

# OUR KIDS

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PRIVATE SCHOOL REVIEWS

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## Kingsway College School

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Written by Megan Easton

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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## Details: Kingsway College School

**Balance. Excellence. Well-being.**

**Location:** Etobicoke, Ontario

**Founded:** 1989

**Enrolment:** 415 students

**Grades:** JK to Grade 12

**Gender:** Coed

**Living Arrangements:** Day school

**Language of Instruction:** English

**Curriculum:** Progressive

**Curriculum Pace:** Standard-enriched

**Academic Culture:** Rigorous



## Introduction

Kingsway College School manages to balance the warmth and close-knit community feeling of a small school with a forward-looking educational vision. This balance extends to everything KCS does, with challenging academic programs and extensive enrichment opportunities equally prioritized alongside students' holistic development and well-being. The academic expectations are high, and students meet and exceed them. But the school promotes more than just scholarly achievement.

To capture its whole-child approach to education, KCS created the “Four Doors to Learning” framework, which encompasses academics, arts, athletics, and citizenship. From Junior Kindergarten to Grade 12, curricular and co-curricular activities take students through each of these entryways to growth. The overarching aim is to create well-rounded, lifelong learners who are prepared to thrive in an ever-changing environment. “The school is always thinking about what skills 21st-century students will need to be contributing members of society,” says a KCS parent.

The learning environment is firmly grounded in the realities of local and global communities. Students encounter experiential and problem-based learning from the earliest years, culminating in the strikingly innovative real-world immersion in the Senior School curriculum.

“Expand possible” is KCS's motto, capturing its commitment

to nurturing a growth mindset in students. “My kids are supported in figuring out who they are and who they can be, all while staying authentic to themselves,” says one parent.

This is a school that’s genuinely rooted in its core values, meaning that social-emotional learning, service, and responsible citizenship are integrated inside and outside the classroom. Judging by our interactions with faculty, administrators, parents, and students, everyone at KCS is truly aligned with the “Three School Rules,” which are Respect, Manners, and Try Your Best. “They’re life rules, really,” says Head of School Derek Logan. “The kids apply them in all aspects of their lives. They’re so simple but impactful.”

Visitors tend to feel at home as soon as they walk through KCS’s doors. It has an upbeat energy, but also a sense of calm and purpose. “Our school community is open, caring, and kind,” says Director of Advancement Hallie McClelland, who helps with community engagement. “Everyone’s ideas are welcomed. Everyone is treated fairly. And it’s a fun place to be.” Based on our visit, this is an apt description of the school’s atmosphere.

The parents we spoke to echo this assessment of the school’s culture. “Every child is known and loved and cared for, and no one flies under the radar,” says one. “You can feel that throughout the school.” Driven by the head of school’s deep commitment to promoting youth mental health, KCS invested in student well-being long before the pandemic brought the issue to the fore.

“At the end of the day, parents want their children in a community where everyone wants the best for them, both academically and as whole people,” says one parent. In our estimation, KCS is that community.

## Basics

KCS is a coed, independent day school for JK to Grade 12 students with two campuses, located a 15-minute drive apart in Etobicoke (a suburb of Toronto’s west end).

The Junior School on Dundas Street West sits between two well-known features of the neighbourhood—historic Saint George’s On-the-Hill Anglican Church and Humbertown Park. For newcomers to KCS, they need only look for the church’s tall white spire to know they’re in the right spot. While the school owes its beginnings to the church, KCS welcomes all students from various religious backgrounds.

Still, the two institutions have a friendly relationship. Students attend weekly non-religious assemblies in the church’s chapel, for example. Saint George’s current rector, Rev. Michelle Childs-Ward—affectionately known to students as “Father Michelle”—sometimes speaks at these meetings. “It’s not religious education,” says McClelland. “The talks are more about how to be kind members of a community.”

The Junior School sits in a leafy setting that’s set high enough above the road to feel insulated from any traffic. Approaching the main entrance, there’s nothing intimidating about the handsome reddish brick building, though the floor-to-ceiling windows on the southeast corner are impressive. “It’s a beautiful campus with a lot of trees, and it’s just got a really bright, airy feel to it,” says one parent.

The Junior School draws its students from Etobicoke and west-end Toronto neighbourhoods such as Bloor West Village and High Park. “Most kids are within a 15-minute drive, and some walk,” says McClelland. “But we’re starting to see families commute from farther afield.” Parents will want to note that there’s no school bus system, but before-school supervision is free from 7:45 am to 8:25 am, and after-school care is available until 6 pm for a fee. For lunch, families can opt to pack meals or pay for the



hot lunch program. There is also a school bus shuttle between the two campuses.

There's natural light throughout most of the interior, where there have been multiple renovations over the decades. The additions are well-integrated, and there's no part of the school that doesn't feel fresh and modern, yet comfortable. The whole Junior School feels full of colour and life, from a 30-foot garden wall and super-sized graphics bearing the school's key messages to a lively innovation lab. At different times, the multi-purpose lobby is an art gallery, concert venue, collaboration zone, or community gathering space.

Classrooms are modern and inviting, with class sizes around 20 to 22. An award-winning outdoor classroom—complete with multiple play structures, free-play space, and a courtyard-style reading circle—is popular with students and teachers alike. Shortly after we visited, there was a complete revamping of the art studio. This was completed in August of 2023.

To keep kids moving, there's a full-sized gym, but the city park across the street sees nearly as much playtime since it's leased by KCS for exclusive use from 7:30 am to 5:30 pm each weekday. Recently, the school installed a new playground and stormwater management system at the park, a \$1.7 million project that benefited both students and the wider community.

This type of mutually beneficial community partnership is central to the KCS approach. It's easy to see that the Junior School doesn't have all the bells and whistles of some downtown independent schools. Instead, students use the wide array of nearby athletic, arts, and cultural amenities. "We don't have everything in-house, but we don't need to," says Logan. "We have top-quality pools, arenas, courts, and running tracks, for example, just a 10-minute bus ride away."

