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PRIVATE SCHOOL REVIEWS

The Mabin School

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

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Preface

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.

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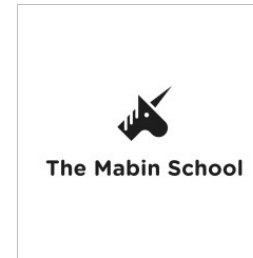
We know how hard it can be for you, as a parent, to research private schools. For more than two decades we’ve published Canada’s most trusted annual private school guide, building on insights gained over years of work. The *Our Kids Private School Reviews* series of book-length reviews is aimed at information-seeking 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: The Mabin School

Location: Toronto, Ontario

Founded: 1980

Enrolment: 150

Grades: JK - Gr. 6

Gender: Coed

Living Arrangements: Day

Language of Instruction: English

School Focus: Academic

Developmental Priorities: Intellectual and emotional

Curriculum: Progressive

Curriculum Pace: Student-paced

Academic Culture: Rigorous

Special Needs Support: In-class Adaptations

Gifted Learner Support: In-class Adaptations



Introduction

It's a Wednesday in late May and we are gathering with a group of Mabin students around a community table in their Learning Commons. Surrounded by a wonderfully diverse collection of picture books and novels, we sit down for pizza to chat about their beloved school. It's obvious almost instantly that these kids are happy to be here. They clamour to share stories and recount details of what they've been working on during the school year.

"We've been learning a lot about Atlantic Salmon," says Charlotte, a precocious Grade 1 student. "We are studying the life cycle and writing a non-fiction book, maybe to put in the library." When asked how they came to study salmon, she gets excited. "Well, we got salmon eggs to hatch in our class, and we were all really curious to learn more about them," she says. "Did you know that on their way back from the ocean they have to swim 3,200 kilometres and they can jump nine feet? And, on Friday we are going to release the salmon," she continues. "They're in their early fry stage now." Impressed, I marvel that she seems to know so much for a Grade 1 student. She replies: "It doesn't matter the age; it matters the knowledge."

This sentiment, echoed by both the students and staff here, is what The Mabin School's philosophy is all about. The school is committed to student-led inquiry and has a mission to create the next generation of original thinkers, adaptive leaders, and caring citizens. This "students-in-the-driver's-seat" approach was the basis

upon which Mabin was founded in 1980. Mabin is governed by a strong belief that if allowed to follow their passions and interests, students will feel more connected to the materials they're learning and will dive much deeper into the subjects they're taught. Mabin starts with the Ontario curriculum as a jumping off point and adds a creative, out-of-the-box group of teachers who are willing to be extremely flexible in their lesson planning. "This has always been a place where students are the leaders, where kids guide the inquiry, and adults are let into their world," says Michelle Barchuk, the school's Director of Admissions and Communications.

"Other schools are just starting to catch on to this way of teaching," echoes Principal Nancy Steinhauer, who came to the school in 2016 with 25 years of education experience in both independent and public schools. "This school is the model of excellence in progressive education. It's the closest thing to perfect that I've found and it truly feels like a place where kids should be. Our students are the leaders of now, not the leaders of tomorrow. And they are able to step into this role with a lot of support from the caring adults who work here."

Zachary, a Grade 4 student pipes up: "Our class inquiry project has been about birds. It started when we found a feather while out on a field trip and wanted to know more. I wasn't really into birds before, but now my family is asking me all these questions. I've become an expert and I didn't even know I could know this much."

From math and science to art and literacy, Mabin teachers weave curricular learning seamlessly into class-wide inquiry projects, forging meaningful connections for students and expanding their knowledge. "My favourite part of the inquiry was the art project we did sculpting birds. They're now hanging in our classroom," Zachary says.

When I speak with a Grade 4 parent and member of the Mabin board, Samantha Margolis Fogle, she adds to the conversation about the bird inquiry. "While we were away on vacation over March break, my son was taking pictures of birds in Costa Rica and

researching their names and habitats. The kids are really into this project. They're being taught things they want to know more about which makes them so excited to learn."

Back in the library, the students finish their pizza and head outside for recess and I'm taken on a tour of the school. There's student work hanging on the walls, and near the entrance to the school I notice posters advertising a "Bird Dance" to be held that Friday in the Grade 4 classroom. A two-dollar donation is requested to attend the dance. "The kids have built bird feeders and are going to shop for seed to fill them," explains Barchuk. The dance is how they'll raise money to buy that seed. The whole initiative is student-led and they're bringing it to life in their own way. "Often, these kids don't even realize they're learning," she says. "That's the beauty of this model."



The Basics

The Mabin School is a coeducational day school for students in JK to Grade 6. It was known as a trailblazer school when, in 1980, a group of parents and investors, along with teacher and educator Gerry Mabin, built the school from the ground up. As former principal of The Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study in Toronto, Mabin was celebrated for what was said to be her magical ability to instill confidence in students, allowing them to be themselves while learning and growing. The school has always taken a relationship-based approach to education with a focus on guided learning and student-led inquiry. Today the school is a member of the Conference of Independent Schools of Ontario and a member of the International Association of Laboratory Schools.

Located in an idyllic, central-Toronto neighbourhood just east of Casa Loma on Poplar Plains Road, The Mabin School has never strayed too far from the values and philosophy upon which it was built. The school has remained small since its inception — though it recently underwent a fairly extensive expansion of their physical space. The smallness allows for close-knit relationships, while also ensuring a nimbleness that often eases the decision-making process. “You can have things pop up quickly and turn around and make them happen,” says Barchuk. The school, which resides in an old house, has a capacity of 150 students. Even with the building expansion, they don’t plan to grow any bigger. “We are located in a residential area and it’s the perfect size for us,” says Barchuk.

