

OUR KIDS

THE TRUSTED SOURCE.

PRIVATE SCHOOL REVIEWS

Niagara Christian Collegiate

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

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Preface

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

About Our Kids

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

1. Académie Ste-Cécile International School
2. Académie Westboro Academy
3. Albert College
4. Appleby College
5. Bayview Glen
6. Bond Academy
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8. Branksome Hall
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11. Columbia International College
12. Crescent School
13. Crestwood Preparatory College
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15. Fieldstone School
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17. Havergal College
18. Holy Name of Mary College School
19. Hudson College
20. Kenneth Gordon Maplewood School
21. Kingsway College School
22. La Citadelle International Academy of Arts & Science
23. Lakefield College School
24. Lynn-Rose School
25. Meadowridge School
26. Merrick Preparatory School
27. Metropolitan Preparatory Academy
28. Miss Edgar's & Miss Cramp's School
29. Niagara Christian Collegiate
30. Pickering College
31. Prestige School
32. Ridley College
33. Robert Land Academy
34. Rosseau Lake College
35. Royal Crown School
36. Royal St. George's College
37. St. Clement's School
38. St. John's-Kilmarnock School
39. St. Mildred's-Lightbourn School
40. Sunnybrook School
41. The Bishop Strachan School
42. The Clover School
43. The Country Day School
44. The Mabin School
45. The York School
46. Toronto Prep School
47. Trinity College School
48. Upper Canada College
49. Whytecliff Agile Learning Centres
50. Woodland Christian High School

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Details:

Niagara Christian Collegiate

Faith-based. International. Supportive.

Location: Erie, Ontario

Founded: 1932

Enrolment: 150 students

Grades: Grade 6 to 12

Gender: Coed

Living Arrangements: Day / Boarding school

Language of Instruction: English

Curriculum: Traditional

Curriculum Pace: Standard-enriched

Academic Culture: Rigorous



Introduction

Niagara Christian Collegiate (NCC) provides individualized attention to a diverse student body, all in a close-knit, supportive environment. The overarching feeling at NCC is one of warmth as family-like values have always been built into the school's programs. This mindset is something long-time math teacher Larry Moss agrees with, saying, "NCC is like one big family. The faculty and staff here know every student's name."

Given that more than half of the students are boarders from around the globe, there's a very intentional effort to create the atmosphere of being a "home away from home." The breadth of geographic and cultural diversity among students makes for lively discussion in the cafeteria and classroom alike, yet there's a tangible sense of unity among students. There's no evidence of any division even when it comes to local and international students. Rather, students speak with pride about attending a school where their friends' homes might be 10 or 10,000 kilometres away.

Academic excellence is of top priority for both students and teachers at NCC. The expectations are high, but so is the level of support. Small class sizes and an emphasis on strong teacher-student relationships set students up for success. "Sometimes we'll have a class with five people, and our teachers really get to know us and our strengths," says one Grade 12 student. Not only is there a 100 percent post-secondary acceptance rate but graduates consistently report feeling more than prepared for their next stage of study.

The school's extensive International Study Program ensures

English preparation and support is provided to all ESL students in reaching the proficiency needed for secondary success as well as in achieving post-secondary ambitions.

Beyond this crucial programming, there's an array of supports that promote broader inclusiveness. Social activities in the dorms, school-wide celebrations of multiple cultural traditions, and special lunches featuring international cuisines foster a feeling of belonging and community. "Our school culture is enhanced by the fact that we have students from so many cultural backgrounds bringing their unique perspectives and experiences here," says Head of Schools and Principal Chris Baird.

As with most private schools, academics at NCC take precedence. However, the school also aims to embed meaning into the learning process. No matter the subject area, teachers integrate an approach called "Christian Deeper Learning" into their daily lessons; it's a way to connect faith to their teaching methods, with the objective of showing students the broader significance of their studies.

A pervasive message at NCC is that beginning today, each person can make a positive difference in the wider world, both in the students' school and in the surrounding community. Students are encouraged to take part in local and international service trips, as well as to take part in a variety of activities on campus. "Because it's a smaller school, we have a chance to join anything we want," says one international student. From student council and sports to choir and Bible study, there's an outlet for everyone.

The school encourages engagement in co-curricular activities as part of a balanced life at NCC. It's just one part of the comprehensive offerings catering to students' physical, social, and emotional health. The school offers an exceptional number and variety of supports for students, including academic tutoring, peer mentoring, psychological counselling, or medical care. "NCC is an intimate community where you can always reach out to people to help you," says one Grade 12 student. "It makes you feel safe and included."

Basics

Just 15 minutes south of Niagara Falls, NCC offers day and boarding school for students in Grades 6 to 12. Approximately two-thirds of the students are international, coming from as far away as Africa, Asia, and South America to as near as the United States. Upward of 15 nationalities are represented on campus each year, with the rest of the student body commuting from nearby townships—proof of NCC’s strong reputation in the region.