When KCS began searching for a location for the new Senior School in 2019, the planning team was envisioning a traditional secondary school on multiple acres. "We were stuck on the status

quo for a while," says head of Senior School Andrea Fanjoy. "But as we did the research on the best new educational models, we realized that more learning would happen if the students got outside the school more often. We live in an amazing city full of facilities and green spaces that no school can match."

With that new perspective in mind, the perfect location turned out to be an unconventional one. The Senior School opened in 2022 in the commercial space of a condo tower on Lake Shore Boulevard West, on the second and third floors, just 15 minutes from the Junior School. The new school is in a neighbourhood that's been cleared for wide-ranging development over the next decade, including new condo towers and a GO Train stop. KCS administrators are counting on this growth to build enrolment. When we visited, there were 33 Grade 9 and 10 students in total, with class sizes around six to 10. By 2025, when the school goes to Grade 12, the enrolment goal is 260.

The Senior School is an award-winning, stunning, light-filled, open-concept space with soaring ceilings and light wood finishes throughout. In truth, it looks nothing like any high school we've visited, but in the best possible way. "Everything is purpose-built for our educational philosophy, which is focused on student-driven, experiential learning," says Fanjoy.

When visitors first step off the elevator, they land in the Market Space, a hub where students meet to collaborate, perform, present, or simply eat lunch. There's a student-run café, which is integral to students' entrepreneurship education. In addition to the open areas, there are classrooms of various sizes, three conference rooms, a state-of-the-art fitness centre, an art studio, a maker space, and more. On the fourth floor, students can walk out to a beautiful rooftop terrace with greenery and views of the waterfront.

The groups of Senior School students we spoke to were obviously proud of their school, pointing out architectural highlights and smaller features such as the soundproofing in conference rooms.

“It’s beautiful and really modern,” says one Grade 10 student.

There are still unfinished spaces in the school, and the administration is in no rush to fill them, says Assistant Head of Senior School Rick Kunc. “We’re living in this and learning from the students to see what they need for an even better experience. For example, we’ve decided to build a communications technology lab, but not a centralized library. Instead, we’re going to have books, magazines, and newspapers available throughout the school, so that reading is prevalent everywhere.” Construction on the remaining space begins in early 2024, with a completion date for the entire space to be summer 2025.

Like their Junior School counterparts, Senior School students take advantage of the wealth of facilities, services, and organizations around them. In our conversations with Senior School students, they spoke with enthusiasm about rowing at the nearby Argonaut Club and using the various athletic facilities at the Boulevard Club—not to mention the countless curriculum-related trips to concert venues, galleries, businesses, and not-for-profits. “We can get downtown in minutes, and Lake Ontario is at our back door,” says Fanjoy. “We have everything we need and more.”

## Background

KCS owes its founding to a group of parishioners at St. George’s On-the-Hill Anglican Church. In the late 1980s, as church attendance fell, the congregation began to explore what to do with a building traditionally used for Sunday School and community groups. Many of the families involved in this investigation had young children, and they were dissatisfied with the public education system. The idea of establishing an independent school came up, and by 1989 the doors of KCS opened to 50 students in Grades 1 to 5.

While the founders remained involved in the school, it was non-denominational from the start. Enrolment grew steadily, compelling the construction of a new wing with a library and two classrooms in 1994. By the time current Head of School Derek Logan joined the faculty in 1999, KCS had extended to Grade 8. A couple of years later, the school began doubling the classes at each grade level, sparking two more additions that included 14 classrooms, music rooms, a science lab, and a multi-purpose room.

Over the course of the 2012–13 school year, KCS amalgamated with the church’s nursery school, enabling the school to offer programming from pre-Kindergarten to Senior Kindergarten. The pandemic made running the nursery school problematic, so it hasn’t been offered since September of 2020. Today, KCS has a long-term lease on the land on which the school sits with the church, but it’s more than just a business relationship.

The establishment of a KCS Senior School has been a “generational project,” says Logan. “A dedicated group of administrators, faculty, families, and alumni has been working on the plan for years.” The first Grade 12 class will graduate in 2024–25 when the school celebrates its 36th anniversary.



## Leadership

When we walked into Logan's office, we quickly got a sense of his warm and welcoming manner. A look at the various collections lining the shelves also revealed his key interests—reading, music, and sports.

A few minutes into our conversation, Logan tells the story of taking his son to see a CFL practice many years ago. After the practice, legendary player and coach Mike (Pinball) Clemons came over to shake hands and say a few words to everyone in attendance. "I saw how much that meant to my son and realized that offering just 30 seconds of undivided attention to a child can have a lasting impact," he says. "It reinforced my resolve about how we should always treat kids with respect and show them that they matter. When I became head of school in 2007, I wanted this to be a principal's office where, 95% of the time, students are coming in to chat, ask me questions, and show me their work. The remaining 5% would be coming for the reasons we usually associate with the principal's office."

Logan was on track for a career in academia initially. After his undergraduate degree at McMaster University, he completed a master's degree in war studies at the University of London in the United Kingdom. He was invited to continue to work on his doctorate, but the financial support wasn't enough. Instead, he returned to Canada to start a PhD at York University. "I was a teaching assistant in European history, and that's when I discovered I really liked teaching," he says. "But I didn't like the politics of academic life, so I left and went to U of T for my Bachelor of Education degree."

After a stint teaching in Ottawa, Logan joined KCS in 1999 as a Grade 7 and 8 teacher in Language Arts and History. Influenced by his experiences abroad, he launched a student trip to a Canadian Battlefield in Europe—something that was usually reserved for high school students. At KCS, though, it fits well with the school's philosophy of pushing boundaries and embracing innovation.