As echoed by many staff and parents, it’s the quality of the relationships that matter most at Mabin. There’s a shared commitment to knowing each student personally and remaining focused on their success and happiness. The average class size is 20 students per grade with regular time devoted to small group instruction. There’s a classroom teacher as well as a Learning Strategies Teacher and/or Early Childhood Specialist assigned to each class to meet the needs of all learners. Students leave their classrooms for subjects taught by specialist teachers including PE and health, music, French, visual arts, and science.

The school identifies as an Ashoka Changemaker School, and was the first independent school to receive this designation from Ashoka Canada, an organization dedicated to helping create a world where all citizens are powerful and contribute to change in positive ways.

Mabin teachers maintain a social justice lens when teaching and encourage students to take action and step into their personal and collective power. That being said, the administration is adamant that the kids stay kids as long as possible and thus they remain committed to the school’s play-based origins. “We provide the kids with real leadership opportunities, while at the same time allowing them the space to be children. We never want to put pressure on them to grow up faster than they’re ready to,” says Steinhauer.

Mabin offers a safe and nurturing environment for students to learn and grow and is committed to diversity and inclusion. Their mandate is to continue to increase the diversity of voices within the school community. They’re proudly progressive and look for families who are aligned with their values. They’ll never exude an elite private school atmosphere; instead, they aim to foster an open-minded, out-of-the-box culture that encourages every student to come as they are. The school’s mascot is the unicorn, which speaks to the elements of magic and playfulness that they value greatly. “We don’t ever protect kids from important conversations when they’re developmentally appropriate, but we also believe kids can still remain playful and joyful even as they grow up,” Steinhauer says.

Students come to Mabin with a variety of learning profiles. “We want that diversity,” Steinhauer says. “We want kids who are academically talented and those who are socially and emotionally adept, and we want kids who have learning challenges and those who find it harder to navigate social circumstances. Everyone benefits from the diversity of learners and the more diverse we are, the richer the learning.”

Background

The story of Mabin’s origins has been well-documented in an article published in the now defunct *Saturday Night Magazine* from April 1982. The article recounts the story of the school’s very first days and the vision that brought it to life. Dubbed an experiment, the school was dreamed up by a group of eager parents who wanted to find a place where Gerry Mabin could work her magic. Having landed in an administrative position as head of the University of Toronto lab school in 1977, Mabin, the story goes, was feeling restless, limited by tight budgets, and unable to accomplish what she wanted to as an educator. The parents saw in Mabin the ability to teach in a way others were not at the time: giving children the confidence to believe in themselves and instilling in them a love of learning. Parents whose children attended the lab school at the time saw this spark in Mabin and wanted to find a place where she could really put her talents to work.

There are many individuals credited with bringing The Mabin School to life. Early investors included Hilary and Galen Weston Sr., Judy Burgess, and Julia Zachary. Gerry Mabin had a teaching partner, Joanne Fleming, who had trained under her and shared her dream of starting her own school. Fleming was one of the school’s first teachers alongside Mabin. The small group set out to find a location for this school they were dreaming into being. After much searching, they found an old house that had been vacated by the National Ballet School. Located on Jarvis Street, the building needed a lot of work

to transform it into a fully functioning school. While Mabin and her team were working tirelessly to transform the space, Galen Weston and his associate Roger Lindsay developed the charter for a non-profit foundation called the TORCH Educational Foundation, which would operate the school, charge fees, and eventually offer bursaries.

With a foundation and a building in place, the group got to work, establishing the school brick by brick, student by student. It is said that they literally went door to door recruiting students from the area. The school's first teachers were Joanne Fleming for JK and SK, Gerry Mabin for Grades 1 and 2, and art consultants Dorothy Medhurst and Paola Cohen. On September 8, 1980 the school, which had hastily been named The Mabin School, after the woman whose educational talents it was built upon, opened its doors. There were only 25 students that year, along with four teachers and a dog mascot named Danny Jarvis. Each year the school expanded steadily, both in size and offerings. After three years on Jarvis Street, the little school moved into the house on Poplar Plains Road which also needed a lot of TLC. Gerry and her team once again worked their magic and the school's forever home was established.

In the early 2000s, the school began to imagine what it could do with more space. After an extensive design process, the renovation was completed at the start of the 2022–23 school year. It includes a brand new community learning lab, a learning commons, art studio, and kindergarten spaces. Parts of the school were also made accessible for the first time, with an elevator and ramp installed on the first floor.

As for Gerry Mabin, she remained at the school until 1999. Though she no longer works at Mabin, her presence is still felt. She always attends the school's annual BBQ as well as other school-wide events. Her legacy also lives on in the way the academic environment is structured. "For these kids it's about being known and understood as learners and as human beings" says Steinhauer. "Imagine having such a progressive vision in the 1980s? We hear a lot more about

inquiry and the student-led approach today, but Gerry saw the value in this more than 40 years ago. She was a true visionary."

Leadership

The Mabin School has, and has always had, a small but mighty leadership team. Keeping with the nature of the school, every adult does a little bit of everything and knows every student by name. The principal's office, tucked away on its own little floor of the school just upstairs from the main office, is small and welcoming. There's a suggestion box tacked up beside the door and, as with nearly everything here, there's a story behind it. "A student gave me this box with a letter explaining how it should work," Steinhauer recalls. "Students are encouraged to write down their ideas for the school and leave them in the box." It's a simple idea, but indicative of how the school operates and what it stands for. Student voices matter.