The peaceful, scenic route along the Niagara Parkway to get to NCC sets the stage for the serenity of the campus. Turning into the driveway, several handsome buildings come into view. The overall impression is of a small college campus with an inviting feel.

When we visited on a brilliant sunny day, the views from the school onto the Niagara River were stunning. “I love that it’s an open campus,” says humanities teacher Laura Bailey. “We have such beautiful landscaping, and all four seasons here are lovely. Students get the experience of moving to different buildings for their classes, much like on a university campus, yet it’s more self-contained. The school is like its own little world.”

That’s exactly how the campus feels to visitors: a welcoming community that’s set apart from the fray of urban life. The vast 120 acres of greenspace is the site of all types of outdoor activities, from cross-country running and campfires to school-wide games. Students can also walk and bike the trails just outside of the school’s limits. “Parents tend to be very attracted to the fact that we’re outside the city in a safe environment,” continues Bailey. “While at the same time, our university-style campus gives students some independence and helps prepare them for university life.”

A pond sits near the centre of campus, with the boys’ and girls’ dormitories facing onto it. Several students we spoke to said they loved to sit on the benches around the pond, while other favourite spots included the back sports fields, the dining hall, and the chapel.

A visit to the dining hall at lunchtime revealed a cozy,

wood-panelled space with different types of seating arranged for single diners or big groups. The light-filled, airy chapel accommodates the school's weekly worship service, classes, and a variety of special events and gatherings. Other features include a full-sized gym, fitness centre, music room, on-site medical Health Centre, and a large meeting space for boarding students called the "Wrec Centre" (a popular spot for movie nights and ping pong). "Our size allows us to provide everything students need to have a full and positive experience—whether they live on campus or not," says Baird.



Background/Religion

NCC was founded in Springvale, Ontario, in 1932 as the Ontario Bible School. Growing enrolment and a vision for the future prompted parents and school officials to seek new opportunities outside of the community. The result was the purchase of the Canada Biltmore Club located on 120 acres of land in Fort Erie, Ontario. After settling into its new home and renaming the Biltmore Club Belmont Hall, NCC opened its doors—educating with excellence based on Biblical truth.

Today, NCC’s Christian values can still be felt across every part of the campus, from faith-infused teaching to the weekly chapel services, to students and teachers meeting for lunch and prayer. NCC’s strong foundation remains robust and true.

Beginning in the 1970s, the international component of NCC took shape with an influx of students from Hong Kong. In the decades since, the bond forged with Hong Kong families has expanded, attracting Christian and non-Christian students from countries worldwide.

As might be expected, every NCC teacher and staff member is Christian. Yet as a university preparatory school, NCC delivers the Ontario provincial curriculum to a broad spectrum of students.

“We have students who are Christian, agnostic, and from different faith backgrounds,” says Baird. “But we consider it our school mission to nurture students’ Christian development, with the ultimate hope of getting connected to a local church and having a relationship with Jesus.”

There is nothing forced about the school’s mission, and many staff members we spoke to described it as an “invitation” that students can take or leave. Baird explains that “we start with our weekly chapel program, where many students hear about Jesus, and what we call ‘The Story,’ for the first time. We invite students to see their place in that story.”

The teachers we met spoke extensively about striking the

right balance in their outreach with non-Christian students and the importance of making students feel safe, comfortable, and cared for. “While we share our Christian worldview, we’re attentive to students’ belief systems and where they are at in their own lives,” says Rachel Peters, director of student services. “We make a lot of space for different views.”

Students we spoke to shared their feelings of inclusivity. “I love learning about different faiths,” says one Muslim student from Turkey. “When I first came, my teacher would start each class with a devotion, and I was curious about the songs and prayers. Whenever I had any questions, or I didn’t understand a concept, my teachers or friends would explain it to me so patiently. I’ve never felt excluded. And I found people were always so interested in my perspective.”

Another fun opportunity for secondary school students is NCC’s weekly Youth Group called “The City.” Run by students on the Campus Ministry Team and chaplain Todd MacGregor, “the evening is full of games, music, and an encouraging message,” says MacGregor, who is also the Pastor of LifeHouse Community Church, which meets at the NCC Chapel on Sundays. “We get a great turnout each Friday as it’s completely voluntary and everyone is welcome.”

Vice-principal Meredyth Campbell summed it up like this: “We want students to know that they’ve all been created as unique and gifted, and with something to bring to our community. The language of what it means to be a Christian might be new to them, so we introduce those ideas in chapel and daily devotions. But, apart from that, the core is that we want students to feel known and loved here. If we can do that and send them into the world feeling that they have something good to offer the world, then we’ve done our job.”