Logan doesn't hesitate when asked what hasn't changed since he arrived at KCS. "It's all about the people," he says. "In my early years here, the school was much smaller and had far fewer students, but we always had good people. The staff and faculty were passionate about helping kids and worked really hard. No one was coasting along, and it's the same today." Since then, Logan has considered hiring to be one of—if not the—most important jobs he does.

"I've always tried to surround myself with smart people who are willing to tell it like it is," says Logan. "I don't know all the answers, and I believe solutions can come from anywhere and anyone. The crucial thing for me, when I'm sitting around a table with staff, is that respect goes both ways."

His leadership style is collaborative and collegial, something his colleagues attested to. Head of Advancement Hallie McClelland sums up the assessment of Logan we heard expressed over and over again. "The culture of kindness and inclusiveness at KCS is driven from the top," she says. "Derek is the warmest individual. He really believes in the human connection." He also believes in walking the talk, especially with the three school rules. "I try to live by them every day because the kids are always watching," he says. "It's not so much what you say to them, but how you behave on a daily basis."

While KCS has always been a place that supports students' social and emotional well-being, Logan took the school to another level about 10 years ago. His daughter, then in elementary school, attempted suicide. At first, his instinct was to keep this traumatic event within his family, but after her recovery his daughter wanted to speak publicly about her experience in hopes of helping other struggling teens. Soon after, he followed her lead and has since raised awareness about youth mental health not just at KCS, but throughout the independent school community.

Logan seems reluctant to take credit for this accomplishment and others—such as launching the first independent secondary school in West Toronto during a pandemic. He tends to speak in

the plural, referencing the teams he's assembled along the way. "I was given a foundation, and we've used that to bring significant benefits to students, the community, and education," he says.

## Academics

KCS designs its academic programs with a view to creating well-rounded, lifelong learners. Traditional academic achievement is certainly a priority, but it's not the only priority. The standards at KCS are high. Students strive to do their best and they tend to excel. It's an academically rigorous school, yet the demands are tempered by a strong commitment to individualized instruction, academic support, and student well-being.

The school goes beyond the standard Ontario curriculum to offer students multiple opportunities for enrichment, whether by digging deep into projects tied to their interests or by making connections with real-world issues through experiential learning. STEM learning—whether it's creating art with natural objects found in kindergarten students' outdoor playtime or building robots and video games in fully-equipped labs at the Junior and Senior Schools—is integral to this enrichment.

"Project-based learning is something that comes into play from a very young age at KCS and extends right into the Senior School," says Matina Mosun, head of Junior School. "We teach students to express their curiosity, apply their increased skills, and collaborate and problem-solve."

There are also avenues for accelerated learning starting in the early grades, where advanced readers and gifted math students can join small groups of students with similar abilities. The signature Four Doors to Learning program integrates academics, arts, athletics, and citizenship throughout the KCS curriculum. The fact that there's been an Artist-in-Residence program since 2014, for example, is evidence of just how much value the school places on this pathway to student development.

In terms of the citizenship "door," KCS embeds character education throughout students' academic (and co-curricular) experience. In addition to participating in at least one act of service learning each year, students benefit from formal programs

designed for specific age groups. From Kindergarten right through Grade 8, the Second Step program builds social-emotional skills in an age-appropriate and culturally relevant way. Grade 3 students boost their emotional literacy through the Zones of Regulation program, Grade 4 students interact with babies in the Roots of Empathy program, and in Grades 7 and 8 students gain the skills and knowledge needed to promote positive social change through the High Resolves program.

“Along with giving our students a really strong academic grounding, making sure they’re good people is at the heart of what we do,” says Assistant Head Junior School Mark Magee. “Our school’s previous tagline, ‘Knowing what matters in life,’ captures our commitment to educating students not just in the core subjects, but in broader life skills and values.”

The three school rules came up in almost every conversation we had with the KCS community. “The students are held accountable for abiding by those rules,” says one parent with a daughter in the Junior School and two sons who attended until Grade 8. “Students’ success in following those rules is threaded into their report cards in some capacity.”

According to Intermediate lead teacher Shelley Gaudet, one way that KCS teachers demonstrate their commitment to the three school rules is by respecting students’ different learning styles. “We appreciate every student as an individual in the classroom, and tailor our teaching for them,” she says. Differentiated learning underpins the KCS teaching philosophy, and it requires that teachers truly know their students. Based on our conversations across the school, we can attest to the fact that students feel known, and parents believe teachers have a genuine understanding of their children’s strengths and challenges.

“The teachers take the time to understand your child as an individual and translate that into programming, or simply connecting with them in a way that makes them feel so empowered and cared for,” says one parent of a Junior School student. “The

way my daughter feels supported has allowed her to do really amazing things.”

Students can demonstrate their learning in diverse ways, depending on their interests and talents. “They may want to write some code or create video games, do a traditional piece of writing or present to the class,” says Magee. “They get a say, but we also make sure that they’re not always defaulting to the same methods.”

KCS teachers are experts in their fields, with many holding multiple degrees and at least a decade of experience. “The turnover is low, which creates a strong faculty culture,” says Mosun, whose doctoral degree focused on how teachers adapt their practice to meet students’ needs. “Our teachers care so much and work so hard to create an environment where students feel driven and excited to learn.”

Many of the teachers we met commented on the strong bonds among faculty members. “It’s very collaborative in that we can ask anyone for help, whether it’s in supporting a particular student or trying out a new teaching method,” says Director of Admissions Lise Lacroix, who joined KCS in 1996. “We love our students, but we also really like each other, which creates a happy environment for everyone.” Lacroix noted that teachers rely on a team approach to get to know each student as well as possible. “The children are cared for not only by their home teachers but by everyone that interacts with them each day,” she says.

The professional development program at KCS is comprehensive, offering teachers the chance to enhance their skills and knowledge through internal knowledge exchange and external education. “We take a holistic approach, where we’re always trying to build out a network of like-minded educators who are keeping pace with the latest best practices,” says Magee.