As far as the leadership progression goes, when Gerry Mabin retired as principal, she was followed, over the years, by a number of administrators who each contributed something of their own to the school, while working to keep Gerry's vision and values alive.

In 2016, Nancy Steinhauer was brought in to lead Mabin. She came with 20 years of leadership experience, having worked in prestigious private schools and TDSB inner-city schools. She also worked for the Ministry of Education as a Student Achievement Officer and was the recipient of Canada's Outstanding Principals Award and the Stand Up for Kids Award in 2012.

"I actually fell in love with this school years before when I was working at Branksome Hall. It was 1993 and there was a Mabin graduate in my class. She was so grounded and loved learning. I had

noticed that many students who came to us from Mabin hadn't lost their love of learning. They all had this spark," Steinhauer recalls. "I came for a visit to the school and met with Gerry who was still the head then. I found her to be extremely charismatic and inspiring."

Over the years, Steinhauer shares, she had a number of encounters with Gerry Mabin through projects they collaborated on. "We had a really lovely, positive, collegial admiration of each other, and when decades later the principal job came up and I was working for the Ministry, Gerry reached out and encouraged me to apply. At the time I figured I had one more school left in me and so much was possible with a school like Mabin. It was innovative, well-resourced, small, and they were already doing so much well. I just thought, wouldn't it be incredible to be in such a creative place that valued social-emotional, academic, and innovative learning. I felt like I could bring the best of everything I'd done in other schools here."

On the Mabin website, staff are listed in alphabetical order and, as such, it's not possible to immediately distinguish who is on the school's leadership team. The photo and bio for the school's custodian is listed next to the VP finance & operations, which certainly says something about the school. The hierarchy doesn't seem to matter nearly as much as the environment that everyone is working to create. And this feeds into everything. In May of 2023 this same custodian, Penpa Tsering, was presented with the school's annual Ian Hawkins Spirit Award. The award, which is presented at Mabin Day, can be won by anyone within the school who embodies the spirit of Mabin.

Along with Steinhauer and Barchuk, the school's leadership team includes Rachel Mathews, vice-principal finance & operations, Erika Bolliger, director of advancement & alumni relations, and Ben Peebles, VP strategy, equity, & learning.

At Mabin, each team member has their specific role, but also wears many different hats, Barchuk explains. Despite the demands of her role, she didn't bat an eyelash when a group of students

approached her recently about wanting to start a student newspaper. “It was a group of Grade 4s who came to me in the fall looking for a staff adviser to help them start this newspaper,” she recalls. “I do the school newsletter and magazine, but I couldn’t just tell them how to do it; instead I let them guide the process and learn how much work it takes to actually produce something like this. While there were 30 kids initially interested, we now have a group of six who consistently come to work on this project, and we are in the process of producing well-researched articles which we’ll eventually turn into a print publication. It’s been a great learning experience for everyone.”

Steinhauer has similar involvement in student life. She always makes time for the kids no matter how many other things she has on her plate. For example, on days when she brings her dog Jada to school, Steinhauer has a sign-up list on her office door for students who wish to help her walk the pup during lunch recess (Jada is listed on the Mabin website as the school’s canine mascot. She even has her own email address).

Beyond the leadership team who work at the school, Mabin has the support and leadership of a 14-person board of directors, some of whom are alumni and current Mabin parents. For Samantha Margolis Fogle, joining the board was the ideal next step in her Mabin journey. Her son and daughter both attend the school and from the beginning, she says, she got really involved in the school. She first spent a few years as a class rep and as a member of the parents association and then joined the board as chair of the marketing committee. “This school has always reflected the values we wanted our kids to have. From the moment we went for a tour I knew this was the place for us. It’s like a big warm hug of a school.”

At Mabin, like at many independent schools, the board has a number of responsibilities including making all major funding decisions, overseeing the principal, setting policies, and providing guidance when it comes to operations. “Our board is always supportive; they provide strategic leadership and guidance, but they don’t interfere operationally. We have a very positive working

relationship,” says Mathews. “Working with Nancy has also been amazing. There’s nothing she doesn’t know about the school and there’s no kid she doesn’t know by name. She’s one of a kind.”

This mutual admiration seems to be felt throughout the school. Teachers speak highly of the leadership team and seem to really respect that work that’s being done to keep this magical little school running smoothly. There’s a strong team feeling whereby everyone contributes to the success of the whole and provides support to others where needed. “If a teacher is passionate about something, the admin is supportive,” says Megan Fehlberg. As part of the school’s Eco Team, Fehlberg is often pitching ideas for ways to improve the school’s practices from an environmental perspective. And like most ideas whether they come from kids or staff, they’re adopted quickly and without much hesitation.



Facilities

As mentioned earlier, Mabin's physical structure is a converted house that's recently been renovated to add more space and elements of accessibility. The neighbourhood surrounding the school is residential. It's one of the nicer areas in the city of Toronto, with tree-lined streets and well-appointed houses. As one might expect from an old, converted house, the school has a very homey feel. It's bright and welcoming and looks like a place where a kid would want to spend the day.