Leadership

NCC's head of schools and principal, Chris Baird, directs academic programs, dormitories, and student life, and also oversees the school's recruitment and alumni initiatives. Chief operating officer Lynn Schmidt, who manages ancillary services ranging from school operations to custodial, maintenance, food services and transportation, shares Baird's vision of delivering a top-notch education in a caring, inclusive Christian community. As NCC's senior administrative team, they both report directly to the school's board of directors.

Baird joined the NCC teaching faculty in 2010 as an English teacher, coach, custodian of the boarding program, and vice-principal, before becoming principal and more recently, head of schools. Reflecting on his own Christian high school experience, Baird says "I was initially surprised at how different NCC was from the Christian high school I attended, which was a very homogeneous school. Coming to NCC and sitting at tables with students from around the globe was entirely new to me. Being curious and listening and learning has made me a much fuller person, I think."

The parents we spoke with had high praise for the way Baird runs the school, including his commitment to the whole NCC community. "He's always accessible to students and parents, and he's very kind and welcoming in his demeanour," says one. Spending time with students is a priority for Baird, something he says is the best part of his job.

Baird, who graduated from McMaster University with an honours major in English before completing a Bachelor of Education degree at Redeemer University, says the biggest changes under his leadership have been twofold. First, there's been a shift to a more intentional Christian mindset in teaching. "We've really leaned into Christian Deeper Learning as a guiding vision in the classroom. But we've also moved to an even higher level of care,

particularly for our boarding students. In recent years there's been a push toward greater attention to students' holistic well-being. We've done this by adding to our boarding staff so that we can provide all the support students need when they're living away. We're not their parents, but we're in the role of parents and we take that role very seriously."

Schmidt, who lives on campus and has been on staff for 22 years, has the perspective of both an employee and a parent. "Many staff members are current or former NCC parents, and it gives us a unique perspective," she says. "We see both sides, and I can say that the level of care we provide to students is exceptional. You can get an excellent education at many schools, but NCC does more. We come alongside our students, doing all the extra things that allow them to thrive."

Academics

The strongest testament to NCC's academic program is the feedback from graduates about the ease of their transition to post-secondary education. Every graduate and every parent of a graduate we spoke to reported that NCC thoroughly prepared students for post-secondary study. Parents of prospective students will be interested to know that most recently, NCC graduates received offers from 34 post-secondary institutions worldwide, of which more than 85 percent were in Canada.

"My daughter is in [her] second year of university, and she's always telling me how valuable her time here was," says Laurie Blue, head of the art department and parent to NCC graduates. "She was so well-equipped that she was teaching her friends."

The school not only ensures students know the key content in their respective courses, but also understand the best practices for vital scholarly tasks. "We spend a lot of time on learning processes," says Peters. "For example, we focus on essay writing in every year of high school, from planning and peer feedback to reflection and editing, so that our students feel really confident writing their first papers at university." In addition to essay writing, NCC focuses on developing abilities in areas that cross disciplinary divides. "We make sure students know how to have academic discussions, manage their readings, achieve clarity of communication and critical thinking, and handle being pushed out of their comfort zones," says Campbell.

Middle school, from Grades 6-8, lays the groundwork for the advanced skill-building in high school. Middle school teachers rely extensively on project design and Christian Deeper Learning, giving students plenty of opportunities for hands-on exploration in the core subjects. In Grade 9, the mode of instruction continues to employ student-led projects as an integral part of the learning experience.

In all our discussions about academics with NCC community





members, there was an emphasis on balance. The programming is undoubtedly rigorous, but it's equally supportive. "I think our students find it challenging in a good way," says Campbell. "We work from the belief that students can't learn unless they feel safe and cared for. It's all about high expectations and high support."

While inter-student competition is rife in some schools that pride themselves on academic excellence, that isn't the case at NCC. We saw no evidence of this kind of aggressive culture, which speaks to teachers' and administrators' active efforts to avoid it. "Our principal has worked hard to shift students' focus away from their number grades and toward the learning process," says Larry Moss, head of the math department. "We're always telling students to look at what they missed or didn't get right not as a failing, but as a learning opportunity."

Many of NCC's international students are used to educational systems that can pit students against each other and set stringent standards for individual academic success, so the school's supportive culture is a welcome change. "A lot of our kids come from a hypercompetitive background in school, where teachers might post everyone's marks on the wall," says ESL teacher Ruben Dunnink. "So, when they come here, they feel themselves relax. It's not that they don't work hard. It's just that there's not that intense pressure." Arts director Laurie Blue adds, "All of the students here strive for a high standard in their work, but it's coming from a place of inspiration, as opposed to a negative kind of demand on themselves."

