

OUR
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PRIVATE SCHOOL REVIEWS

Pickering College

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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

“What I want our students to believe is that they have the capacity to look at a situation that they feel may not be just, may not be fair, may not be right, and ...[feel they can] do something about it. To not just sit idly by and be frustrated that, well, there’s nothing I can do ... We want to teach them to be creative, to come up with new and different approaches, and then to actually do something about it.”

—Peter Sturup, Headmaster, Pickering College

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:

- 1. Hudson College
- 2. Appleby College
- 3. Brentwood College School
- 4. Robert Land Academy
- 5. Trinity College School
- 6. Havergal College
- 7. St. John’s-Kilmarnock School
- 8. Holy Name of Mary College School
- 9. Kenneth Gordon Maplewood School
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- 11. The Bishop Strachan School
- 12. Lynn-Rose School
- 13. Fieldstone School
- 14. Upper Canada College
- 15. Pickering College
- 16. Ridley College
- 17. Metropolitan Preparatory Academy
- 18. Lakefield College School
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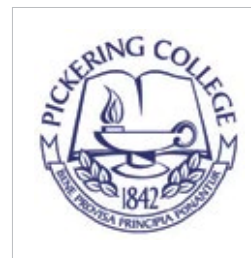
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Details: Pickering College

Location: Newmarket, Ontario

Founded: 1842

Enrolment: 446

Grades: JK to 12

Gender: Coed

Living arrangements: Day, boarding

Language of instruction: English

Curriculum: Progressive

Curriculum pace: Standard enriched

Academic culture: Rigorous

Average class size: 18 to 20

Motto: Bene Provisa Principia Ponantur (Let Foundations Be Well Planned)



Introduction

Pickering College is full of surprises. Some are perhaps of less academic import than others, though all contribute to the character and the singularity of the overall environment. It's the second oldest JK to Grade 12 school in Ontario, and the third oldest in the country. It's the only school in the country that runs its own radio station. It houses the Canadian Quaker Archives and Library. It also has artwork painted by Franz Johnston, a member of the Group of Seven who taught here, and a mural by resident artist (1933–34) Harold Haydon that dominates a wall in the gym.

"It's amazing that no one really says anything about it," says headmaster Peter Sturup, "because it's a little bit provocative." It's also huge. Haydon meant to depict the dawn of the universe, including the dawn of humankind—so the content is grand, including everything from local fauna to cell division. There are lots of people depicted, too—none wearing clothes, yet modestly arranged. JK students giggle, "but it's always been here, and it's just part of the school," says Sturup. "That's where some of our Junior School students have their basketball and volleyball games with visiting teams, and every so often somebody must walk in and do a double take there." No doubt they do, in part because so little fuss is made of it. In addition, Group of Seven artist Franz Johnston's paintings are found throughout the meeting hall, a cornerstone of the collections that the school has accumulated over the many years of its life. It's affecting that art of this calibre can be such a common, everyday part of student life.

And the surprises continue from there. Rogers House, the building that dominates the campus, was designed by John Lyle, who was also the architect for Toronto's Union Station. It's beautiful, to be sure, if a bit monolithic. For a school that is progressive and forward looking in so many ways, the initial gestalt is strikingly traditional: lots of Georgian heft and might. Apparently Lyle wanted to put a dome on top, but the Religious Society of Friends—the formal name for the Quakers—nixed it as too showy. But yes, it's a beautiful building, nonetheless, and it is the hub of the campus. In celebration of the 100th anniversary of the school in Newmarket, a student and his father, who is also an alumni, created a model of Rogers House out of Lego. It's as fun as it sounds, and it's on permanent display just inside the main doors of the dining hall.

The more you wade in, the more you realize how singular the school is, and how unique it is within the Canadian academic mosaic. It was founded by Quakers, and was co-ed at a time—1842—when, well, schools simply weren't, to say nothing of the society at large. For the bulk of the school's existence, it has operated as non-denominational, though consistently following some Quaker principles and practices, which, if you have a sense of those traditions, are immediately apparent on entering the school. Students meet each day in the Meeting Room, sitting in rows facing the centre, just as they would in a traditional Quaker Meeting House. Once gathered, the students stop talking as if on cue, though there isn't actually any cue. "It's noisy and then it's quiet," says Sturup. "It just happens." Once quiet—again, without any cues or order of ceremony—students and faculty stand to give announcements. It's striking. Should two people stand at the same time, the one behind defers to the person further forward, nearer the centre of the room. It's all very democratic, which, of course, is itself a core Quaker value: all voices are considered equal.

"Quakers call them testimonies," says Sturup of the talks he gives during some of the morning meetings. They address, more often than not, the biggest topics of all. "Those are the things that we want to instill. ... I like to help students understand what those

things mean; again, not from a religious standpoint [but rather to consider]: what is integrity? How do we know it when we see it, and how do we know it when we don't see it? ... what is consensus? Collaborative decision making? Peace? Community?"

The families that enroll do so perhaps principally for the academics, though a close second would be those values that begin with the morning meetings and are woven throughout the curriculum. Says Sturup, "I think it's just good foundational character values that we try to instill in our students. Because it's important to us."

All of these little things contribute to a much greater whole. Students don't dwell on it much—the ones we spoke with see all of these things as normal, everyday, just as fish don't give much thought to the water that they swim within. Per the alumni we spoke with, the benefits of the environment become clear when they move on into post-secondary life and beyond. Many rightly cherish their experience with the school, as expressed through the high attendance levels at various alumni events throughout the year.

