

OUR
KIDS

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PRIVATE SCHOOL REVIEWS

La Citadelle
International
Academy of Arts &
Science
The Our Kids Review

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La Citadelle International Academy of Arts & Science

The Our Kids Review

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Written by Megan Easton

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

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Preface

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

About Our Kids

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

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

For more information on the *Our Kids Private School Reviews* series, visit www.ourkids.net, or contact info@ourkidsmedia.com.

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Details:

La Citadelle International Academy of Arts & Science

Excellence. Harmony. Community.

Location: Toronto, Ontario

Founded: 2000

Enrolment: 160 students

Grades: Preschool to Grade 12

Gender: Coed

Living Arrangements: Day school

Language of Instruction: English

Curriculum: Liberal Arts, International Baccalaureate

Curriculum Pace: Accelerated

Academic Culture: Rigorous



Introduction

At La Citadelle International Academy of Arts & Science, students experience academic rigour and high expectations alongside individualized support, warmth, and care. It's a unique mix, but La Citadelle is a unique school.

Just the fact that La Citadelle, as its bilingual name suggests, offers French and English language learning in a truly bilingual format, sets it apart. In the Ontario public system—and most of the independent school system—students can choose either French or English as the first language of their learning, not both. However, at La Citadelle, French is the primary language of instruction for the school's youngest learners, who start with two years of preschool followed by two years of kindergarten. In the elementary years, the academic program is fully bilingual, and there's a requirement to study a third language (Mandarin or Spanish) starting in Grade 3.

Academic excellence is a top priority, but within the context of a holistic education that emphasizes well-rounded learning and character education. Founder and Headmaster Alfred Abouchar often says that La Citadelle is focused on education, not instruction. “The key difference between the two is that instruction is simply about imparting knowledge and skills, while education encompasses the development of the whole child,” he says. “As educators, we transmit values and pay close attention to students' well-being. We teach them to be good human beings in the broadest sense.”

La Citadelle truly is an ‘Academy of Arts & Science’ in that the curriculum ensures students gain a broad education in both domains. In the presecondary years, when most courses are required, the academic program creates a balance between arts and science learning. In high school, students are strongly encouraged to maintain this equilibrium through their course selection—and most do, while also maintaining a mix of English and French language instruction. There are enrichment opportunities throughout the curriculum, including the Grade 8 Reach Ahead credits, the International Baccalaureate (IB) Middle Years, and the Advanced Placement (AP) programs.

Unlike similar private schools, which emphasize the strength of their STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) offerings with little mention of the arts and humanities, La Citadelle is committed to giving students a foundation in each branch of learning. Consistent study of languages, literature, history, humanities and the arts teaches students “to see beauty, feel awe, experience transcendence and appreciate some sense of the ‘truths,’” says Headmaster Abouchar, “even if students intend to pursue careers outside these areas.”

“In the 15 years I’ve been on faculty, the school’s primary focus on holistic education hasn’t changed,” says Mr. Matthew, Intermediary & Secondary School Vice-Principal and English teacher. “We provide avenues for students to experiment with different disciplines or subjects, so that they don’t narrow their options.”

The school’s comprehensive approach also includes giving students a strong grounding in crucial academic skills. “Some schools consider these to be add-ons or optional, but for us, they’re part of every student’s education,” says Mme. Chantal, the School’s Curriculum Coordinator. “By mastering time management, test preparation, research methods, and other skills, students *learn how to learn*. They gain confidence and motivation.”

Beyond academics, the school’s holistic approach includes a strong focus on students’ integrity and well-being. Character

education is integral to La Citadelle's academic and co-curricular programs. As one graduate puts it, "The school prioritizes personal growth, character development, and a sense of community."

Parents at La Citadelle told us they value the small class sizes, accessible faculty members, and frequent reporting on their children's progress. "The school culture is inclusive and supportive, grounded in respect for the individual and wanting each student to perform at his or her best," says one parent of three students at different grade levels. "They learn and study hard, but they also play hard with a wonderful mix of ages and stages that builds a strong sense of responsibility in the older kids to look out for the younger ones."

Newcomers to the school are sometimes surprised to learn that elementary-aged students take exams twice a year, but everyone we spoke to agreed that the children quickly get used to the routine, and the consistent evaluation is valuable to students and teachers alike. Apart from early-grade exams, La Citadelle uses several pedagogical methods that might be considered 'old-school' such as teaching cursive writing and assigning students summer homework. Yet there's a lightness to the school community, a mutual affection and a sense of fun. Students address teachers with an honorific (Mr. or Monsieur and Mm. or Madame, for example) followed by their first names, reflecting the mix of formality and familiarity.