The students we met agreed that there's a feeling of collegiality among their peers when it comes to marks. "It's more like healthy competition with ourselves or our friends," says one Grade 12 student. Says Peters, "I think students feel competitive about getting into the right university for themselves, rather than competitive against their peers. Our students do a good job of helping each other academically and being happy when their friends do well."

Academics: International Students

From the moment international students arrive at NCC to the day they graduate, they get the right academic support at the right time. Everything is tailored to students' individual needs, based on their pre-existing English language skills and unique academic strengths.

After educating international students at NCC for 50 years, the school has developed academic expertise in ensuring students are well-served during their time there. NCC makes a point of constant improvement by staying in touch with graduates to assess their experience and preparedness for post-secondary education.

The NCC staff work with certified immigration consultants in the recruitment process, so families can be assured that their children's transition to Canada will be as smooth as possible. Once students get settled on campus, the first step is an assessment of their English-speaking ability, says director of international education Jackie Angi-Dobos. "Based on that assessment, we prepare two individualized documents for every student, and those are shared with all of their teachers. One is called 'can-do statements,' which outline all the things teachers can expect the student to be capable of, and the other are accommodations that teachers should make in the regular curriculum."

The range of English language proficiency in new international students can be quite wide from year to year, but NCC has a robust system to handle this variation. There are several summer programs that offer students a leg up on their English language learning before they even start classes in the fall. They're structured as both fun camps that introduce students to Canadian culture and English instruction, delivering a nice balance for the new arrivals.

There are two main arms of the International Study Program—one is to offer students customized English language

instruction through ESL courses and, sometimes, private tutoring at an additional cost, and the other is to immerse students in regular academic courses. “That second piece is critical,” says Baird. “Learning alongside their English-speaking peers, as well as other international students, naturally fosters their skills. And of course, our teachers play a huge role in this process. We like to say that every one of our teachers is an ESL teacher, in that they can support English language learners in whatever courses they teach.”

Specialist teachers teach all five levels of ESL credit courses, offering students the chance to improve their abilities as they move through the grades. At the same time, international students take core courses at their grade level, bolstered by intensive support from regular teachers. “All of our teachers go the extra mile to help our ESL students fully understand the academic subjects at their level of English,” says Angi-Dobos.

Teachers rely heavily on Angi-Dobos’ expertise and in-depth understanding of every international student’s unique competency. “She goes into classrooms and offers suggestions, makes observations, and provides the teachers with ideas such as creating word banks or translating assignments,” says Campbell. “We also recognize the process of international students’ work, so even if they might still be learning about grammatical structures, we can evaluate them on the sophistication of their thoughts and ideas in an essay. We look for ways that students can be successful, even when they’re feeling a little bit nervous about the clarity of their communication. This often means discussion-based assessment as they get more comfortable writing in English.”

In the last years of high school, international students who have studied in Canada for fewer than three years must take the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test—a proficiency test accepted for application to higher education. NCC has extensive experience in preparing students for success on this exam, says Angi-Dobos. “We’re also an IELTS testing centre, so our students don’t have to travel elsewhere to take the test and can





stay in a comfortable environment.”

The support for international students extends well past preparing for this entrance test, as crucial as it is. The entire NCC community dedicates itself to creating a safe, inclusive, welcoming environment for the young people who travel across the world to study at the school. It helps, of course, that NCC has decades of experience with a global student body. “I couldn’t believe it when we started getting the grandchildren of our first international students from Hong Kong,” says Angi-Dobos. “It says a lot about our reputation there.”

The school makes a concerted effort to celebrate its international character, for example by marking the holidays celebrated by different nations represented at NCC. There’s also a much-loved International Week, where students share their cultural foods, traditions, and games, culminating with a talent show. “We’re always working to honour our international students’ roots, history, and culture,” says Angi-Dobos. At the same time, NCC nurtures international students’ knowledge of Canadian history and culture through classroom learning, school events, and trips across the community and country.

As for students’ take on NCC’s international character, we heard nothing but positive comments. “With so many of us from different countries, even in my first year I felt comfortable, not unusual or different,” says one student from Hong Kong. Her classmate from Turkey described the cultural learning benefits, saying, “Living in the dorms, we have students from many different places. For example, my roommate last year was from Nigeria, and she taught me so many things about politics, songs, and traditions there. This year my roommate is from Japan, so now I’m learning all about that country. It’s really good.”

The benefits go both ways, offering local NCC students the unique opportunity to live and learn with classmates from across the world. “My son loved the diversity in his classes, and he chose to have an international roommate at university,” says one

parent of a local graduate. Other parents talked about how their children sometimes take NCC's global character for granted. "Sometimes I'll say, 'Isn't it great to sit next to kids from all over the world?' And my kids will just shrug. It's completely normal for them. This is a fantastic element of the school that you won't find anywhere else."