Quakerism

The proper name is The Religious Society of Friends. The term "Quaker" is actually derogatory, used first by a judge in England intending to demean them, a suggestion that they should quake at the word of God. They believe that the divine spark exists within every individual in the world, no matter what their particular observances might be. Therefore, every person is of equal value and of equal worth, no matter where they come from, what they personally believe, or what their gender or socio-economic status may be. "Every person has an inner light, every person has potential," says Sturup, "and that fundamental belief permeates everything that they do. At Pickering, because we are non-denominational, we translate that into [the idea] that every person has goodness within them. Those

ideals are translated into secular practices and foundations, including the understanding that every person has goodness in them and, as an educational institution, we believe that it's our responsibility to look for that goodness, look for that inner light, look for that potential, and help to bring it to the surface as much as possible."

Within Quakerism, as in any religious community, there's a spectrum of observance from orthodox to secular. However, Quakers tend more typically to be secular, and they are open and accepting of other religions and other orientations. "If you go to a Quaker meeting, typically they're in old meeting houses which are single storey, very plain on the outside and very plain on the inside—usually it's just pews arranged all facing the centre." There's no altar, no stained glass windows, no ornamentation, no distraction. People who attend enter in silence, sit down, and sit in silence for upwards of an hour. If someone feels moved to speak, they stand, share, and sit back down, after which the silence resumes. Over the course of an hour, you may get five people speaking or one person speaking, but it's predominantly silent and deeply reflective. "It's awkward if you're new to it," says Sturup, "but it's actually quite profound." There's no minister, no priest, no rabbi, no leader. "The principle is that your communication is directly with God because God exists in you. And I find it very democratic. I find it very open to allow any faith to worship in any way they want to, because all you're really doing is sitting quietly."

Because they believe every person has worth, they're pacifists, and have become quite well known historically for their pacifism. They won the Nobel Peace Prize after World War II for their work helping the victims of the wars.



1

Basics

Pickering College is a coeducational day and boarding school in Newmarket, Ontario. It offers a liberal arts education and includes a Junior School (comprising JK through Grade 5), a Middle School (comprising Grades 6 through 8), and a Senior School (comprising Grades 9 through 12). The stated mission of the school is to “instil in each individual the ability and responsibility to make the world greater, better, and more beautiful than they discovered it.” Values, as well as the global perspective, are key components of the programs; since it was launched in 2013, the Global Leadership Program (GLP) has been a defining feature of academic life.

Peter Sturup arrived on faculty in 1986 and has served as Headmaster since 1995. In that time, he has been present for some of the most significant changes in the life of the school: the student population tripled, there was a significant increase in day students—prior the school was almost exclusively comprised of boarders—and the reintroduction of co-education, something he feels “changed the tone and the complexion of the school for the better.”

For all of that, he feels that the introduction of the GLP will have the most prominent and lasting effect on school life in the years ahead. “As it fulfills its potential,” says Sturup, “it’s setting students up to be successful not only in university, but successful in whatever they want to do,” in both work and life. “What I want our students to believe is that they have the capacity to look at a situation that they feel may not be just, may not be fair, may not be right, and ...

[feel they can] do something about it. To not just sit idly by and be frustrated that, well, there’s nothing I can do ... We want to teach them to be creative, to come up with new and different approaches, and then to actually do something about it.”

Leadership

The leadership is remarkably consistent, particularly given Sturup’s long tenure as headmaster. Staff are readily charged with responsibilities beyond the classroom. Maria Di Mambro, director of the Junior School, talks of allowing teachers to take responsibilities for specific areas of instruction—the eight pillars that form the core vision of the program in Junior School—and to run with both program development and its delivery. “Collaboration is very important in all schools, but not all schools are able to do it very well,” says Di Mambro. “And I’m very happy with where we are now. We have everything running the way it needs to be running. ... we recognize that teachers need time and we are working to provide the time they need—that’s key for being able to do all the things we want to do”

In our experience, that entrepreneurial spirit is shared across the faculty—there is strong leadership, balanced by teachers who feel they are given latitude to impact the life of their students and the life of the school. Because the GLP was developed and implemented so recently, even the newest faculty members feel that they’ve played a part in significant changes and have had an impact on the program. There is a nice momentum to it all, as well as a sense of ownership, and the faculty clearly feels a close responsibility to seeing all of those changes realized.



2 Background

The school was founded at a Quaker settlement near Picton, Ontario. The house where the first classes were held still stands, and is now a private residence. It had indoor plumbing and a septic system, so it was at the apex of domestic architecture for the time. Classes were first offered in 1841 and only girls were admitted, in part because of the need to build facilities to house the boys. It also reflected the Quaker ideals around gender equality. To say that this was unheard of for the time is an understatement: the Persons Case wouldn't be initiated for another 80 or so years, yet here was a school that believed that girls had as much right to an education as boys did. When coed classes began in 1842—the year that the school cites as its founding year—boys and girls learned side by side. It was registered as the West Lake Friends' Seminary. Despite the name, and again in keeping with Quaker ideals, from day one instruction was non-denominational and open to all who wished to enroll.

There were some ups and downs along the way, including varying rates of enrolment. In 1877, the school moved to Pickering and found a new life there, housed in buildings that were perhaps more akin to the architecture of the other notable schools of the time, such as Upper Canada College and Ridley College. Like the property at West Lake, it was a point of pride that all amenities were up to date, including, once again, indoor plumbing.