The yard isn't big, but every aspect of it has been designed intentionally. The enclosed playspace winds around the perimeter of the building. There's a dedicated kindergarten yard that older kids use when the kindies aren't outside, a well-maintained sport court out front, a play structure with a slide and climbing equipment, and an outdoor stage in the back. All the way around the school there's a running track, which kids sometimes use for running and other times use to walk and chat with friends. There's also a four-square court, hopscotch, a looseparts playground, a sandbox and more. There's even an outdoor blackboard. Cross-grade play is encouraged, and the yard allows for that. The whole space is lined with soft, bouncy turf. It's comfortable and inviting and blends in well with the surrounding area.

Inside, what's noticeable upon first glance is the student work purposefully displayed in all of the hallways. The art is impressive, perhaps more so than one might expect in a JK-to-6 school. Every

collection seems to be linked to something the students are learning—from fungi to space to birds—there's an obvious academic connection.

Speaking of art, the newly built art studio space is stunning. These are soaring ceilings, bright overhead lights and huge windows. Shelves are lined with every single art supply you could imagine. It's a budding artist's dream workshop. The learning commons, also newly built, is bright, with high ceilings and walls lined with books. The space is intended to be flexible; tables can be moved around as needed and collaboration is the focus.

Every classroom exudes its own distinct charm, each a reflection of the captivating inquiry projects underway within. Some bear the remnants of the older part of the building's architectural history, with low ceilings and snug, almost crawl-like spaces. The kindergarten classrooms shine with newness, a testament to recent renovations. On the day we visit, sunlight floods through the windows, casting playful shadows on the floors and illuminating the colourful artwork posted on the windows. A dedicated music room boasts a delightful array of instruments, ready to inspire these budding musicians. Meanwhile, the science lab is bright and full of life, a collaborative space where learning will be brought to life through hands-on experimentation.

With mental health and well-being as a primary focus within the school, dedicated chill-out spaces are aptly placed, giving students a place to unwind when needed. Called "the nooks" these literal nooks have been designed by the students and furnished to exude calm. One is inside the art studio, and one is in a hallway outside of the main office. They're small spaces, just big enough for one student, and cozy enough to provide comfort when a child needs to regroup or take a moment to themselves.

There's a sense of pride in the space and everyone's contributions to it. And while the expansion has provided a more modern feel to the building, the energy within the school is still what matters most. "We are lucky to have such a beautiful facility, but we aren't fancy," says Steinhauer. "We are all substance and no glitter. This school

is about people who are serious about education. And yes, there's magic, but there's also a whole lot of substance."

"This house is the heart of the school," Barchuk chimes in. "And there's a reason we didn't raze the whole building to the ground and build a brand-new school. We wanted to create new spaces that would compliment what was already here. To respect and celebrate our rich history." In fact, the house has a cool history of its own, spanning way back to the 1920s when famed Canadian pilot, Billy Bishop, called it home.

A lift and ramp, installed during the renovation, have made parts of the building accessible for the first time, giving access to the community learning lab and learning commons as well as the art studio. There's also an accessible washroom. Accessibility became a priority to the students a few years ago. "There was a volunteer coming to the school a few times a week who was in a wheelchair and had to be carried up the front stairs," Steinhauer recounts. "A teacher brought in Luke Anderson of StopGap who worked with the kindergarten kids to help complete a building audit of the school and the students became advocates for accessibility not only in the school but in the local community as well."

Academic Environment

The Mabin School adopts a progressive education philosophy. This approach emphasizes hands-on learning, critical thinking, creativity, and student-centred teaching methods. It encourages students to explore their interests and develop a deep understanding of subjects through experiential and inquiry-based learning. The curriculum is thoughtfully designed to be dynamic and adaptable, allowing educators to tailor their teaching methods to individual learning styles and paces. This approach not only ensures a deep understanding of subjects but also cultivates critical thinking skills, problem-solving abilities, and a lifelong passion for knowledge.

In order to ensure this way of learning is maintained throughout the school, teachers are hired specifically for their ability to be flexible. "We don't know in September what will happen in March, what the kids will want to learn about, or where each class's focus will go," says Steinhauer. "When we hire teachers, we know we are looking for individuals who love to learn, who are willing to learn alongside the children, and who will constantly try to get better at what they're doing. We also look for teachers willing to embrace flexibility and change their focus on the fly."

Teacher professional development is common and frequent, and the whole school participates in learning opportunities to ensure consistency. As part of being a lab school, they often have access to University of Toronto academics and are educated based on the latest research.

Some of Mabin's teachers are specialists, who work with each class and partner with the classroom teachers to focus on specific subjects. One such subject is science. In the science classroom students from JK to Grade 6 get to bring their learning to life through hands-on experiments and a rich and challenging science curriculum. Michelle Li is Mabin's science specialist, and she came to the school in 2010 via the Ontario Science Centre. "I studied to be a teacher but then I spent a number of years in museum education working with kids of all ages from preschool through Grade 12. When the opportunity came up to join Mabin and work in the classroom I was really excited," she says. "What's especially amazing about working at Mabin is that I'm always learning. Because science is always changing, we model that in the classroom, encouraging the students to explore their interests and question things to come up with answers. We have to model what it means to stay curious." Li says she thinks about Mabin as an 8-year program during which she covers the four strands of science: earth, physics, chemistry, and biology. "Unlike schools that follow along with the Ontario curriculum, we have the freedom to go deeper and look at science from a variety of different ways."