Pedagogical Approach

Exceptional teachers make NCC an exceptional place to live and learn. Our conversations with parents, students, staff, senior administrators, and teachers themselves made it clear that there's an extraordinary strength of commitment among faculty members. "I've known many of the teachers for a long time, and they have great professional integrity," says MacGregor, NCC pastor and parent of one current student and two graduates. "Prospective families should know that their children will get excellent, one-on-one attention."

Students also get a strong grounding in Christianity, because NCC teachers integrate their faith in their teaching. They do this by following a guiding framework called Christian Deeper Learning, which aims to deeply engage students in their learning and recognize its importance in the wider community. "We want them to see that the work they're doing in the classroom shapes their characters and the world," says Baird. "We're helping them see that their skills and contributions matter. To do that, our teachers use innovative teaching practices that highlight real-life connections. It's a much harder way to teach than the traditional way, where the focus is only on written assignments and tests. We still use those tried-and-true methods, especially in certain math and science courses. But we can always incorporate activities and practical projects that help students do real work that serves real needs."

The teachers we spoke to emphasized that this teaching approach isn't about forcing a Christian perspective on every lesson. "I've seen Christian math textbooks that calculate the area of churches—that's not what we do here," says Moss. "We bring faith into the classroom in a much more organic way. In my classes, I'll often just pause and talk about how amazing it is that God created this order in nature, and we can use math to figure out what's involved in it. Or in a business class we can bring up the fact that money can be used to help people through donations to non-profit

organizations, not just for personal gain.”

ESL teacher Ruben Dunnink echoed this comment, saying, “It’s intentional, but not explicit in that we’re not saying to students, ‘Let’s learn about the Bible right now.’ It’s more about taking principles from the Bible and from our faith and weaving them into the curriculum. It’s a gentler approach for students who aren’t Christian.” Even if the Christian messages don’t resonate with students, the larger ideas usually do. “Students may not always realize it, but they’re actually deepening their relationship with themselves and with the content,” says Peters.

To illustrate how Christian Deeper Learning works in action, Baird points to a recent interdisciplinary initiative based around a school garden. Led by humanities teacher Laura Bailey, the project involved students from Grades 9 to 12 in the design, construction, and maintenance of a garden. “We started with a big question: How can we create a garden that will keep things growing all year in our Canadian climate?” says Bailey. “Students drove the learning process, from conducting the research to implementing potential solutions. The learning touched on concepts in geography, biology, physics, economics, and more. It’s an ongoing project and really beautiful and creative things have come out of it.”

Small class sizes and a close-knit community naturally foster strong teacher-student relationships at NCC, but teachers work hard to strengthen and sustain those ties. Their shared philosophy, proven by extensive research, is that students learn best when they feel safe and cared for at school. “My main job is to teach the curriculum, of course, but my equal priority is to connect with students on a personal level and teach them about living a good life,” says Dunnink. “We can do that here because we’re also coaches and advisers at the school, so we get to know the whole student.”

The evidence that teachers are succeeding in this relational approach comes from students themselves. “I trust my teachers so much, because they really know me,” says one Grade 12 student. “For example, they helped me figure out what program to apply





for at university.” Other students commented on the bonds they created with teachers on camping trips and sports teams. Says one, “We get time to put away the school stuff and just play and have fun as a big group.” According to Baird, the number one thing he hears from students is that they believe their teachers genuinely care about them.

Professional development at NCC is a mix of internal and external education, with perhaps a greater emphasis on in-house enrichment due to the school’s unique character (being both Christian and international). “We depend a lot on each other and know our students well,” says Campbell. “Drawing on best practices in the Christian education community, we’ve developed a sort of NCC way of doing things. Looking at our graduates’ accomplishments, it works really well.”

Co-curriculars

The breadth of co-curricular offerings at NCC is impressive, considering the smaller school size. What's not surprising, though, is the spirit in which the school delivers these programs, with a firm focus on self-discovery, community-building, service, and fun. Overall, life outside the classroom is designed to create balanced lifestyles and well-rounded students.

Arts and athletics are particularly strong at NCC, with opportunities for students at the amateur to highly skilled level. This is where being a small school is an advantage, something several teachers and students brought up. "We have more chances to get engaged in extracurricular life because it's not as competitive or limited by numbers as at big schools," says one Grade 11 student. In fact, all of the students we spoke to were eager to list off all their involvements, as if they felt compelled to prove how rich the non-academic offerings are at NCC. "I think maybe some people think they're going to be bored at a small school, but I'm never, ever bored," says one Grade 12 student. "I have something on every night of the week."