The school also began drawing students from further afield, including international students from Japan, Russia, China,

Australia, and the West Indies. At a time prior to even a national railroad, that's particularly impressive. The student body grew, as did the alumni network. An event in 1894 was attended by more than 400 old boys and girls from across the country and beyond.

Then, as was inevitable for large institutions at a time when lighting was oil lamps, and heating was coal, in 1905 a fire consumed the main building. The school would rebuild, and at first it was assumed that it would do so on the present site, something that was reported in the press at the time. But, with the growth of the various communities, and the development of reliable rail transportation to Toronto, Newmarket offered benefits that Pickering couldn't. Ultimately, the school was built in Newmarket in 1909, high on a hill overlooking the surrounding farmland. It remained a rural setting until relatively recently. The context is more urban today, though the views, seemingly from every window, are still remarkably impressive.

“Let foundations be well planned”

From day one, the school was an early adopter of a more open, more collaborative approach to education. In the 1932 edition of the school yearbook, “The Voyageur,” the editor reflected on the changes that had been adopted by the school:

When in September 1927 Pickering College began to function once more as an educational institution, we, as the student body, were presented with a new conception of how a school should be operated. The conception was, as aptly expressed by the first editor of the Voyageur, “education without tears.” No longer were we obliged to submit to the tyranny of a group of elderly school masters whose word was law. We were allowed to come and go as we pleased on our own responsibility. Instead of stern task masters we found a group of young but competent teachers who were willing to meet us half way and to consider our point of view.

In 1930, headmaster Joseph McCully wrote “we have realized that it is impossible to force boys to become educated; long hours of fatiguing drill and arduous driving on the part of the staff may succeed in cramming the heads of small boys with a vast collection of heterogeneous and unrelated facts, but such a result is not education.” Instead, he goes on, the goal of education should be to provide mentorship and an opportunity to develop talents and resiliency. In 1930, Taylor Statten, head of character development at Pickering College, wrote that:

The ‘habit of obedience’ forced upon the impressionable nature of a child does not develop judgment and will, but does develop that fatal facility in following other people’s wills, which tends to make us a hopeless mob—mere sheep, instead of wise, free, strong individuals. The habit of submission to authority, the long, deeply impressed conviction that to ‘be good’ is to ‘give up’—that there is virtue in the act of surrender—this is one of the sources from which we continually replenish human weakness ... Those who know no other way of modifying a child’s behaviour than through ‘making him mind’ suppose that if he were not made to mind he must be utterly neglected. ... the rich years of childhood should be passed in the acquiring the habits of self-direction.

You’d be hard pressed to find a better description of what private education—the rich years of childhood spent learning self-direction—in the decades since, would become. As the 20th century progressed, schools would seek to promote the habits and values that Statten championed at Pickering College, as well as within the YMCA youth outdoor education programs, Camp Couchiching, and the summer camps that he founded and which continue to bear his name: The Taylor Statten Camps in Algonquin, Camp Ahmek and Camp Wapomeo.

All of that—the development of the programs, the approach to the learner, the development of personal will—is evident throughout the school today. Yes, time has moved on, and our concerns aren't clustered around the kinds of things that Statten was specifically reacting to, but the foundation that began with the Quakers, and reinforced in Statten's time, are evident throughout the school today. The meeting room, for example, reflects the Quaker belief in the value of everyone's voice. Seats are set facing the middle of the room, and while there's a podium, staff and students don't sit at the foot of it, but around it. During meetings, students have many opportunities to speak to the student body, both formally and informally. The day we visited, a Grade 12 student spoke about his experience working with children with autism in his home country of Taiwan. Announcements are delightfully casual and democratic; students and faculty simply take turns, standing up when they're ready to speak. If two people, or more, stand at the same time, the one closest to the podium goes first. It sounds like it could risk being a bit of a jumble sale, but it's not. Rather, it's all very orderly, polite, and pointedly without a sense of hierarchy. The student talking about the soccer game is given as much respect as the faculty member noting that applications for an Australian student exchange are available for anyone who is interested.

The Meeting Room is in many ways the heart of the school, and while most probably don't think of it in these terms, the social organization there is an analogue for what happens throughout. It also houses some nice visual reminders of the school's heritage. A memorial wall honours those who served in the World Wars. On the other walls are painted panels, one for each of the provinces and territories in the Canada. Most were painted by Franz Johnston, a member of the Group of Seven who also taught here. Those for Newfoundland and Nunavut—both of which became part of the country after Johnston's time at the school—were added later, painted to match the style and feel of the originals. All combine to create a very unique feel to the room, nicely reflecting the culture of the school.

While the school had been run by the Canada Yearly Meeting of Friends, in 1917 all assets were transferred to an independent corporation. In 1927 it became a boys' school and was run as one until 1992, the same year as the school's 150th anniversary. That year also saw the addition of the Junior School, extending the program from JK to Grade 12.



3

Academics

“We made a conscious choice not to be [International Baccalaureate (IB)],” says Kim Bartlett, director of teaching and learning, “because we wanted the custom build. We could make partnerships that enhance our work.” There was also a conscious decision not to offer Advanced Placement (AP) courses. She adds, “I don’t believe AP is the way the world is going anymore,” noting that it is exam based, founded in the drill and kill perspective. She also notes, using Georgetown University in Washington, DC, as an example, that universities are trending toward a portfolio model, rather than ranking by marks alone.

The decision to create a program from the ground up was, nevertheless, a strikingly bold move, and one that began a new era in the life of the school. Pickering College’s Global Leadership Program (GLP) shares some similarities with the IB: both encourage an international perspective; both are hands-on and academically rigorous; both are based on a core set of values; and both stress interpersonal communication and collaboration.

