnae Luncheon, and countless informal connections.

“Our grads want to stay in touch and give back through their talent, time, or financial support,” says Read. Some act as visiting coaches, others have mentored the SWAT 771 robotics team, and many return to speak at special assemblies. Graduates also help students secure meaningful placements in the Professional Internship Program.

“There’s nothing more impactful than having former students share their lived experience with current students, and our alumnae are so generous,” says Power. A new program is in the works where alumnae will serve as liaisons at the universities new graduates typically attend.



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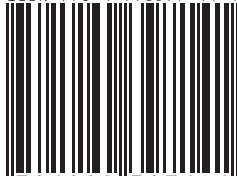
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“At SMLS, every aspect of students’ experience—whether it’s math class, basketball practice, debate club or lunch in the dining hall—is carefully constructed to be part of their growth and learning.”

“The students and parents we spoke to, who were from diverse cultural backgrounds, said the school works hard to live up to its aspirations on equity, diversity, and inclusion.”

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