Students can, in fact, be active every day, thanks to strategic scheduling. For students with multiple interests, it's possible to take part in arts programs while still having time for sports teams. "We're intentional about making sure that everyone has access to as many co-curriculars as they want," says ESL teacher and athletic director Ruben Dunnink. "As a result, I'd say it's almost impossible for students to come through NCC and have only done their schoolwork. There are just so many different ways for students to be learning beyond the classroom, and we're always encouraging them to join in and be a part of things."

In the arts, students can explore their interests and talents in drama, music, and visual art. There are annual theatrical productions, multiple performances and competitions for choirs and instrumental ensembles, and regular art exhibition opportunities.



A popular annual Arts Café brings the NCC community together for a showcase of students' creations across the arts. When we visited the art studio, arts director Laurie Blue's students were hard at work painting a canoe (a literal canoe!) in the style of Group of Seven artist Lawren Harris. "Harris often used light as a spiritual dimension, and that's what we're trying to capture here," she says. Once complete, the canoe was to be displayed at a local art show and then auctioned off for a charity. "I'm always finding connections between the students' artwork and the community," says Blue, noting that NCC does the same with drama and music. "We're not just creating culture at our school but giving kids the chance to explore the culture in the larger world."

From intramural sports to competitive teams, athletics are a pivotal part of NCC student life. While the school has some championships under its belt, there's room for all skill abilities on the fields and courts. The parents we spoke to appreciate this inclusiveness and its potential to uncover new interests and abilities in their children. "At bigger schools, it's so hard to make a lot of the teams," says one parent. "Here, if someone wants to be part of a team and they're committed to showing up for practices, they'll have a role. One of my daughters, who we used to consider the least athletic, was encouraged to participate on teams. Now she's probably our most athletic child." The campus's 120 acres provide ample space for recreational activities, while the formal athletic facilities include multiple fields, a full-sized gym, and girls' and boys' weight rooms.

For students interested in honing their leadership skills, there's student council, dorm council, arts and athletic councils, and more. They can also earn a credit by taking a Peer Helping Course in Grade 12, where they assist younger students with every aspect of a given course, from providing academic support to social-emotional mentorship. Another outlet for leadership is the NCC Model United Nations. NCC's delegations have attended provincial MUN conferences. "I want to positively impact the





world, and I received an award for Model UN,” says one participant. “It meant so much to me that my teachers recognized that.”

Other NCC students make a difference by joining local and international outreach trips. NCC has travelled to several international destinations during winter and spring breaks over the years. One of the most popular local service opportunities is the annual Sock Mission, where students and teachers travel to Toronto with up to 750 bags of socks and hundreds of bagged lunches to distribute to people experiencing homelessness. “I take part in a lot of after-school groups, but this trip really inspired me,” says one Grade 12 student. “I feel like giving back to the community is something I’ll now do for the rest of my life.”

Academic Support

NCC lives up to its promise of “high expectations and high support” by providing a range of connected programs designed to meet the needs of all students. Whether they’re struggling to keep pace in their courses or striving to increase already commendable grades, the right help is always there.

The student services team, led by Rachel Peters since 2009, includes guidance, learning resources, the advisory program, and peer tutoring. “Before all of these services come into play, though, our teachers are the first and most important layer in student services,” says Peters. “Because they have such strong relationships with their students, teachers are attuned to their struggles and ambitions. The first thing they usually do is take some time to discuss students’ concerns and see if they can resolve a situation by providing extra help. This allows us to focus on early intervention.” In some subjects, such as math, teachers provide regular after-school support that’s open to any student. “In these smaller groups, it can be a safer place to ask questions and get caught up,” says Moss. If that isn’t enough, teachers enlist the help of the larger team.

Learning resource teachers work one-on-one with students who may have different learning needs (identified by an Individual Education Plan) or who may be at risk of not reaching their academic potential. “These specialist teachers have good partnerships with our core subject teachers,” says Peters. “They collaborate to help students succeed.” For students who require even more support, NCC has professional tutors available for an additional fee. One parent, who learned that his daughter was lacking essential math skills when she enrolled at NCC in Grade 7, saw a dramatic turnaround with the help of these resources. “We really appreciate the personal attention she received,” he says. “Within a month, she had the basics down. It was incredible.” Parents should note that, if they don’t opt for private tutoring, peer tutoring is available at no charge. Students who are doing well in their courses

but need occasional help with writing essays, starting projects, or organizing their workloads can also find support at the Learning Resource Centre.

As head of the guidance department, Peters works closely with students in making plans for post-secondary education. “By the time students are approaching graduation, they’ve done a lot of self-reflection on their strengths and interests with our team, along with intensive research on college and university programs that would suit them,” says Peters.

For the large international student population living on campus, dormitory staff run a study hall after dinner each weekday night where participation is required. According to the teachers and students we spoke to, the routine is effective: “Study hall helps a lot,” says one student. “If we were at home, our parents would be telling us to do our homework. So this is the same thing.”