Unlike the IB, the GLP is a custom diploma program entirely unique to the school, with students working toward it in concert with the requirements necessary for completion of the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD). “When we designed it, the goal really was: ‘what do we want our graduates to be able to do at the end?’” says Bartlett. “It was really about imagining the ideal graduate.” As such, it was essentially reverse engineered from that

goal, based on an understanding of the skills they would need to have to succeed, while also cognizant of the attributes and experience that universities would be looking for.

Cristy Drake is the co-curricular director and also played a role in developing the GLP. She says “it’s really about developing global leaders in a world where we don’t know what we’re necessarily preparing them for. If we can make sure that they have the skills to face challenges when they leave school, that’s what we want to make sure that they have. To be really innovative, to be critical thinkers, to have empathy ... we have a program to help them achieve that. Through a variety of GLP days, off-timetable days, where students are fully immersed in their different programs. The GLP program builds upon itself through the years.”

Bartlett oversees the scope and sequencing of the curriculum from JK through the senior years, something which itself is telling of the intentions of the program: it was created to be of a piece, with a consistent and detailed progression from the primary years on up. Bartlett feels that the custom build also allowed them to be agile and to build programs that reflect the specific aims of the school and the character of the student body. “We don’t just buy a package for math; we built a math program,” says Bartlett as an example. “It’s a custom build. And I would say we use the best tools for the job.”

That included locating the best practices and partnering with local institutions that reflect them, such as a notable partnership with the University of Toronto’s I-Think, based at the Rotman School of Management, and participation in the annual Global Ideas Institute at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy. Pickering has been participating in the Institute for almost a decade, an experience that informed the development of the GLP. “When we wanted to develop our program, we thought this is a fantastic model. Because kids that have done that program have really been successful at U of T and other schools. So we worked with the director of Munk who looked at the work we’re doing and said, yeah, this is what universities are looking for.”

Bartlett jokes that she doesn't get much sleep, given the range of things that she's involved with at Pickering. Her enthusiasm for the work, and the school, is nevertheless infectious. When she gives examples, the source of that enthusiasm is evident. "I've got a student right now, he was sort of an early prototype" of the Capstone project, the culminating activity in the GLP. Students in Grade 11 write a research proposal based on a global issue of their choosing, suggesting solutions and implementation, which they ultimately pitch in front of a judging panel. "He was the first kid in that program, and [the first] to test some of the pieces. He crowd-sourced his solution, and right now he's at Northwestern University in engineering. He's worked on Spider Man equipment—you know, where you can climb walls and ceilings—and he just finished working with Elon Musk for the last fuselage" for the Mars mission.

That's a lot, but more than the specific details, what Bartlett sees is that the plan—the GLP, the partnerships, I-Think, the approach—is proving itself through tangible results. "These are the kind of kids that are now coming out of our programming. They've got the thinking skills, they've been trained in integrative thinking. We want all of our kids to have that kind of experience." Bartlett points to a photo on her bookshelf. "There's a picture of one of our Munk teams. That one built a cook stove for India. The first one blew up," she says, chuckling. "But I look at that little team and Belinda was from Tanzania, and she's now studying medicine at UBC. Alli is at U of T in medicine. Grant's in business. And June just got elected policy chair of the Young Liberals of Canada, and she's now at McGill."

The GLP culminates in a Capstone project where students are required not just to research and present on a global issue, but also to act on it, which is a distinguishing feature. One student described how her project was based on disaster relief, and her action was to partner with a local restaurant to host a fundraising dinner. "We worked together to plan a give-back dinner with 10% of each person's total bill [going] to Habitat for Humanity Mexico. My goal was \$500 but we doubled that."

"In all of our programs, there is a strong focus on real-life experience," says Noeline Burk, head of arts. "In visual arts, it's about learning the techniques of painting and sculpture, but I also spend a great deal of time with the students on being able to critique work, and analyze work, and understand the process of informed judgment. As well, I think what a lot of these kids will need to be able to do is write formal proposals and be able to prove to someone that their idea is the best idea." In a recent Grade 12 class, students were asked to propose a piece of public sculpture. The students toured locations in Newmarket, developed sculpture concepts, built maquettes, created a budget based on real numbers, wrote a proposal, and then presented it to a panel.

"It's not just whether or not you're the best artist in the class; it's about being able to develop an idea and see it through to a successful ending," Burk explains. It's impressive, but also relates well to the goals and concepts of the GLP. Art, Burk believes, is about more than communication, and it should be used to develop communication and presentation skills.

Academic direction is overseen by operational directors for the JK to Grade 5 and the Grades 6 to 12 programs. Throughout is an overt attention to interdisciplinary, project-based instruction. Says teacher Alex Au Yong, "it's rooted in all these great traditions, and at the same time the school is very progressive in what we're trying to do." Class sizes are relatively small, and students are known. "You can't hide at the back of the classroom," says Au Yong. "For example, the students coming up for next year, I already know them in different ways."

Academic environment

"I think it gives you a broader perspective," says a parent who is himself an alumnus. "I remember my daughter talking to me about writing a business plan, and I was just blown away. That's not something I learned until post-secondary."



On entering the school, students become part of a shared culture of curiosity, while also being reminded that everyone brings something unique to it. One student told us that “everyone has that one strength, and some weaknesses. Someone can be really good at French, but maybe not so great in other subjects.” They seem to appreciate that latitude, and don’t feel the need to be good at all things. As such, there isn’t an overt sense of competition among students for marks or athletic performance, something that was confirmed independently by a number of students from across the senior grades. The staff promotes that approach subtly, though the culture of the school does as well, as underscored each day within the meeting hall.