## Junior School

The Junior School, which runs from Junior Kindergarten to Grade 8, is where KCS students accumulate the skills, knowledge, and confidence to become independent, self-motivated learners. In each division—Early Learning (Junior and Senior Kindergarten), Primary (Grades 1 to 3), Junior (Grades 4 to 6) and Intermediate (Grades 7 and 8)—the Junior School creates age-appropriate opportunities for students to discover their interests, hone their research capabilities, and forge connections with the world outside the classroom.

The child-centred Reggio Emilia philosophy, where teachers view children as capable and competent and respond to students' ideas and interests, inspires the KCS Early Learning Program. "Our teachers follow students' lead, but they can expertly guide the questioning and learning so that it always links to curricular goals," says Mosun.

Kindergarten lead teacher Lise Russo says it all starts with getting to know these youngest learners as people. "We do a lot of observation to see who they are as individuals first, and then we develop a relationship with our students. This allows us to develop lessons that are meaningful to them and guide their individual projects. By Senior Kindergarten, they dive a lot deeper when they're doing inquiry projects, whether it's writing letters to their favourite author or asking questions to start an investigation about something in nature."

Direct instruction in the fundamentals is also part of Kindergarten, such as introducing students to literacy through the Handwriting Without Tears and Reading Mastery programs and starting French instruction. But there's still ample time to explore, play, and socialize in the beautiful outdoor classroom.

Visual art, music, and drama are essential to the curriculum. Parents will be interested to know that there's a dedicated art studio and full-time art teachers in the Primary Division, and Grade

1 students start learning to read music in preparation for choosing an instrument in Grade 5.

Daily small-group learning is integral to the academic program throughout the Junior School. "Part of the response to pandemic-related learning loss in schools across Ontario was focusing on small-group learning, but that's something we've been doing for many years," says Mosun. "Ability-based reading groups start in SK, and then there are similar workshops in math and science starting in Grade 1." Bringing students together according to their capabilities—whether it's to offer them challenges beyond their level or provide support in reaching their level—continues through Grade 8.

"It's all about engagement," says Mosun, noting that there are special resources and contests available for talented math students. "It's our responsibility to ensure that students are neither bored nor anxious, so they can feel invested in their own learning." Another way that KCS cultivates student engagement is through project-based learning that springs from student concerns and passions. These projects tend to cross disciplines and require collaboration with multiple students and/or teachers.

While project-based learning is a newer approach in elementary school pedagogy, at least compared to what KCS parents might have experienced, it's in fact a very structured method at the school. "We make sure that we're teaching students the core skills along the way, such as asking critical questions, conducting proper research, and writing up their findings," says Mosun.

Starting in Grade 6, KCS students write exams in some of their courses. The reason, according to the teachers we spoke to, was not just to provide a useful form of assessment, but to practice the critical skill of exam writing at an earlier stage. KCS also uses some standardized tests in the Junior School. "It's a way of seeing how our students are faring compared with other students across Canada," says Mosun. "The results show that our students are very strong in literacy, numeracy, and reasoning skills."



Much of the Junior School curriculum is linked to real-life events and issues in local, national, and global communities. “It’s not uncommon for our teachers to say, ‘Let’s email that MP’ or ‘Let’s write to that scientist,’ and they get responses,” says Mosun. “We encourage students, safely and with support, to reach out to the greater community and to experts. We want them to experience things that are real and relevant to them. That’s when learning sticks.” In the Intermediate Division, students take project-based learning to a new level by completing Passion Projects—long-term investigations into topics of their choice.

Service learning is integrated throughout the Junior School curriculum. Younger students learn about various causes and make contributions as a class, while older students choose their own paths. There’s a dedicated service-learning class in Grade 7 where students design their own projects. “They identify a need in the community, research it, and make connections to external organizations with their teachers’ guidance,” says Mosun.

We spoke to a group of Intermediate students about the highlights of their progression into the upper echelons of the Junior School, and the two things that came up most often were the Passion Projects and Electives Program. In the latter, students get to choose from about a dozen courses designed to expand their academic and co-curricular horizons. From coding, cooking, and dance to yoga, mindfulness, and robotics, the electives spark new interests or improve skills in existing ones. “There were so many options I liked that I felt a bit overwhelmed when I was making a choice,” says one Grade 7 student.

Other unique features to note in the Junior School include a gradual acceleration of the provincial curriculum across the grades (culminating in Intermediate students learning Grade 9 and 10 content), a comprehensive outdoor education program that progresses from day-long trips to overnight adventures, the Student Entrepreneurship Program, and the Young Authors of KCS Program.

## Senior School

The KCS Senior School doesn’t look like any other secondary school we’ve seen in the GTA, but the differences go far beyond the surface. This is a school that’s reimagining how—and where—teenagers learn best, based on the latest educational research.

“We’ve designed our curriculum to give students the skills, knowledge, and experiences they’ll need to be successful in our complex and ever-changing world,” says Fanjoy. The Junior School’s long-time dedication to innovation and holistic development helped inform the Senior School’s creation, but the latter has gone even further in delivering an education for the 21st century.

Students benefit from an enriched, deeply experiential approach that involves frequent hands-on learning outside the school, interaction with mentors and external experts, independent research, and meaningful leadership opportunities. As Logan says, “High school should be about a lot more than just preparing students for university. We do a disservice to kids if they have to constrict their focus so much that they aren’t exploring their interests and engaging with people and issues in the real world.”

The Senior School space is striking—it could easily be a very successful tech or design company—but we also felt a start-up energy in the people we met there. Everyone seems excited to be on the ground floor of a bold new venture. “The families that enrolled their children here are pioneers,” says Assistant Head Senior School Rick Kunc. “But there are lots of families out there who are watching and waiting a bit. Once they see the great things happening, they’ll come. This group, along with the predicted population growth in the area, will steadily increase enrolment.”