"We're a small school, and we consider ourselves a large family," says Mme. Denise, a math and computer science teacher who is also the IB and AP Coordinator. Headmaster Abouchar often speaks of the 'harmonious' environment that comes from this shared outlook within the school community. Based on our observations of the mutual affection, a sense of fun and what could be described as 'joie de vivre' among the staff and students we met, this characterization rings true.

Background and Basics

La Citadelle started very small: just five students in a church basement in 2000. But Founder and Headmaster Abouchar's vision of a holistic, bilingual liberal arts and sciences school with the highest academic standards was anything but small, and enrolment increased quickly as the school's reputation grew.

The student body outgrew the basement within a year, prompting Headmaster Abouchar to lease part of a public school for over a decade. In 2015, La Citadelle moved into a space as expansive as his vision: a 40,000-square-foot facility conveniently located just off the intersection of Highway 401 and the Don Valley Parkway on Scarsdale Road, nestled in a nice neighborhood and surrounded by serene greenery. In addition to TTC access, parents told us pick-up and drop-off times are quite easy and efficient.

The two-story red brick building has colourful play structures out front and green space around it, creating an inviting ambiance. La Citadelle showcases a modern and impressive bright, airy, and welcoming interior. Its open-concept layout fosters connectivity and collaboration throughout the school, while glass windows in the classrooms offer transparency for onlookers to observe the students engaged in learning activities.

"I don't like classrooms that are completely closed off from one another," says Headmaster Abouchar. "My design was intentional in making sure everybody is connected."

The openness extends to faculty members' accessibility within the building. Teachers have a resource Centre and a staff room where they can socialize and collaborate. "This was intentional, because we want our teachers to be either within the community of students or the larger community of faculty," says Mme. Murielle.

The centrepiece of the building is the atrium, a 4,000-square-foot space where students gather to eat lunch, play a game of ping pong and foosball, read a book, and let off steam when it's too cold to play outside. It's also the venue for special events. When we

visited, parents mingled at the monthly Café Croissant morning get-together, and later in the day teachers were setting up for the annual art exhibition.

The kindergarten area is another highlight of the school. It's the largest classroom by far, looking more like four or five classrooms joined into one big, bright, colourful space. When we visited, the students were moving happily between the art studio, the book corner, the computer nook, and the free play areas. Despite the spaciousness, there's still a welcoming, cozy feel to the space.

Other features include a science lab, a computer lab, a music room, an art studio, and a spacious, inviting library that seamlessly connect with the Atrium through a large open wall adorned with lush green plants and beautiful flowers. Everything is sparkling clean, comfortable, and highly functional. There's ample square footage for the school to grow enrolment, but the leadership is committed to keeping class sizes under 20 students.

Students wear uniforms at La Citadelle, and the dress code is quite strictly enforced. We noted teachers and staff providing friendly reminders to students to tuck in their shirts, followed by quick compliance. The technology policy is implemented with similar firmness. Students can't use their cell phones or personal devices during school hours. Only students in Grade 8 and above can bring their phones to school, and they must be turned off and stored properly during the day. Not that the curriculum is tech-averse—there are laptops for all secondary students, and teachers use huge, touch-enabled screens in the classroom. But the rules are clear, and the Headmaster has been known to confiscate a phone or two. It's rare, though, because La Citadelle students learn respect and discipline from the earliest grades.

There's an after-school care program available for an additional fee until 5:30 p.m., and students can opt into a very healthy lunch catering service. Parents will also be interested to know that La Citadelle offers students of all ages year-round recreational and educational options. The preschool/daycare runs through the

summer, and there's a day camp in July for students in Grades 1 to 7. "It's a traditional, English-speaking camp with all the sports, crafts, games, and fun activities you'd expect, but there's also an academic component," says Mme. Chantal. "Instead of just dropping the ball for the entire summer, we make sure the kids maintain some of the knowledge and skills by having an academic period every day." The school also offers summer school to secondary students looking to pick up extra credits.

Leadership

La Citadelle is the culmination of Founder and Headmaster Abouchar's long and distinguished career in education. He was born in Egypt to a Lebanese family and attended one of the largest French-language boys' schools in the Middle East. Fluent in English and French, he earned an Honours B.Sc. from the American University in Cairo before immigrating to Canada in 1969 and earning a B.Ed. and an M.Sc. from the University of Western Ontario, and an M.Ed. from the University of Toronto.