“It’s more about personal growth,” says Janet Downer, director of the Middle and Senior Schools, of the academic culture. “[It’s about] seeing that personal growth over the years, and for students to accept challenges and to take risks they would never have thought they would do. And to learn something about themselves through that. The grades are great—they will help you get into university—but there’s a whole package. When you have so many opportunities available to you, and you take advantage of that—whether that’s the trips students go on, the social justice activities, the leadership—to me, that is thriving. To try new things and to participate.”

A Grade 8 student told us that “even though there is a lot of similarities ... in every school you go to, everybody is unique in their own way. At our school everybody is unique in their own way, but there’s always other people that are unique with you.” Which is lovely, both in the sentiment, his perceptions of it, and the way that he expresses it. Certainly, students seemed to be in agreement that there was latitude to be your own person, while also feeling connected and part of a whole. (He also said that “there’s not anybody who’s nerdy in our school.” Also good to know.)

Students and alumni commented that faculty make a priority of being available. “There were always teachers there,” says alumna Nicole Wolscht. “No matter what was happening, whether it was

a sporting event and they’re there as coach, or in the classroom ... my fiancé struggled in math and a teacher would stay with him every day for an hour.” She feels that kind of attention and support was the norm rather than the exception. “My teachers were there 100%.”

The radio station



Noeline Burk, head of arts, oversees the operation of the only JK-Grade 12 radio station in Canada. Gareth Sturrup is the station manager who runs the day-to-day radio programming and coordinates with the school’s students and community volunteers. At Pickering, 102.7 CHOP FM was created by the generosity of a parent at the school with experience in radio, Jim Waters, a past owner of CHUM FM.

The station began broadcasting in 2007, initially intended as little more than a special interest club. “Initially I think Jim’s idea was just to get the kids on the radio, but the school has taken the mindset that, yes, get the kids on the radio, but let’s make it curriculum enhancing. And I think we’re doing an amazing job of that.” And they are. The day we visited, a number of Grade 5 students were getting

ready to interview a politician from Toronto, one of a series of interviews that are far deeper and more informative than you might think.

The station is applying to the CRTC to become a community station. At the moment it's only licensed as a campus radio station. The designation will bring an enhanced signal strength as well as an enhanced profile. Even without that designation, the station operates just as a professional one would. The kids do morning and evening drive programs, lunchtime shows. "We've got one student in Grade 12 who does a heavy metal show and it's incredibly well received," Burk says. Some staff and community members also participate on and off air, a volunteering opportunity that the school intends to continue growing.

The concept may seem out of date, though the resources are deceptively useful. One of the Grade 12 students we met was on his way to record a podcast of his Capstone project, presenting the results of his work. Kids are clearly excited to be on air and to use the studio, while the school is keen to ensure that it supports and augments the curriculum. And, from all indicators, it's doing that in spades.

Junior School

Instruction in the primary grades is inflected with the Reggio Emilia approach: student-centred, constructivist, and building out from the curiosities that students bring with them into the classroom. The Junior School program culminates in Grade 5 with a public speech advocating for support on a topic of personal significance, a first milestone as students progress through the GLP. "That is one

thing that I think we've done very, very well," says Di Mambro. "We have kids four and five years old that can stand in front of a full school assembly, parents and everything, and speak better than some of the senior students that are new to the school and haven't had this training. ... Our kids are super speakers."

That's part of a clear focus on the basics—the program is designed nicely, with an emphasis on the core competencies of writing, speaking, and numeracy. Curriculum development gives explicit attention to eight key areas: leadership, global awareness, design and building, public speaking, empathy and perspective, environmental stewardship, friendship and community, and literacy and language. It's a lot of moving parts, to be sure, but all have been designed to fulfill the curricular expectations while building the groundwork for what students will be doing in the middle and high school grades. "It was developed from the bottom up," says Di Mambro. "You're always looking for ways to improve your program," and she notes that the scope and sequencing of the junior grades was informed, first and foremost, by an understanding of the skills and knowledge they'll need to be successful in the middle years.

It can sound like a lot—and no doubt it is—but Di Mambro is also clearly aware that, while the ideas may be very big, these are, after all, little kids. The challenge for her and the faculty is to prepare the groundwork, to get them thinking of the big ideas in ways that are creative, inviting, and lasting. Environmental stewardship, for example, is taught through growing an awareness of the waste generated each day in the classroom. "Grade 1 [students] learn that they are responsible for their own waste, and it's a year-long project," says Di Mambro. "They each have their own garbage bin they have to put their stuff in."

"For Grade 2, they have a vermi worm composter," she says with a chuckle. She admits that the first year didn't, um, go so well. "It was actually quite a disaster, but that's a great example" she's quick to add, with regard to how the project was handled, and the experience it granted the students. "Thankfully, that Grade 2

teacher is a very strong science person,” says Di Mambro. “It took two weeks of real learning. Those kids did the research they needed to do, and it was amazing to watch ... They found that they had given the worms too much fruit. They had been overfed. But they learned what they did wrong, and they corrected it. They learned how to fix their problem.” It’s wall-to-wall charming—we saw the composter, and the worms seemed happy, so far as we could tell.