What's also important to note about Mabin's teaching style, which was well-reflected in the student interviews we did, is that speed matters much less than depth. "We go deep, we require rigour, and we stay on a concept until everyone understands it. We take time to create, design, reflect, and we don't rush through anything," Steinhauer says. Students also learn to think about their thinking and to understand themselves as learners, something that doesn't always happen in elementary school.

Lailah, a Grade 3 student, joined Mabin from another private school in the city. "I loved my old school, but I found that things were going too fast and happening all at once. I couldn't focus and subjects would fly by, and I never had enough time to absorb information." At Mabin, she says, she instantly felt at home and more relaxed in her learning. "We have more time to learn each subject and it's much easier for me to focus now."

With an intense focus on student-led inquiry, like the Grade 4 classroom's bird project, one has to wonder what happens if kids aren't interested in the subject matter. This is something parents might wonder when considering Mabin. Barchuk explains: "Turn that around and take a look at the traditional teaching model that follows the Ontario curriculum. The teacher says we are studying endangered animals, for example. One kid is excited, a few are curious, others not so much. They learn about it anyway, and then they move on to the next thing. At Mabin, the buzz around a topic or area of study comes from the kids directly. It's not a top-down approach. And I can tell you, when it's coming from their peers, it's much easier to get everyone on board. Kids are much more convincing than a teacher ever could be. And that momentum builds. Some kids may be on the fence at first, but they'll find a way to access the subject through their own personal interests. We aren't just checking off topics and moving on, nothing is random. We get to a place where the kids share that excitement, and we stay in that place and we build on it."

Can you teach like this and still prepare them for Grade 7? Barchuk says, "Absolutely! We find ways to connect everything they're learning to ensure a deeper understanding. Our students are well-prepared for middle school and beyond."

This is one of the things teacher-librarian and teaching learning and curriculum (TLC) coach Jillian Green loves most about Mabin. "I love to see what the children are naturally curious about and build the curriculum around their genuine wonderings," she says. For Green, who has been at Mabin since 2010, teaching has never become repetitive. "It's fresh every year, even if we are learning the same subject matter. Because you'll have a class who is curious about space and you've taught space before, but they'll enter through a completely different vantage point, and that's part of the thrill."

In 2022 Green moved into the role of teacher-librarian and TLC coach. Part of this role involves working with all of Mabin's

teachers to provide support, guidance, and continuing education. Green is especially passionate about literacy. At Mabin, language arts instruction relies heavily on the science of reading, something Green passionately talks at length about. “As the province scrambles to update their practices around teaching reading and spelling, I’m proud to say we are leaders in the industry. Many schools want to connect with us to see how we are implementing the recommendations and what resources we are purchasing. As a laboratory school, we are in a unique position to not only apply learnings within our own school, but to happily share resources with others.”

All of the educators at Mabin have participated in a full-year professional development program in structured literacy, which included having trainers work in the classrooms delivering model or demo lessons. “We’ll have a professional come into the classroom space and work with the students to teach a lesson we’ve been struggling with, and we’ll get to observe in a fishbowl style, and that’s been incredibly helpful,” says Green.

At Mabin, core subjects like literacy and math are taught through a balance of rote learning and experiential education, which involves dynamic, engaging lessons. Typically, classes are taught in half-group settings where a classroom teacher and learning strategies teacher divide up the class and can focus on individual needs to ensure each student is challenged and supported when needed. No matter how a student learns, they’re given the tools and resources they need to succeed. The school also doesn’t separate academics from social-emotional learning; instead, human development is integrated into everything—from the topics studied to the way these topics are taught.

For Alex Morley, an SK teacher with a special education background, Mabin’s teaching approach is ideal. “This school provides one of the best models for special education, ensuring learning is inclusive for all students by providing in-class support with two teachers assigned to almost every class. Not only do the teachers provide support for each child, but they also support one another,”

he says. In the kindergarten classroom, Morley believes there’s a perfect balance of play and learning. “We watch the kids closely but also let them develop independence. We make time for academics but always ensure they feel like they’re having fun. We work in small groups and challenge each child in a way that works for them.”



School Life

Mabin prides itself on being more than just a school. And while many schools talk about family and community, it's clear that being part of something bigger than oneself is what being a Mabin student is all about. Over and over again the following words are used when talking about Mabin: innovation and leadership, flexibility and empathy, positive change, community, and liberal thinking. The school's mission attracts many families who are looking for something different, a place where their kids will feel safe and supported but also challenged and inspired.

“The ideal Mabin student and family is one that's not looking for a traditional school. You won't find uniforms here. In fact, we don't have a dress code,” says Morley. “I wear all sorts of clothes as a teacher. Sometimes I come in a three-piece suit and other times I wear a tracksuit. As part of the Mabin community, all are free to express themselves as they feel comfortable.”

Students also address all adults in the building by their first names. While it may seem informal, it goes a long way toward creating a comfortable, family-like environment that the school prides itself on. It's also about making kids feel like important members of a community, one that values them as equals.

Most families who come to Mabin live within three kilometres of the school, but others commute from across the city, because the school meets the needs of their child in a way others do not.

Steinhauer describes the school as a learning community for those ages 0 to 99. This is something she's especially proud of. Through a variety of programs, Mabin works really hard to connect with the community beyond the school population. These programs are mutually beneficial and provide learning opportunities for all.

On Saturday mornings, for example, the school opens its doors for a play-based experience for parents, caregivers, and children ages 0 to 5. Made possible by an alumni donation, the program is free and operates via a drop in and play model. It extends Mabin's reach and forges connections within the greater community. It's something that families in the area really take advantage of and connects young children with the school at an early age.