While he began as a physics teacher and professor at the Faculty of Education, Headmaster Abouchar went on to a wide range of senior positions in educational consulting and curriculum development. From serving as the Secretary General of the Council for Franco-Ontarian Education and the Superintendent of Curriculum, Research, and Continuing Education in the Ottawa Carleton French Language Public School Board to participating in the overhaul of Ontario's science curriculum for the Ministry of Education and sitting on the Ontario Advisory Council on Multiculturalism and Citizenship, every role shaped his outlook on teaching, learning, and school administration.

Over the decades, Headmaster Abouchar developed a philosophy of education founded on his experience of best practices across different countries, systems, and schools. In 2000, he decided to start a school rooted in his deep belief in holistic, bilingual, values-based education. "Everybody thought I was totally out of my mind to launch a new school," he says. "But I wasn't coming from a business perspective. I was very disillusioned by the existing system and wanted to create a school on the basis of true education, not just instruction."

Headmaster Abouchar's undergraduate studies was firmly grounded in a liberal arts approach, something he wanted his students to experience. "When I was doing my undergraduate degree in physics and chemistry, I was enrolled in a Faculty of Arts &





Science, and the program required me to take courses in arts, social studies, and humanities,” he says. “It gave me an appreciation of culture and a wider outlook, and this is why La Citadelle students all take a balanced curriculum in arts and sciences throughout their years here.” One outcome of his immersion in the arts is his passion for music, specifically composing electronic music, something he passes on to his students in a dedicated class in computer music that starts in Grade 3.

Even as his school grew and became a competitive private school on the Toronto scene, Headmaster Abouchar never wavered from his founding principles of holistic education. In addition to giving equal weight to arts and sciences, this has meant instilling core values in students through both academic and co-curricular programs. For Headmaster Abouchar, character education begins at the top, so he takes great care in the hiring process. “I don’t hire people because they have teaching qualifications or a Ph.D.,” he says. “I hire people based on character, character, and character. Even if they have 20 years of experience, if they can’t model values of respect, integrity, and discipline, they aren’t for us.”

Headmaster Abouchar has strong opinions on the lack of decorum and discipline he sees in some young people today, and he’s determined that his students take a different path. His strict dress code, decent comportment, and phone policies contribute to La Citadelle’s culture of dignity and courtesy. “There are no phones allowed at school because I want students to talk to each other, play together, look people in the eye, and discuss emotional issues instead of sending text messages and emojis,” he says. “It’s a little bit different from the surrounding culture, but it’s working very well. I have a microcosm here of a safe school where the students and teachers are kind.” The parents we spoke to had nothing but praise for the Headmaster and his dedication to marching to a different beat in today’s cultural landscape.

Headmaster Abouchar also attributes the school’s culture of respect to the strong community of students, families, teachers,

and administration. Having his two daughters on staff and four granddaughters attending the school only adds to the overall family-like feel. He says it's a perfect arrangement, with professional distance during the day and goodbye hugs after school.

The school's open-concept design extends to Headmaster Abouchar's open office door policy. "I don't think it's a good environment when the headmaster is up there on the pedestal and students, or even teachers, are hesitant to visit him or her," he says. "One of my favourite things is talking to students and seeing what they're working on, whether it's a class project or a club performance."

When it comes to handling students' learning or behavioural challenges, Headmaster Abouchar also avoids current trends in education. Instead of immediately categorizing students based on psychological assessments and recommendations, he opts to accept and work with each student. This approach is characterized by patience, care, and dedication, which he considers rare in the education system nowadays. By standing by and assisting students, he believes in their potential for success and growth, which he finds remarkably effective.

Headmaster Abouchar's mix of strictness and warm-heartedness (everyone at La Citadelle calls him Mr. Alfred) is indeed successful, as evidenced by the happy and courteous students, satisfied families, and long-tenured teachers we met. "He provides visionary leadership that sets the tone for the institution," says one graduate. On the other hand, a senior student commented on the Headmaster's lighter side: "Alfred is really interactive with students, and even though he has certain rules that are always enforced, he's a lot of fun and jokes around with us."

For Abouchar, respect and rapport are key. "My main objectives are for students to go to their universities of choice, yes, but also to be capable of thriving in life as decent people with solid values. I'm very proud of what we're doing. It's a lot of work, but it's very gratifying."

Academics

Academic programs at La Citadelle are both enriched and accelerated, with students learning ahead of their grade level at every stage. The teaching approach is defined by consistency, discipline, and rigour—along with one-on-one support when needed and always within a warm and trusting relationship.