“We want kids doing more critical thinking and problem solving,” she says, “so that’s the main reason for our inquiry-based learning and our project-based learning. We’ve done a lot of professional development for our teachers on that.” She’s demonstrably adept in her role developing the programs, though her passion also resides with the kids, the things they’re doing in the classrooms, and the interactions they’re having with their peers, mentors, and instructors. Which, frankly, is as good a sign of a school’s health as you can ever hope to find.

There’s a strong relationship with the upper grades, including cross-generational instruction, getting the Grade 11 students into the junior classrooms to speak, lead discussions, and teach a few lessons. “We did a little bit of that when I first came here,” says Di Mambro, “and now it’s almost daily.” Those are the kinds of things—the worms, the Grade 11 students in the classroom, the outdoor ed trips, the Lego robotics—that give spark to the delivery of the curriculum. Likewise, she is keen to ensure that all the teachers are leading from their passions, the areas that they feel particularly confident within.

Co-curriculars

Co-curriculars are mandatory until Grade 12. In Grades 9 and 10, the year is divided into four terms, and students are required to be engaged in something every term. It could be a solo activity, such as rock climbing, equestrian or debate, or participating in team sports, including the competitive teams. By Grade 11, students are

able to take a term off, and often students will take the spring term off in order to maximize their time around the ISPs and exams. In Grade 12, students are able to take two terms off if they wish.

While physical activity is encouraged, co-curriculars include arts activities. While there is a core offering that remains, there is some latitude for both students and faculty to initiate co-curricular activities. A recent example is Anime, a program created at the request of a group of students. All offerings are organized around the overall goals of the school curriculum and the GLP. In some cases, the instructional links may not be entirely clear on the face of it—there is a cooking session, for example—though faculty are keen to bring leadership, creativity, interaction, and resiliency out-comes to the fore.



4

Athletics

The athletic program is as attentive to overall participation as it is to competition. The students we spoke to agreed that a willingness to be involved in the opportunities that the school offers, including a full range of co-curriculars, is key to success. The school does not set out to breed Olympians, though the program is such that Olympians, like Gold Medalist Gabby Daleman, have the opportunity to emerge. The school seeks to promote involvement in sports and outdoor education as just that: participation. Co-curricular activities provide a cornerstone of social engagement and, therefore, are a cornerstone of the student experience as well as student success. Co-curricular director Cristy Drake notes that the overall intention is to expose students to a wide variety of opportunities, to expand on what they're learning in the classroom, and to allow them to gain a broader range of experience, specifically with peer collaboration. "Our teams are very dedicated," says alumnus Nicole Wolscht, "but I don't think [competition] is the main focus. I think the main focus is making sure that people are involved, rather than winning."

All coaching is handled in house. The soccer program is particularly strong, as are volleyball and basketball. Ultimate frisbee is a recent offering, but has proven exceptionally popular among the students. Excellence is prized, though ethical competition is as well. School teams participate in the Conference of Independent Schools Athletics Association (CISAA) and the Ontario Federation of School Athletic Associations (OFSAA).

5

Student population

With a total enrollment of 420 students across all the grade levels, the lived experience is close-knit. "I think when you're smaller," says Sturup, "you have that deep teacher-student relationship and the involvement in a wide range of activities. ... the fact that so many kids are focused on being successful and going to university, that creates a momentum among all the students."

One student told us, "I love the community ... it's so small, everybody knows each other. I just think everybody feeds off each other. ... because we are a small-sized school, a lot of the events that we do ... for them to have a good turnout, it has to be a large chunk of the school [participating]," something he sees as a plus. "For example, at other schools, when there's a dance, it's mostly the seniors. Here [they include] Grades 9 to 12. Everybody knows each other, there's a lot of interaction. ... everything we do is as a big school community." He appreciates being known, both socially and by the faculty, as he advances through the grades. The school is divided among houses that compete throughout the year, culminating in Sports Day at the end of the school year. As elsewhere, the houses grant a sense of participation and belonging.

"A mission-appropriate person," says Sturup, "would be someone who is willing to be open minded. We want students who are strong academics, who are involved in the community, and involved in music and drama and so on. But if they aren't interested in taking a look at the world around them, then that may not be as

mission appropriate. Of course, one of the things we have to do is be open to students who aren't open to that and teach them to be open for that."

The students we spoke with are all ambitious, and appreciated entering an environment that shared their academic inclinations and aspirations. A Grade 8 student, in talking about his interests began by saying "math is the mother of all sciences." A Grade 11 student told us "I'm going to UBC in the fall for general science, and then to major in neuroscience in my second year."

Not all are that on point or goal directed, and that's fine too. One student told us that he wasn't sure what he wanted to study in post-secondary education, but that he is taking a careers course as well as speaking with an academic counsellor, something that began with his entry into the school. This is a culture of curiosity, and that includes not rushing into anything—students feel that there is some space to try new things, take some ideas for a test drive, and then direct their interests into a specific course of study. When we asked some Grade 8 students what they wanted to do in life, one responded "Well, we're pretty young!" The others were quick to agree, which is nice in that it suggests that, yes, this is an academically rigorous environment, but at the same time, kids are allowed to be kids and to grow into their interests at their own pace.

Interestingly, the student who is heading into neuroscience cited the music teacher as a particular inspiration during her time at the school. "He was always there for extra help when I needed it. And he shaped me not only through my music career—I play the clarinet in symphonic band, and the tenor saxophone in jazz band—but he's also given me skills to succeed academically and in the real world." That kind of cross-pollination of interest is discussed as a signature aspect of student life.