Director of Guidance Jennifer Lillie has noticed that there’s a large contingent of entrepreneurs among the parents of current students. “They’re people who are willing to take a risk on something new and let their children step off the traditional path,” she says.

Our conversation with one parent of a student who was there

RESPECT  
MANNERS  
TRY YOUR BEST



from day one, when the Senior School was in a temporary location, illustrates this point. “The first group of families understood the vision and trusted the staff, who were all fabulous,” she says, noting that her daughter graduated from the Junior School. “We knew these people and how committed and smart they were about what they were planning, and it was really exciting. Also, my son is someone who’s a very innovative thinker and likes being part of something that’s new and different.”

It’s important to point out, though, that this is definitely not an alternative school. Teachers follow the Ontario curriculum, and the students are all on track for post-secondary education. They’re just doing it in some different ways. “Families need to be aware that building the model for the Senior School was an evidence-based exercise,” says one parent who was involved in the planning process. “There’s a wealth of research behind what they’re doing.”

Over a period of several years, a group of faculty, staff, parents, and board members worked with a consultant to gather best practices from more than 80 institutions (mostly, but not all, schools). “We looked at what’s happening in secondary and post-secondary education and in different industries, and we considered the advice of thought leaders worldwide around how high school should prepare students,” says Fanjoy.

The result is a school that upends much of the status quo in high school education. One of the core philosophies is called “place-based learning,” which essentially means that students often learn most effectively outside the classroom in places directly related to the lessons at hand. “We say that Toronto is our classroom,” says Senior School teacher Janet Gowans. “Recently we’ve gone to real labs to demonstrate concepts in science, for example, and tried out photography techniques in Graffiti Alley.” Parents sign a permission form allowing students to travel anywhere in a 50-kilometre radius, and there are extended periods in the timetable to accommodate the excursions.

Based on the enthusiasm of the Senior School students we met, this approach has been a hit. The teens were eager to describe all the outings they’d been on and how the experiences improved their learning. “In music class, we go to performances like the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, and it’s a lot more enriching to hear professional musicians play in their natural habitats than on recordings,” says one student.

Teachers often customize place-based learning to enable positive impacts on the community—a pillar of the KCS approach. Students pair up with local organizations to address a problem, such as when they donned hip waders and collected water samples in Lake Ontario for the organization Swim, Drink, Fish, or pulled out invasive plant species in High Park.

The outings can also be simple and closer to home, such as when a math class learned how to calculate slope using the ramps outside. “We get to actually experience what we’re learning about,” says one Grade 9 student. “That really helps me, because when we’re doing math, I can’t understand all the little pieces that go into something until I see how they all connect.”

Parents who might be concerned that students are constantly out gallivanting will be reassured to know that there’s also plenty of time when students are at their desks. “Some of our students would be happy to be out all day, but others need a bit of quiet sometimes,” says Kunc. “So we make sure we balance the times when students are experiencing the wider world and when they’re consolidating that learning in the classroom.”

Another link to the real world comes through the Learning Community Program, where Senior School students can access the resources and expertise of a wide array of community leaders. Some of the Learning Partners in the program receive payment for their services, such as recreational facilities, while the rest are individual volunteers willing to share their knowledge. These people—which include a growing number of KCS parents—may speak at the school, respond to student inquiries, host field trips,

or provide mentorship.

“We knew we wanted a school where students would meet more adults—external experts and people who bring different lived experiences,” says Fanjoy. “Now we have a gallery of more than 60+ vetted partners. Even when students browse this database, they’re learning more about avenues they could pursue in their careers.”

Two other key programs similarly increase students’ engagement with real-world challenges but within the context of the school. Every student is part of at least one full entrepreneurial venture during their time at the Senior School. “We’re nurturing the mindset and skillset of entrepreneurs, something that’s going to be essential for this generation,” says Fanjoy. Grade 10 students are 100% responsible for the running of the school café, from doing the market research and creating the business plan to pricing and staffing. In the future, Fanjoy says there will be a school store and social enterprise.

KCS By Design is another program where students must grapple with challenges that are common in the wider world. In this novel leadership program, students identify a problem or opportunity within the school and use a design thinking process to address it. “This guarantees that every student is involved in authentic leadership and making a true difference at the school,” says Fanjoy. “It’s part of our efforts to build students’ sense of agency.”

Through KCS By Design, students have organized a sports day, started a debating club, and chosen art for their building, to name a few projects. “We’re promoting the idea that they can shape their own school, so they have a real sense of ownership in it,” says teacher Lindsay Pollock. One parent of a Senior School student says KCS By Design has had a profoundly positive influence on her son. “He feels he can provide feedback and be heard, and actually work on real projects that affect the school,” she says.

The Path Program is perhaps the centrepiece of the KCS Senior School curriculum. From Grade 9 to Grade 11, students choose a

topic to study in depth—on school time—from the perspectives of the school’s Four Doors to Learning (academics, arts, athletics, and citizenship). To facilitate their investigations, every student has a one-on-one mentor with relevant expertise. For example, one student who is investigating primatology connected with a mentor in Indonesia who runs an orangutan rescue charity.

“The school devotes regular time and resources to allow students to learn about what’s really important to them,” says one parent. “It’s a brilliant way to reach teens—taking what they’re already passionate about and making space to support it.”

Students arrange offsite experiences to gather knowledge about their topic, integrate it into their coursework, and document everything in an e-portfolio. Some students stick with the same topic over all three years, while others switch topics each year as their interests evolve. At the end of each year, however, they must present their discoveries to the school community. In Grade 11, students complete a creative project based on their Path Project learning that has value in the outside world, along with an extended essay describing their three-year independent learning experience.

One aspect of the Path Project catches many students and parents off-guard: there are no marks attached to it. “We’re passionate about creating lifelong, intrinsically motivated learners,” says Senior School teacher Craig Harris. “We do this to help students understand that the learning is the reward.” In the rest of the Senior School’s academic program, students earn a level, rather than a numerical grade, on their assignments and overall courses. The five levels are associated with percentage marks, but students never see those numbers.