NCC’s summer programming is not just for newly arriving international students who want to get a jump start on their English language learning. There are also credit courses offered in core subjects such as math and English. Summer academic programs combine classroom learning with fun activities and field trips to popular attractions as part of the course content.

Wellness

The school's family-like culture naturally extends to a strong community of care that prioritizes students' all-around well-being. "We're committed to ensuring kids' physical, emotional, and spiritual health, and we have the staff and resources in place to do this," says Baird. "During my years at NCC, I've seen our investments in these areas increase significantly."

"When you're dealing with students in middle and high school, it's important to always make sure that they're safe and healthy, while also giving them increasing independence and ownership over their choices," says Peters. "We've been able to strike that balance, because we want our graduates to be responsible and resilient."

The school frames its boarding program as a kind of practice run for university life. "This is a really good place for students to learn how to manage things like sleep and nutrition and stress, because it's a safe environment where someone is always watching over them," says Moss. "If they're going to make a mistake, now is the time, not later when they're on their own." When parents—local or international—are concerned about their children's well-being, they're always welcome to contact student services or dormitory staff.

A weekly advisory program run by classroom teachers gives students a chance to discuss a variety of topics relevant to personal well-being, such as how good sleep and nutrition are pivotal to a healthy body and mind. "We talk about a lot of different issues that come up in our lives," says one student. "It helps to get different perspectives." NCC Pastor Todd MacGregor also holds prayer meetings and individual counselling sessions with students seeking a Christian point of view.

However a student opts to seek advice, there's always someone to either provide it or direct them to the person who can. "I think every NCC student would tell you that they have at least

one, often two, staff members that they've really gotten to know and trust, and would be comfortable approaching for help," says Peters. For the students we spoke to, this proved true. "When we need support there's always somewhere to go and someone to talk to," says one Grade 11 student. An international student agreed, mentioning the dormitory staff specifically. "They're so attentive to all aspects of our well-being," she says. "Because we're away from home, they take care of us in a lot of ways. I'm a sensitive person, and they've helped me with that."

"NCC strives to run a boarding program that provides students with a high level of care in a family-like atmosphere," says Baird. The separate boys' and girls' dormitories each have a live-in boarding director and boarding assistant, along with additional boarding staff. They all maintain close communication with teachers. "It's about maintaining a continuum of care and attention," says Baird. "We make sure that what happens in the classroom and in the dorm transfers over to each place, so everyone is aware of how students are doing."

In 2017, NCC hired a nurse practitioner to direct the on-site Health Centre. Boarding students can access primary health care right on campus, rather than travelling to clinics in Fort Erie. The centre's nurses not only provide essential care for students' physical health but coordinate mental health support with a professional counsellor who regularly visits the school.

"We've always been very active in promoting students' mental health, but since the pandemic we've gone further," states NCC's Health Centre staff. "In the last couple of years, our ability to provide one-on-one support has increased, and we've expanded our mental health education initiatives for both students and staff. Our goal is to make sure everyone is aware of the issues, and teachers and staff have the training to recognize when students need help."

An annual NCC Health Fair brings together a wide variety of health-care professionals and health-related businesses from the local community, including public health, physiotherapy,



emergency services, mental health, and many other community supports. The school provides this as a way of educating students on the types of health supports available to them.

NCC Health Centre staff also engage in ongoing professional development in the area of culturally sensitive care. “Our boarding students often have unique perceptions of physical and mental health care based on where they grew up, and it’s our responsibility to understand and respect them,” says the NCC health team. “When we engage with students, we keep their individual backgrounds in mind.”

There’s strong collaboration between Health Centre staff and the student services team since students often require a broad spectrum of support for interrelated challenges. “We find that one of the most effective strategies is to invite the student to sit around a table with all the relevant support staff,” says Wiens. “By including a student in these conversations and giving them a voice in the decision-making, we demonstrate that we’re not making decisions for them, but with them. It also shows them, visually, how many people are there to support them.”

With such a broad network of caring adults surrounding students, it avoids the possibility of anyone falling through the cracks. “There’s always someone, or several people, who pick up on a student that’s struggling in some way,” says Campbell. “It doesn’t take long for us to connect them to the appropriate person for the appropriate support.”

Student Body / Diversity

It's remarkable that the NCC student body isn't fragmented into various groups, considering the geographic, cultural, and religious diversity on campus. Yet it's exactly the opposite: a cohesive, family-like community. On our visit, we were struck by the warmth and connectedness that can be felt across the campus. "I think students would agree that the vibe here is that we don't have cliques and popular kids that exclude others," says Peters. "We're a safe place for students to be themselves and to feel like they belong."