We asked students what they didn't like about the school, and unanimously it was blazer day on Thursday. Which, is also a pretty good sign of school health. If all that Pickering College is doing

wrong is insisting on blazers one day a week, the corollary is that there's a lot they're doing right.

Boarding

The boarding population represents about 25% of the student population and about 40% of the Senior School population, with about 120 or so in residence each school year. "It's busy," says Laura Mason, director of boarding and health services. She admits that there are some challenges, perhaps given that the students arrive from around the globe, but that "there are more opportunities than challenges."

The boarding program begins with Grade 7. Different programs are offered based on age and stage. "We try to provide a home away from home," says Mason. They live in families headed by boarding staff who live in residence with the students. Associate faculty live in residence with the kids. They tend to be young teachers, or new to the school.

The families are made up of 10 to 12 same-gender students from Grades 7 through 12. "It's meant to provide mentorship, that big-brother, big-sister, little-brother, little-sister scenario," Mason explains. They have activities, family meetings, and meals together. Weekends are busy with activities, from shopping to theatre trips to outdoor activities.

"There's a certain level of independence that is expected," says Mason of the students entering the boarding program. "Our rules and our policies are all geared toward age and stage," including earlier bedtimes for the younger students, as well as age-appropriate programming on evenings and weekends. As they get older, they have more flexibility with curfews, etc. Individual needs are also considered. "Some kids might need more boundaries, so those things can be very individualized."



6 Pastoral care

The delivery of any school's wellness program is invariably an expression of a school's size. In larger settings, there are more wellness departments, such as on-site medical care, psychologists, and a range of counselling services. Smaller schools, of course, don't have all the bells and whistles. That said, the close community has a lot of benefits—being known by staff, having a consistent and long-term counsellor, and gaining a longer-term relationship with specific members of the faculty are invaluable. And that's true of Pickering. There are three nurses in the health centre, including one that is resident on campus. "We have a doctor who comes in and is on call to us all the time," says Mason, as well as a mental health counsellor who attends campus one day each week. The health centre is staffed from 7 am to 7 pm every weekday. Outside that, a nurse is on call, ensuring access 24/7. "It's a community-wide effort: it's our faculty, our admin staff ... it's a collaborative responsibility," with equal attention given to boarding and day students.

Students in the Senior School are assigned to a faculty advisor who will remain in that role for the duration of their time at Pickering. Students meet with advisors in groups of eight to 10. They sit with them every day in Morning Meeting and hold advisor lunches three days a week, when they sit together as a group. Otherwise, advisors make themselves available to their advisees informally outside of those meetings. "So it was pretty much a

daily interaction," says alumna Nicole Wolscht, and one that she appreciated. Having graduated in 2013, she's still in regular touch with her advisor to this day.

There is commensurate guidance staff, the path to care is a team approach, and could be initiated by either staff or academic counsellors. There are also two specialists on campus tasked with providing classroom accommodations, one for the Junior School and one for the Senior School. "In the Junior School," says Patrick Peotto, assistant head of academics, "all the teachers have their special ed [qualifications] and that helps them in being able to identify when learning issues are emerging, and be as proactive as humanly possible" around remediation or emotional regulation.

The guidance staff is actively engaged with the student body, and students are aware of their availability. "They've been there for me for everything from choosing university to emotional and academic stuff too," says a student of the guidance staff. Another described his guidance counsellor as "the best teacher of all."

For boarding students arriving from overseas, the school is able to source a local guardian if needed, available for a fee. Again, because of the size of the school as well as the relative size of the boarding program, faculty at times serve as guardians, as was the case with one of the boarding students we spoke with. Opportunities to enhance the interconnectedness of the school community are both sought and acted upon.

Food services are tasked to source food locally as much as possible, and they also ensure that students are aware of that fact. Meals are served family style, which is charming as well as in keeping with the Quaker values that the school is founded upon. As such, the dining hall serves as a regular and robust interface with the school community. In the Junior School, students sit at tables with their teachers, rather than staff sitting separate, which is lovely to see.

Discipline

The day we visited, Peotto was in the midst of working with a family whose child was going through a rough patch. “He has some personal issues, a lot of anxiety,” says Peotto, “but he doesn’t want to go to the stage of talking with someone. He’s not dealing with it well.”

“So, I said to the parent that I can deal with this as a disciplinary issue, but I know that there are extended circumstances. And I know that what I’d rather do is teach him and help him learn coping skills to be able to deal with it—not only here in an environment that’s very caring, but when he goes to university next year, he needs to be able to balance the expectation of the school with what might be happening at home, with what might be happening with peers. It’s very complex.”

That instance is indicative, says Peotto, of the school’s more general approach to behaviour and discipline. “Instead of looking at things in a very black and white way ... we try and look at things in a flexible way, with the student’s best interest at heart.” Whenever issues arise, Peotto meets with parents and guidance staff, and together they build a proactive plan. Each case is unique, but Peotto’s instinct is to first approach each instance as a wellness issue, rather than a disciplinary one. Because all students are known—this is another benefit of the size of the student body—attention is given to extenuating circumstances, whatever they may be, as well as patterns of behaviour. Peotto speaks of progressive discipline, which is a friendlier version of three-strikes-you’re-out: a one-off is seen for what it is, and addressed appropriately and empathetically. A pattern of ongoing behaviour, too, is addressed for what it is. In all cases, says Peotto, families are notified very early on.

7 Getting in

Grades, of course, are important, but they are only one part of what the admission team is looking for. They’ll be looking at how students contribute to the school they are arriving from and how they contribute to their community. Community service is a core value of the Pickering offering, so arriving with some demonstrable experience there is certainly a plus. They’re also looking at breadth, including involvement in athletics and the arts.