“We’re a feedback-based school,” says Gowans. “We expect students to write a reflection on teachers’ comments and then apply the feedback to grow in their learning. Some students initially struggle with this method because it’s not what they’re used to, but it doesn’t take long for them to get it.”

Even as the school grows, Fanjoy says it will remain committed to an enriched, experiential approach. As for the families and studies who took the calculated risk by joining in the early days, we heard no regrets. “The school is creating the global citizens that our world needs right now,” says one parent. “They’re doing something that’s unique from any other school in Canada.”

## Co-curriculars

It’s no wonder that the co-curricular offerings at KCS are rich and varied, given the philosophy summed up in the school’s motto, “Expand possible.”

“We’re always encouraging students to try new things,” says Logan. “It’s a safe environment where they can just see if they like something. Maybe they do, maybe they don’t. There are no big consequences.”

Logan notes that parents often choose certain after-school activities for their children when they’re young, and it can limit students’ vision of their own capabilities. “I want the sports kids to have those artistic experiences, for example, and the music kids to be on a sports team or do rock climbing, or whatever gets them moving. Then maybe they’ll go home and say, ‘Hey Mom and Dad, this is something I’d like to pursue.’ ”

There are more than 40 clubs in the Junior School for students to explore, from the usual suspects to some unique ones like Boot Camp, iPad Art Club, and Yoga Fit. “We’re a really supportive environment for kids to stretch and grow,” says McClelland. “But kids being kids, they sometimes need a gentle nudge in that direction.” In our conversations with students from across the grades, however, they enthusiastically listed off their co-curriculars and showed pride in the breadth and depth of the options.

On the day we visited KCS, the school’s Wake Up with the Arts event had just wrapped up. It’s a monthly opportunity for students, staff, families, and friends to gather in the main lobby and see a student art exhibit while enjoying performances by student musicians, dancers, and singers. “The performers are at all different levels, but they come in and share what they’ve learned,” says McClelland. “We cheer them on, and it’s wonderful.”

There are also more formal opportunities for students to showcase their abilities, including several concert bands and choirs, and the annual Junior School musical, which invites students from

Grade 4 and up to join as backstage or on-stage participants.

One parent we met shared the story of her son, now graduated, discovering his musical talent at KCS. “I found the school was excellent at knowing things about my child that I couldn’t see,” she says. “My eldest son was known as being really athletic, but he also worked as backstage crew on the musical. One year a teacher overheard him singing as he worked and said he had to try out for the cast the next year. He ended up getting the starring role, and it’s his fondest memory of his time at KCS.”

This parent also recalled how impressed she always was at KCS concerts and shows—not just by the talent, but by the unreserved support for the performers. “Some of the kids were really challenging themselves to get up on stage, and they were wholeheartedly celebrated,” she says. “Respect, manners, and trying your best are embedded in students. It’s all about progress, not perfection.”

The goal of the co-curricular program, says Assistant Head Junior School Mark Magee, is to avoid the narrowing of focus that’s become very common among students at younger and younger ages. “I know the phrase ‘whole child’ gets thrown around a lot, but we really try to get our students to develop all aspects of themselves. It can limit future choices when eight-year-olds think of themselves only in one way, like ‘I’m a hockey guy’ or ‘I’m a math girl.’ So we expose our students to arts, athletics, and citizenship alongside academics. It just makes for a richer, more interesting life.”

Encouraging students to test the edges of their comfort zones is part of the KCS way. Whether it’s entering a robotics competition, singing in the choir, joining a team, or going on a school trip, the aim is to move past the barriers that might be holding students back. When we spoke to Magee, he had just returned from a Grade 6 outdoor education trip. “They slept outside in tents in April, which for many kids meant pushing themselves a bit,” he says. “But that’s where authentic self-confidence and self-esteem come from.”

Co-curriculars at the Senior School understandably don’t compare with the Junior School choices, given the small student numbers, but everyone we spoke to there was happy with the current offerings and expected them to grow with enrolment. In fact, the Senior School students we met spoke animatedly about their involvement in clubs for rowing, environmental action, service, robotics, and the DECA business competitions (one student was excited to share that he’d advanced to the provincials).

Student interests drive the Senior School co-curricular program, and students take the lead in organizing and running clubs and teams. The same thing is possible at the Junior School but with more teacher guidance. For some Senior School students, this ownership over their activities outside the classroom took some getting used to, but soon they became excited by the possibilities.

“Some of our students came from schools where there was a menu of clubs to choose from that had already been organized,” says Harris. “It took them a moment to realize that if they wanted to start a club, it was up to them. One student, for example, started a Ping Pong club. He did all the research, created a spreadsheet of possible tables to purchase, pitched it to the administration, and got it up and running. There’s a real sense of pride in that.”

As one of the Four Doors to Learning at KCS, athletics are integral to every student’s experience. Junior School teams ranging from basketball and volleyball to swimming and ultimate frisbee compete in the Conference of Independent Schools Athletic Association (CISAA) and the Private Schools Athletic Association (PSAA), while intramurals offer a chance to experience internal competition.

At the Senior School, we were surprised to hear the extent of athletic offerings, given the small student body. “We’ve already had athletes compete for KCS in cross country, swimming, skiing, and ultimate frisbee,” says Kunc. “There’s also an intramural basketball and fitness program, so there’s no shortage of ways that students can be active here.”

The Senior School has a state-of-the-art fitness area, but students have many other options outside the building thanks to partnerships with nearby facilities such as the Boulevard Club. Then there's the lake and surrounding trails. "If our kids want to run 5K, they can do it around the Lake Shore path, or they can go rollerblading in the summer or ice skating in the winter," says Kunc. "We're never stuck in a school gym."