Mabin also has a unique intergenerational program that was designed to bring children and seniors together in an experience-rich environment for their mutual benefit. These connections are facilitated through arts activities. The program provides opportunities for seniors and children of early and middle childhood age to learn together in an innovative learning environment with reciprocal social, emotional, and academic benefits.

The school is also host to events and conferences. In 2023, Mabin co-hosted the International Association of Laboratory Schools conference, welcoming 150 people into the building for a keynote address and dinner. “It was really exciting and affirming to be doing what we're doing and to be able to share it with other educators from around the world,” says Steinhauer. The new renovation gave them the space to accommodate many visitors, and it was an exciting time for all involved.

For Mabin students, there are a variety of ways to get involved and to learn new skills both within the classroom and after school hours. Mabin offers sports teams, school-wide athletic events, and co-curriculars and clubs. The type of programs change each term, based on the interests of students. Students, teachers, and other talented individuals organize and lead these initiatives, which provide great leadership opportunities and a chance to discover and nurture

interests and talents. There are other co-curriculars that are run after school and are paid for by parents. The school also has an in-house extended care program for an additional fee.

Another new Mabin program that seems to have garnered a lot of praise is the Mabin LEADs (Leadership, Entrepreneurship, and Adaptive Design) program for Grades 5 and 6 students. Through this program students learn the basics of starting a business through a program led by Junior Achievement called “Our Business World.” They then have the opportunity to develop their own business, the Grade 5s as a class and the Grade 6s as individuals, matched with a mentor from the Mabin community. Steinhauer explains that she provided the students with \$50 microloans which they had to apply for and then pay back by June 1. Some of the Grade 6 businesses have included jewellery making, woodworking, pet sitting, and a student baking club, among others. “One of our students designed a club to teach students baking after school. Her business was so successful that she came back as an alum to offer these baking classes out of the Mabin kitchen.”

For older students, there are a variety of opportunities to take on leadership roles within the school. One such activity, which all of the students speak about with enthusiasm, is Mabin Day. The tradition began in April 2017 with a focus on celebrating arts, creativity, and the history of the school. Falling around Gerry Mabin’s birthday, the school’s founder is always on site to celebrate with the community. Mabin Day is now consistently held on the Thursday before the Victoria Day long weekend and includes current families as well as alumni. It’s an embodiment of all that Mabin stands for.

Students also have the chance to get involved in other school-wide events including a Winter Solstice celebration, Chinese New Year festivities, a Holiday Give Back program, a student-led pride parade, and more. When we visited Mabin, the kids were just completing their rehearsals for a school production of *The Jungle Book*.

For families, there are many ways to get involved in the school. Volunteers are encouraged to join the parents’ association (PA)

executive and to take on the role of class representative. They’re also welcome to join event committees and to assist with the lunch program. Parents say they feel connected to the school and their children’s teachers and appreciate the focus on communications which ensures everyone is on the same page.

“As a Kindergarten teacher, I talk with parents regularly, and if a child is struggling I take the time to meet consistently with parents to talk about their progress,” says Morley. “Collaboration at Mabin is quite strong and we are always working with families to ensure the best for these children.”



Student Integration & Well-Being

With mental health and well-being integrated into each classroom and every Mabin experience, it's clear to see why students feel so comfortable and safe coming to school here. For Jen Waisberg, former co-chair of Mabin's parents' association and a mom of three Mabin students, the social and emotional support at Mabin is high on her list of the school's pros. "Socially, this has been a great experience for my kids," she says. "The school is relationship-based, the teachers take time to really know the kids personally, and I'm always blown away in parent-teacher conferences with just how well they get my kids." At Mabin, she says, teachers help children navigate social situations and also provide plenty of opportunities for integration of students of various ages. "The older kids help with the younger kids and have many opportunities to really get involved in school life outside of the classroom."

Integration is something Jillian Green says is a defining feature of Mabin. Perhaps because the school is so small and there's only one class per grade, the opportunity to participate in whole-school activities is really special and important. "We believe that children really thrive when they're in mixed-age groupings, so we have developed protected time every Friday afternoon for integration groups. Like other private schools, the students are divided into Houses, which is meant to further foster a sense of family and belonging across grades. They get to develop close relationships with teachers and students from across the school and these continue year over year.

Each House at Mabin is named after one of the school's past locations: Jarvis, Poplar, Prince Arthur, Spadina. Teachers are divided into Houses as well and, as such, get to know the students very well. "You are the teacher of all those children across various ages and you really get a chance to connect with them," Green says. "I didn't realize just how vital this was to school life until COVID hit, and we couldn't do it anymore."

Margolis Fogle says her daughter Poppy, who is in Grade 1, comes home talking about her friends who are in Grade 5 and 6. "Because of the school's focus on integration she really feels like they're her best friends and I love that."

For Waisberg, another area in which Mabin excels is their ability to ensure students feel supported academically. "What I often tell people is that Mabin really takes your child where they are and works with them to get as far as they can go. The school is strong academically, but the kids don't feel pressure. They never feel like they're stressed or falling behind because they're learning in a way that promotes engagement and takes its cues from the kids."

Mabin takes pride in integrating a mental health focus into their academics and school life. "It's not separate and never has been here," says Steinhauer. "Our Habits of Mind are woven into everything we do, different from most schools, they are part of the curriculum and they're how we teach academics." The Habits of Mind framework was developed by Art Costa and Bena Kallick to assist students in school and adults in everyday life as they are challenged by problems, dilemmas, paradoxes, and enigmas for which the solutions are not immediately apparent. As the school's website explains, "Drawing on the Habits of Mind means knowing how to behave intelligently when you do not know the answers. It means not only having information, but also knowing how to act on it."