That can all sound onerous, though the admission team is clear that it’s less about achievement than it is a willingness to engage with others and to try new things. Once at Pickering, students are expected to take part in all aspects of school life and be willing to push the boundaries of what is comfortable for them. Again, they don’t have to be on track to saving the world, but they should be curious about what’s happening in the world, both in their local communities and further afield. They may not ultimately love taking part in debate or canoeing down the Nahanni River, but they should arrive willing to give it a shot. While a global gaze and the values of global citizenship have been an aspect of the program since it was founded, there was a renewed dedication to that with the development of the Global Leadership Program. The right fit for Pickering, perhaps now more than ever, is a student who is prone to thinking in a global way, inclined to seek out active roles in the school and beyond, and whose personal goals mesh well with all of that.

The school strongly encourages that students gain some hands-on experience with the school prior to enrolling. To that end, they've created some nice opportunities to do so, including the ability to spend a day at the school while classes are in session. Potential boarders are also able to spend an evening in the residence, meeting the staff and potential peers. One student recalled his trial visit, saying that "it was really fun to get to know the students a bit more." No doubt it eased his transition into the school.

There is ESL offered on site during the school year, as well as residential ESL programs in the summer. For students arriving from overseas, the summer programs can help grant a sense of what to expect when enrolling in the academic programs. Likewise, visits can make the transition to Pickering an easier one, and we strongly suggest that all families make the most of those opportunities. Arriving at school knowing what to expect and where to go, and with a growing sense of ownership of the environment—the idea that "this is my school"—can be invaluable in easing a student's acclimation. Day students are encouraged to attend a half day.

"It wasn't really formal," says a boarding student from Turkey of her admission interview. "It was more like just a chat between us." Interviews, such as that one, are conducted via Skype if necessary. They're looking, she feels, "not just for academic success. ... You should be doing some other co-curricular activities. Or you should be able to go out and socialize with people."

The admission officers also recommend speaking with alumni and current parents, and they are happy to supply contacts for those. That kind of research, too, is very much worth any effort you're able to give it.

8 Money matters

The fee schedule is as detailed as you could ever hope to find, with the goal being to ensure that there are no surprises. It's extensive, certainly to a degree that we haven't seen elsewhere. The desire is to ensure absolute transparency, and the fee schedule achieves that.

Parents likewise report that there are no surprises in terms of additional fees, as their children move through the program. Extra costs can be incurred based on the kinds and number of activities a student is involved in. Parents, though, recognized this as typical of any private school, and note that costs are always up front and very clearly expressed.

The tuition level is absolutely in line with what you'd expect of a school of similar academic profile. The parents we spoke with felt that it is money very well spent.

9 Parents and alumni

Pickering College is keen to involve the entire community within the ongoing life of the school. When we were touring, we passed our guide's mother in the hallway. She was on campus volunteering. Similarly, a retired teacher turned alumni ambassador, Mr. Boyd, is often on campus. They, and indeed many others, add to the students' conception of what the school community is and who it includes. Ask a student to name the longest serving teacher at the school and, more often than not, they'll say "Mr. Boyd!" Press them for names of alumni they know, and they'll mention names such as Sterling Mancuso—"he's very smart, a great debater, who went to the world championship last year in Australia," says a student—who either are recent students or those who have returned to meet with students and describe their academic and career paths after leaving Pickering. Like them, parents and alumni are visible and welcome to participate within the life of the campus. It's telling that very many do.

Parents of the boarding program receive weekly updates, newsletters, and photos. There is a formalized communication plan between parents and the residence staff. "We try to ensure that parents feel a part of it," says Mason. "We work in partnership with parents."

In a recent survey, current parents were asked to complete the sentence "I would encourage other parents to enrol their child at Pickering because . . ." The responses included:

"It is not only a school but a place that values each student differently and provides the added resources available so they can flourish and become independent. "

"The staff and faculty maintain an environment in which the students are truly set up for success in all facets of their education ... athletic, academic, artistic ... and do so in a safe, inclusive, respectful place. "

"Not only is the expectation of excellence in academics very high but also the expectation of being a good person. PC is looking at the whole person not just the academics. "

"It is a supportive community that while encouraging the pursuit of academic excellence it strives to ensure our youth develop social responsibility, strong character, leadership skills, empathy, compassion and a provides tools they will need to be valuable contributors to society."

10

The takeaway

Pickering College was founded as the West Lake Friends' Seminary by Quakers in 1842 and, as you might expect, has had a long and interesting history since. Canada became a dominion, the school amalgamated, some buildings burned down, others were built up. It began as a coed school—something unique at the time—and as such provided an expression of the Quaker ideal that both genders should be educated equally. That was groundbreaking. It was also the first school in North America to offer a course in typewriting, symbolic of the school's desire to incorporate new ideas and technologies and to educate students with an eye to the world they would enter upon graduation. Times, of course, have changed, though certainly many of the values that the school upholds today reflect those upon which it was founded, including a desire to embrace new ideas and to support a diversity of interests. The ideal student is a curious, well-rounded one who demonstrates character and shares the values of the school, will contribute to school life and is willing to work hard and risk being the best person that they can be. The student is one who will thrive in a supportive yet challenging academic environment.



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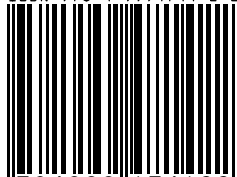
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