## Service Learning

Visitors to the KCS Junior School will likely notice a display in the main lobby featuring cards with handwritten descriptions of all kinds of good deeds. It's called the Wall of Service, and it's a visible reminder of the school's dedication to positively influencing its surrounding communities. (The Senior School is in the process of recreating this tradition.)

Every time a Junior School student completes an act of service—whether at school, at home, or further afield—they write it down on a "brick," read it at assembly and then mount it on the wall. "For the younger students, it could be making cookies for a neighbour or picking up garbage in the park," says Primary lead teacher Keri Davis. "By sharing what they've done at assembly, students are helping to create our culture of giving." Once all the spaces in the brick wall are filled in, students get a dress-down day as a reward.

The prize is a nice motivation for individual acts of service, but KCS has a built-in structure for cultivating students' civic impulses. Every grade in the Junior School participates in at least one service project each year, with the younger students working together as a class under their teachers' guidance and the older students taking on independent initiatives.



In Grade 7, students take a class dedicated to service learning, where they find out what it takes to have a meaningful impact through their volunteer efforts. They plan and execute the projects, which have recently included performing dance routines at a seniors' home, helping at the Special Olympics, and developing a game for younger students.

## Academic Support

Whether students are capable of working ahead of the curriculum or struggling to keep pace, KCS offers a variety of academic support. Still, this is an academically rigorous school, and prospective families will want to know that there are limits to how far staff can go in bringing students up to speed. For students traditionally known as gifted, however, there are virtually no boundaries at KCS.

Each of the Junior School divisions has a learning strategist who works closely with teachers, parents, and students to design appropriate accommodations and extra support. "We provide a wide array of accommodations, and it's not uncommon for our students to have IEPs (Individual Education Plans)," says Mosun. "Some children use noise-cancelling headphones, for example, or come to the office for work that requires quiet concentration. Students can also choose from different desks and chairs designed to allow safe movement during class. We've normalized these things so that it's never awkward for students to use strategies that are recommended for them."

The Junior School's emphasis on differentiated learning through small-group instruction provides built-in support for all types of students. For those who are equipped to move ahead faster than some of their peers, it's an ideal approach. "The sky's the limit in terms of setting a high bar for students," says Mosun. "And we find that most of our students are constantly striving to reach and stretch, at least a little bit."

At the Senior School, students can take the learning strategies course in Grades 9 through 11 to improve their study and research skills, while also getting extra help in the subjects that challenge them the most. "With our small class sizes, we can tailor about half of the course to each student's area of particular academic need," says Director of Guidance Jennifer Lillie.

Lillie also offers one-on-one guidance in planning for post-secondary education. "I believe our students are going to



have an edge when they start applying to universities in a couple of years because of the unique nature of our academic programs,” she says. “Completing a three-year independent project, working with external mentors, running a café, and having all these awesome experiences outside the school—not bad for an application.”

One thing parents have expressed concern about is whether universities will recognize KCS, given the newness of the Senior School. “It’s a fair question,” says Lillie. “But I want families to know that I’ve been reaching out to as many schools in Canada as I can this year, and I’ll continue doing that. I’m networking and building up our name recognition. By the time current students apply, it won’t be a problem.”

## Wellness

While most schools have come out of the pandemic with a new, or renewed, emphasis on student well-being, this has been a long-time priority at KCS.

More than a decade ago, Logan led a change at the school toward more openness around KCS community members experiencing mental health challenges. Precipitated by his daughter’s crisis, Logan underwent a personal shift in his approach to the subject. “The way I grew up, you didn’t talk about any of that,” he says. “But I was so inspired by my daughter speaking about her experience at high schools and different organizations, and even on TV. I decided that I was going to use my platform at the school and my position in the independent school community to talk about it.”

The response to Logan’s decision to share his family’s experience was immediate and almost universally positive. “It was amazing that my fear around speaking about it changed within about a 72-hour period because there were so many people in the staff and parent community who came to me and talked about either their own struggles or their family’s struggles,” he says.

Since then, KCS has continued to build on its well-being programs and culture of openness around mental health. Hiring Tamara Drummond as the school’s first director of student and community well being in 2013 was a decisive step, given that few—if any—independent schools in Canada had a similar person on their elementary school staff. Drummond has the advantage of a dual perspective, with training and experience as both a teacher and a Certified Canadian Counsellor.

“We recognize that student well-being is the foundation for everything,” says Drummond. “No matter how smart or how athletically gifted a child might be, if they’re not in a good place socially and emotionally then they’re not going to be able to perform and learn and improve and grow. That’s why my position was



created—to make sure that this knowledge is part of our culture and the teachers all understand it.”

Magee, who works closely with Drummond in managing any behavioural issues in students, says students benefit from the supportive environment created at the top. “Because of Derek, and because of Tamara’s presence, all the adults in the building know that we can be open when we’re struggling with something, and there’s not going to be any shame and stigma,” he says, adding that every staff member is certified in mental health first-aid. “We’re all here for each other, and that feeling trickles down to the kids.”

Students in Grades 1 to 8 participate in the Second Step social-emotional learning program, which sparks dialogue around positive mental health through weekly conversations and curricular content. Grade 3 students dig even deeper into their emotions through the Zones of Regulation program. At assemblies, Drummond and other staff lead information sessions and discussion on healthy habits for mind and body, with students often contributing. There’s also a school nurse on staff to address the mental health challenges that often manifest as physical symptoms. And teachers integrate mindfulness skills into many aspects of the curriculum.

In our chat with Junior School students, they were happy to share how their school promotes well-being. “Everyone here cares about your mental health,” says one Grade 7 student. “They make sure we don’t do too much on the computer and encourage breaks so we can put our best foot forward.” A peer agreed, saying, “We get mental health time to relieve stress and try not to pack everything in.”

At the Senior School, there are just as many opportunities for students to deepen their understanding of holistic well-being and seek support in achieving it. Drummond collaborates closely with Senior School Director of Guidance Jennifer Lillie to deliver mental health-related talks at weekly assemblies and counsel students as needed. “They take mental health really seriously here,” says

one Senior School student. “The teachers and Ms. Drummond talk about healthy habits and how to notice when you’re not doing well.”