When you wander the school, you see the Habits of Mind posted everywhere. They're in every classroom and they're taught and integrated from kindergarten all the way up. They are: Persisting, Taking responsible risks, Listening with understanding & empathy,

Applying past knowledge to new situations, Paying attention to detail, Collaborating, Managing impulsivity, Taking ownership, Questioning and creating solutions, and Thinking about thinking (metacognition).

The Habits of Mind is the framework upon which everything at Mabin is based. “They’re helping these kids be the best versions of themselves,” says Margolis Fogle. “As parents we wanted to find a school that reflected our values as a family, and Mabin is it! They’re teaching kids to intuitively behave, to show up, and to be good citizens. They make the kids feel good about who they are, and they redirect rather than reprimand.” As Fogle says, this shows up in the teachers as much as in the kids. “I know as a business owner it’s hard to find talent, and Mabin does such a good job recruiting and hiring staff. Every single person who works here embodies the Mabin magic, they walk the talk. It’s not just a vision statement on their website, this school brings it to life every single step of the way”.

For parent Alice Barnett, choosing Mabin for her two Kindergarten students was a no brainer. As a teacher at a nearby Toronto independent school, she had the opportunity to see many Mabin grads come through her school in Grade 7. “The Mabin kids always integrate really well into middle school, and they come in with these really fabulous critical thinking and behavioural skills, thanks to Mabin’s focus on social-emotional learning,” she says. “Mabin is known as a school that really tailors to the individual needs of the child, and that shows.” For her own kids, who just finished JK and SK, Barnett says they’ll come home talking about how they showed empathy and how they’re learning to manage impulsivity, and about the importance of having a bubble gum brain as opposed to a brick brain (growth mindset). “Persistence also comes up a lot,” she says. “My son was having a lot of trouble with some hand/eye coordination issues, and he said to me, ‘It’s okay Mommy, I’m just going to keep persisting until I get it.’ ” The idea of practising and persisting applies across the board, and, says Barnett, “The fact

that they’re encouraged to make mistakes, to fail and to try again, provides kids with an enriched view of themselves as learners and a better understanding of their own learning capabilities.”

Diversity, Inclusion, and Values

There are many ways for an independent school to express its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Mabin has taken it upon itself to make DEI a priority in a variety of areas, from board practices to teacher training, to the books in its library and the activities shared by the school community. “We are starting to find ways to build DEI into all of our systems,” says Steinhauer. “We have developed a working document that outlines our commitment and goals and this will continue to evolve as our understanding develops further.”

The school’s learning commons / library embodies this DEI commitment. On the wall there are three flags, a pride flag, a Black Lives Matter flag, and an Every Child Matters flag. “Even in choosing which flags to hang and where to hang them we consulted with a variety of individuals in the school community,” says Green. “No one person is ever in charge of all decisions at Mabin; we want to hear from the staff and the students and create a space where everyone feels comfortable.” A diversity of voices and narratives can now be found in children’s literature from graphic novels to picture books and novels. Mabin has a well-stocked library that’s been carefully curated to share these stories and give students access to all types of characters and family dynamics. “We use many of these books to promote deep learning and address big concepts. We use stories as a jumping off point for hard conversations around social justice and inclusion. Books can really open up a child’s world.”

The school as a whole expresses a strong commitment to social justice, and this is reflected within and beyond the classroom. Activities range from hosting a school-wide pride parade, to drag storytime, to anti-Black racism and anti-oppression staff training. “We are working really hard to have a greater diversity of voices in our school and in our teaching,” says Morley, who plays a key role in Mabin’s equity work. “We do a lot of great teaching when it comes to diversity,” he says. “Our Grade 4 teacher every year spends time talking about rap and hip hop music and the Black Lives Matter movement. As a Kindergarten teacher, I’ve had to re-frame coming from teaching older kids and being able to talk directly about colonization, to focus on setting the students up to learn about it in the future. We talk about promises and we read Indigenous stories, and I am now doing some work with Dr. Hopi Martin who is an early childhood educator working through [social enterprise] Edge of the Bush, to bring an Ojibwe perspective to our teaching.”

Thanks to Morley’s lead, the whole Mabin staff will be working with Dr. Martin to build land-based teaching into the Mabin curriculum, weaving an Indigenous perspective into their pedagogy. “This is a more powerful way to impact student understanding than to, say, wear an orange shirt on one specific day or read a book together. While those are great places to start, we hope to go much deeper with our teaching and learning.”

As stated in Mabin’s equity, diversity, and inclusion document, the school “seeks to invite and amplify the voices of equity-deserving communities, including BIPOC perspectives. We welcome families that are part of the 2SLGBTQ+ communities, and, as a non-denominational school, our families come from multiple religious traditions.”

The ultimate goal is to create a space where students and staff feel safe to bring their authentic selves to school and can leave the school with a deeper understanding and commitment to positive social transformation. “Ultimately, we want our school to be a desirable place for a wider range of people,” says Morley.

“A true commitment to equity demands continuous improvement,” says Steinhauer. “We are constantly revisiting, digging deeper, and learning more. This isn’t performative, but a continuous commitment to getting better and doing better.”