The nature of the school—its modest size, located in a rural area, offering consistent Christian teaching, cultivates a close-knit student community. With respect to activities, "We don't have dozens of activities going on simultaneously," says Peters. "There are usually one or two main events after school each day and on the weekends, so students form a lot of natural connections when they're running into each other on most days." For this reason, there's a lot of cross-grade interaction at NCC. The fact that many co-curricular activities include students from across the middle and high school only reinforces these friendships. "Many of our sports teams are open to students from different grades," says Dunnink. "It's nice to see kids of different ages learning from each other and having fun."

While there's a fundamental difference in the school experience of local and international students in that they part ways in the evenings and on weekends, they otherwise learn and play together at NCC. "Joining cross-country was the way I really got to know the local students," says one international student. Another commented on the kindness she felt from day students on first arriving at NCC: "My English was not very good, but they never made me feel under pressure. They always wanted to help." Some local students volunteer with the school's summer programs, helping to acclimate students to their new homes.

Several parents of local graduates told us that their children

had such positive experiences learning with international students that they found a way to replicate it in university. “My daughter loved the international culture at NCC so much that they chose to live in a university dorm with an international community of students,” says Angi-Dobos.

Principal Chris Baird sees wide-ranging benefits for both students and staff in the diverse student body, several of which connect to the Christian values that NCC promotes. “All of us who live, work, or study here see our experience of the world and of other people expand,” he says. “We’re more capable of engaging with the world with curiosity and empathy, which are critical parts of our humanity. It can be difficult to get to know someone who’s really different from ourselves, or at least someone we initially think is really different from ourselves. But we’re all so much better for it.”

In our conversations with parents of international students, they said the same thing. “My children now have interpersonal relationships that they would not have been exposed to otherwise,” says one mother of two students. “The diversity provided by NCC is a major benefit for them. They’re exposed to different cultures, which is helping them to build team spirit and ample networking skills.”

School-wide events foster community-building in students. Each fall begins with Grade Retreats, where students from each grade gather off campus to get to know each other in a non-academic atmosphere. Spirit Days with lighthearted themes break up regular weeks throughout the year, and the year-end Grade Wars pit students against each other in a day of fun competitions. “The school culture is centred around community growth and development, in my view,” says one parent. “My children often express their excitement about these group activities.”

It’s no surprise that boarding students form especially strong ties, but at NCC that’s especially the case because of the school’s setting. “Since we’re in more of a rural area, the kids don’t have

as much access to get off campus each weekend,” says humanities teacher Laura Bailey. “This motivates them to build a community with each other rather than escape to a city. They become a family.”

Applying to NCC

The application process is free and very straightforward. Whether the student is applying from the local region or from across the globe, NCC enrolment representatives are eager to help and assist in the process.

A simple email (enroll@niagaracc.com) or connecting via the school website (www.niagaracc.com) ensures parent inquiries and questions are forwarded to the enrolment department for follow up. The enrolment team provides campus tours, Zoom meetings, and opportunities to meet the administrative team for those parents who are interested in sending their child to the school.

International and domestic tuition information is available by contacting the school.

Parents

The school uses an educational platform called Edsby, which includes detailed information on assignments and grades in every course. “Through Edsby, I’m able to keep tabs on my children’s progress and growth throughout the school year, and I find it easy to connect with teachers and staff when required,” says one parent of two international students.

Baird has an online newsletter that highlights the latest news and events, but parents told us that Baird also makes himself

accessible in less formal ways. “He genuinely wants to engage with parents,” says one parent. “He actively reaches out because he wants to know our thoughts.” For parents of international students, there’s an online residence newsletter for parents, including individual student videos as part of a popular feature called “Hi Mom News.”

The Takeaway

NCC is a school that welcomes diversity, supports individual needs, invites students to see the world through a Christian worldview, and prepares them for post-secondary success through high expectations and high support. The beauty of the campus is mirrored in the character and posture of the school staff from administration to teachers. We saw evidence everywhere we looked that the work NCC is doing to prepare students well is working.

As we heard from vice-principal Campbell, “at the core, we want students to feel known and loved here. If we can do that and send them into the world feeling that they have something good to offer, then we’ve done our job.”

After our time at NCC, touring the facilities, experiencing the program, talking with teachers, students, and parents, it’s clear that this job is being done at the very highest level.





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FROM THE REVIEW:

“The breadth of geographic and cultural diversity among students makes for lively discussion in the cafeteria and classroom alike, yet there’s a tangible sense of unity among students.”

“Parents of prospective students will be interested to know that most recently, NCC graduates received offers from 34 post-secondary institutions worldwide, of which more than 85 percent were in Canada.”

“Small class sizes and a close-knit community naturally foster strong teacher-student relationships at NCC, but teachers work hard to strengthen and sustain those ties.”

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