According to Drummond, the essential foundation to student well-being at school is for them to feel truly known by teachers—something KCS does well. “Across the Junior and Senior Schools, our teachers care about every student and recognize when they’re having a tough day, or if something bigger might be going on.”

Like all schools, KCS is grappling with the pandemic’s impact on children and teens, and Logan is the first to say that his staff doesn’t have all the answers. “I think we’re in a better position than some because of the work that we had done before, but there’s still so much to do,” he says. “We’re just going to keep trying to do the right things.”

## Student Body / Diversity

The KCS student body is close-knit and very intentional in its efforts to nurture a cohesive community. The weekly assemblies at the Junior School go a long way toward creating unity and shared purpose within grades and across the divisions. Sometimes, the gatherings are all about fun and celebration—recognizing student achievements, enjoying student performances and presentations, and cheering on clubs and teams. At other times, the time in chapel is focused on listening and reflecting on more serious subjects, such as compassion and service. The House system also helps build cross-grade friendships and school pride through friendly competition and spirit days throughout the year.

Our conversations across the KCS community left the impression that students have no time for exclusive cliques, let alone bullying. “Everyone is so nice to each other,” says one Grade 6 student. “Nobody is mean here. It’s a great vibe.” Her friend echoed this sentiment, saying, “Everyone respects each other, and whenever you’re alone they’ll ask if you are okay and if you’ll play with us.”

A plaque that greets visitors at the Senior School reception desk says it all: ““In our community, you can expect to be: Accepted and celebrated for your individuality. Appreciated for your ideas and questions. Free from bullying and comfortable in our company. We’re glad you’re here.” Judging by our conversation with a group of Senior School students, these aren’t just words. Alongside the expected jokes and lighthearted jabs, there was a sense of genuine camaraderie and respect within the group.

The school cultivates leadership skills at every stage, even in the youngest learners. Primary students have the chance to speak at assemblies, sometimes with the assistance of older children, and Junior division students can be Reading Buddies. All Grade 6 to 8 students participate in a formal leadership program, prepping them to lead assemblies and serve as House captains.

“There are leadership opportunities for all students, whether

they’re in Grade 1 or Grade 8,” says one Junior School parent. “At other schools, those opportunities are reserved either for older students or they’re just not as forthcoming based on the sheer size of the school.”

The KCS By Design program gets every Senior School student involved in concrete projects where they can develop—or polish—their leadership skills. “It’s like everyone is on student council, instead of just having a few at the top making decisions,” says teacher Lindsay Pollock. The lack of hierarchy suits many teens, especially those who might not have engaged with student life in large, traditionally organized high schools. It’s a reflection of the KCS mission to encourage students to expand their self-concept and try new things. As one parent says, “Some other independent schools only want the kids who are already super-confident leaders. Well, that’s not who my kids are. I love that KCS nurtures those qualities in all students.”

Like all independent schools, KCS is directing more time and energy to equity, diversity, and inclusion. One of the current strategic goals is to expand the community catchment area, but even over the past decade, the demographics of the student body have evolved. “We’re excited that there’s a lot more diversity among students because the neighbourhood demographics are changing,” says one parent. “The school is building out that diversity through different events and celebrations that invite families to engage with the school.”

Shelley Gaudet, the citizenship education coordinator, says KCS has formalized its EDI efforts in curricular and co-curricular programs. “We’re now documenting all of our diversity and inclusion initiatives across the grades, which provides teachers with a map of different cultural celebrations and related resources. I’m finding that parents are more open to coming in and sharing their culture, maybe because they see our receptiveness.”

## Getting In

Open houses are a critical part of the admissions process at KCS. “In the Junior School, we don’t interview applicants’ parents because we’ve generally met them at an open house,” says Director of Admissions Lise Lacroix.

The Junior School admissions team initially takes students on a school tour, where they have an informal chat. Then there’s an age-appropriate assessment that’s been designed in-house. Even the Junior Kindergarten students complete one. “We just want to see where children are at in their learning,” says Lacroix. “We’re not trying to trick them. It usually covers material they should have mastered.” For older children, the assessment includes some reading comprehension, for example, and a bit of writing and math. A more formal student interview usually follows the assessment. The Senior School assesses applicants largely based on past transcripts and written work, along with an interview.

KCS tuition is on par with comparable schools, if not slightly lower. There is a one-time non-refundable infrastructure fee due upon acceptance.

There is no financial aid currently available at KCS, but the school is building its culture of philanthropy in hopes that this may change in the future.

## Parents

KCS wouldn’t be the school it is without its dedicated parents. Some families are more involved than others, of course, but everyone gives at least some of their time throughout the year. It’s just another expression of the strong community spirit that enlivens and energizes KCS.

All families are members of the Parent Network, but there’s a core group that has the ability and inclination to commit to executive positions and long-term roles such as Class Parent. For the rest, multiple options offer flexibility—and often some fun. There are social events for parents such as coffee mornings, pub nights, and, recently, a gala in support of the Senior School’s next phase.

And of course, parents are always needed to help at special school celebrations like sports days, the Terry Fox Run, art shows, and year-end barbecues. “Our families donate about 4,500 hours a year, or 15 hours per family,” says McClelland. “We would not be a successful school without them.”

KCS works hard to ensure that every new family feels a sense of belonging from day one. There’s a New Family Welcome event just before classes start in September, and new families are paired with “seasoned” families who can show them the ropes. Moreover, the parents we spoke to were happy with the amount and type of communication from the school, which includes a weekly email newsletter, homeroom websites, a learning management system, and social media presence.

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“The teachers take the time to understand your child as an individual and translate that into programming, or simply connecting with them in a way that makes them feel so empowered and cared for,” says one parent of a Junior School student.

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