“At La Citadelle, we understand that the content we teach in schools today will evolve and in some cases become obsolete in the years ahead, so we focus on teaching students to learn effectively and feel assured of their acquired skills,” says Mme. Chantal. In our many conversations with her at the school, promoting students’ confidence came up again and again as a critical aim.

A traditional, systematic approach defines the academic environment, while still incorporating progressive teaching methods and the latest learning frameworks. Headmaster Abouchar founded La Citadelle in part due to his increasing dismay with the declining academic standards he observed in the public education system. Today, he says many private and independent schools are also on this downward trajectory. “There’s very little core academic content in schools. The students are doing a lot of robotics, sports, field trips, and activities, so the trend is away from the academic foundations and more towards entertainment.”

It’s not that students at La Citadelle don’t have opportunities to explore their co-curricular interests, but they must also meet academic expectations. Homework is a given starting in Grade 1—except on “Homework-Free Wednesdays”—and completing it isn’t optional. From Grade 1 to Grade 8, students use paper agendas to track their daily academic responsibilities, and parents must sign them every night.

“It’s all about making the students responsible and accountable, giving them ownership over their school work,” says Mme. Murielle. “We’re not asking parents to do their children’s

homework. It's the opposite. Parents' only job is to monitor and supervise that their kids are in fact sitting down regularly after school and getting it done." One student we spoke to, who has attended La Citadelle for seven years, says the full academic schedules and demanding workload give him and his peers a sense of accomplishment. "We know we're getting a really good education, and we get used to working hard," he says.

Similarly, some graduates commented on the long-term value of the academic discipline they learned at the school. "I appreciate the academic expectations and requirements that La Citadelle upholds," says one. "The school's emphasis on academic excellence has challenged me to push my boundaries and strive for my personal best. While these expectations may have been demanding at times, they've ultimately helped me develop a strong work ethic, time management skills, and a good attitude towards challenges that I may face in the future."

The fact that the students use bound paper, not digital, agendas reflects the school's judicious use of technology in the academic program. The latest tech is available, and students gain the necessary skills to use it, but there's equal use of time-tested teaching and learning methods. Students learn cursive writing starting in Grade 1, for example. "If you don't teach children how to write, then they're going to be illiterate somewhere," says Mme. Murielle. "We aim to give them all the tools they need to learn effectively in the outside world." (It's worth noting that the Ontario government recently announced that cursive writing will be reintroduced in the public education curriculum.) Another interesting practice is that students memorize substantial poems in French and English, and then present them to the class. "It enriches their language learning while also improving their presentation skills," says Mme. Murielle.

When we toured elementary classrooms, it was striking to see up to a dozen notebooks in each student's desk filled with careful writing and diagrams. These "cahiers," as they're called

in French, are customized by colour, by subject: graph paper for math, special lines for learning lower- and upper-case writing, graph pages for lab reports and blank pages for drawing scientific observations. “The notebooks are from France, and each one is specially designed for the development of the child in a given subject,” says Mme. Murielle.

It’s obvious from a quick perusal of various notebooks that students take pride in them. They’re like a concrete repository of their effort and achievements, says Mme. Chantal. “Our teachers take a very systematic approach, especially in the earlier years, to foster students’ knowledge, skills and, most importantly, confidence.”

The early introduction of exams is perhaps the most unique aspect of La Citadelle’s academic environment, but everyone we spoke to said that the policy is not nearly as stringent as it appears at first glance. Parents agreed that the process nurtures vital skills in children for later success while boosting—again—their confidence and sense of agency. Students were a week away from exams when we visited, and we didn’t sense any tension in the air. “They’re happy and fine because they’re used to it,” says Headmaster Abouchar. “Parents sometimes project their experience and anxiety about exams onto children, but here we teach them to see them as ordinary parts of the school year.”

La Citadelle’s holistic approach to academics means that students across the grades experience rich variation in their learning each day. “We’ve designed a curriculum where the kids are able to do a little bit of everything,” says Mme. Denise. “Each year they take a wide spectrum of subjects, even in high school. It can seem daunting at first glance, but we give students the support and skills they need to succeed.”

In our discussions with families, they spoke positively about this comprehensive academic balance and how it benefits students. “It ensures no kid is left behind,” says one parent. “One of my kids didn’t feel at all strong in math, but she thrived in dance and art.

Having a subject in which they recognize themselves as leaders was good for their self-esteem and helped them to weather any challenging moments in other academic subjects.”

When students join La Citadelle in later grades, often coming from schools that don't have the same standards and expectations, there are accommodations in place to help them adjust to the increased demands. “When they're not used to this level of work, we provide extra support and they catch on quickly,” says Mme. Chantal. “The parents who choose this school also encourage education as a priority, so they partner with us.”