Creating a teaching environment that’s conducive to a variety of learning needs is something Mabin prides itself on. “One type of diversity that feels present in our learning all the time is neurodiversity,” says Green. “We openly talk about autism and ADHD, that’s part of the language here, and we work to ensure all students feel empowered to express who they are and what they need to be successful.” According to Steinhauer, the more types of learners in the Mabin classrooms, the better. “Learning is richer for everyone when teachers present materials in a variety of ways and all voices are comfortable coming to the table and contributing.”

Mabin also places a significant focus on giving back and contributing to society in a positive way. From creating StopGap ramps and working with local businesses to promote accessibility, to designing, building, and stocking a community pantry just outside of the school’s property, to running fundraisers for causes that are important to the students, Mabin kids are always being challenged to leave the world a little better than they found it.

Transition to Grade 7

Leaving a beloved elementary school and transitioning to middle school can be nerve-wracking. It’s also an exciting time and an important transition that parents and students are eager to get right.

“We arm our students with the skills they need to confront challenges and different situations and to feel prepared for middle school and beyond,” says Barchuk.

Mabin staff support all Grade 6 students through the process of finding the right school for their transition. “There’s such a range in the city and one size definitely doesn’t fit all, so we help families navigate that and find the next best place for their child,” Barchuk explains. While some families express a wish for Mabin to continue through Grade 8, the school is committed to being an elementary school where young students thrive.

“I’ve been here for a long time and I’m ready to go to middle school but I’m sad to leave all the people here behind,” says Antimo, a Grade 6 student who started at Mabin in SK. “I’m going to RSGC [Royal St. George’s College] next year. Everyone at Mabin, all the teachers, helped me with the application process and interviews. I felt very prepared.”

Students who graduate from Mabin often go to Upper Canada College, RSGC, Greenwood College, Havergal College, University of Toronto Schools, Branksome Hall, and other independent schools. They also go to public schools. “When you have this foundation and you’ve got the skills to really know yourself as a learner and what you need to be successful, the transition is much easier,” says Barchuk.

Getting In

Mabin doesn't have a specific deadline for applications, but Junior Kindergarten is their main entry year with the most spots available. "We recommend families apply a year ahead of entry. Applications open in the fall, and we encourage families to submit an online inquiry form well in advance of entry so prospective parents can start receiving information of relevance to them—including fall open house dates, opportunities for individual school tours, and other events—in a timely manner," explains Barchuk.

Admissions interviews begin late in November and the school prides itself on its "cozy process" with the child's comfort at the forefront. "One of our teachers will get to know the child while our admissions team meets with the parents to ask some questions. Following the interview, families go on a school tour led by our Grade 6 students," Barchuk continues.

There are two open house sessions for prospective parents in the fall, and information and registration information can be found on the school's website.

While Junior Kindergarten is the natural entry point, there are students who join the school in every grade when space permits. The school adheres to a strict maximum enrolment, which means that even if there's room in a particular class, if the school has reached its cap they won't be able to allow new students in. That being said, students have joined Mabin as late as Grade 6. "This is only the case if it makes sense, and sometimes it does," says Steinhauer. "We had

twins join Mabin for their Grade 6 year, and while it can be a big transition, sometimes it works out really well for the student. From those parents what we heard was: 'one year of Mabin is better than no years of Mabin.'"

When it comes to joining the school in kindergarten, Mabin looks for a wide range of kids. Students must be able to independently follow the routines of the day as the school doesn't offer 1:1 support. That being said, sometimes certain students need more one on one time during a day and that can be arranged. "Our kindergarten staff are excellent and they're here for every student," says Steinhauer.

Almost any student can do well at Mabin because it is so responsive. "A teacher won't stand in front of the class and lecture—learning is integrative, sometimes kids sit on the floor, they work in groups, they go outside, and they experience what they're learning in a real way," says Steinhauer.

Money Matters

The Mabin school is competitively priced with other private schools in the Greater Toronto Area. The annual fee is set by the board of directors. A one-time, non-refundable new student registration Fee is due upon acceptance to the school. Tuition covers all costs except overnight trips, some extracurricular programs, and extended care. As Rachel Mathews, vice-principal finance and operations, explains, “there are no extra fees for field trips, books, or supplies. There are no hidden costs. We want to keep things very straight-forward for families.”

There are a few bursaries available to Mabin students. One example is the Girls in STEM bursary which has been provided by an anonymous donation with the hopes of making Mabin’s excellent science program accessible to a few more students. These bursaries are available to girls entering Grades 3 through 6 who show an aptitude for science, technology, and math. Other bursaries are available for financial need as assessed by a third-party provider, Apple Financial. More information can be found on the Mabin website.

The Takeaway

Some families call The Mabin School Toronto’s best-kept secret. This magical little community built out of one educator’s dream to do things a little differently has had a huge impact on countless children and families in its 40+ years of existence. The school continues to hold true to its values and morals, raising good humans and educating them in a way that instills a love of learning. This is a place where students matter, where empathy is nurtured and modelled, and student-led inquiry remains the primary focus. For eight years, if a child is lucky, they get to go to school in a place that’s fully welcoming. A place that will embrace them as they are, nurture them to grow and evolve and learn, and send them out into the world more confident, more inquisitive, and ready for whatever comes next. “I feel so lucky that my kids get to have this type of education,” says Margolis Fogle. “I’m so excited for their future. I sit on the Mabin board with some alumni, and they all talk about how Mabin shaped them into the adults they are today. I love that for my kids.”



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