Before we visited the school, we imagined it might be a competitive academic environment, given the focus on excellence and discipline. This proved to be true in one sense, but not in terms of the overall culture. La Citadelle uses marks and awards to motivate students, but never to pit them against each other. From Grade 5 through Grade 12, the school recognizes overall achievement with levelled awards and scholarships ranging from \$300 to \$500 that go towards tuition. Yet students of all ages can also earn awards for demonstrating good character and work habits. Students in Grades 1 to 8 have small booklets for collecting “Bons Points,” stamps that staff award for good behaviour and scholarly success. According to one student, “there is some competitiveness, but it's friendly competition.”

Older students participate in external competitions in math and science, but competition amongst individual students is discouraged. Headmaster Abouchar often reminds parents to never judge their children based solely on their exam marks, for example, but to support them in the learning process. “We need to be realistic, non-comparative, and non-competitive, and focus on effort and potential,” he says. “And we should always consider students' overall well-being.”





Prep-K, Pre-K, and Kindergarten

Even the play-based pre-kindergarten program for children, two to four years old, has an advanced curriculum. The youngsters complete a series of workbooks covering the earliest foundations of reading and writing, which sets them up well for becoming proficient language learners in junior and senior kindergarten. During these two years, students learn in both English and French.

The preschool is a year-round licensed daycare, but it offers far more than the typical childcare facility. While it's play-based and informal in structure, it also has an academic curriculum. "Our curriculum in these early years is inspired by the one in France, where children attend a four-year program at the Kindergarten," says Headmaster Abouchar.

We spoke to several parents who were initially skeptical about just how academic a preschool could be. "When I heard that we had to buy workbooks for our three-year-old, I thought it was ridiculous," says one. "But as the year went on, I saw that she was actually completing them, and I was shocked. By the time that she started elementary school, she was confident and ready to go." In Junior and Senior Kindergarten, students continue the phonics-based early reading program in French while exploring science, mathematics, computers, sports, and the arts.

Elementary

English reading and writing enter the curriculum in Grade 1, and the students take an approximately equal number of subjects in both languages from then on. After four years of French-language immersion in preschool and kindergarten, students are primed to read and write in English. "We teach the phonics-based system of reading and writing—it's called the syllabic method—so it's a smooth

transition,” says Mme. Chantal. By the end of Grade 1, students’ English reading skills tend to be on par with their French.

Starting in Grade 1, students learn from a growing number of teachers who are specialized in their fields (see Pedagogical Approach below). In Grades 1 and 2, students spend more time with their French teacher who teaches core subjects.

In Grade 3, parents opt for either Spanish or Mandarin as the third (mandatory) language for their children to learn. “With the way the world is opening up, we think it’s important to introduce another language,” says Headmaster Abouchar. “They can better navigate languages and cultures in our globalized world.”

As mentioned, one unique aspect of La Citadelle is that students write exams in Grades 1 to 8. It starts slowly, with exams in just a few core subjects worth about 10 percent of final marks, then builds up to two-hour assessments worth 30 percent. The parents we spoke to said this early experience in formal assessments lays a strong groundwork for secondary school and university.

Intermediate and Secondary

Students take the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme (IBMYP)—an internationally recognized program that promotes leadership, cultural competence, and a global perspective—from Grade 6 through Grade 10, then transition into Advanced Placement (AP) courses in their final secondary years. Since every Grade 8 student must take up to four Grade 9 Reach Ahead credit courses, La Citadelle graduates tend to accumulate far more than the province’s 30 credit requirements and gain early acceptance into their postsecondary programs of choice. “The compulsory Reach Ahead credits in Grade 8 create a bit of a rapid pace for students, but it’s a huge benefit to them in secondary school because it opens up space for more electives,” says Mme. Denise.

Several teachers and parents told us that students who complete middle school at La Citadelle enter secondary school feeling prepared and self-assured. As in the early grades, there's ample support to help newly arriving students ramp up, such as opting to take math in English.

The school encourages secondary school students to maintain the holistic breadth of their education even when they have more choices in their courses, and most do. You'd be hard-pressed to find a student who takes just one course in history, geography, the arts or fitness, as is required in the public system. "The majority of our students are still taking a well-rounded range of courses in Grades 11 and 12," says Mr. Matthew, noting that the average La Citadelle graduate finishes with up to 36 high school credits, rather than the minimum requirement of 30. "So even if they want to be, for example, engineers and they have to take the main sciences, they still opt to take courses like philosophy, art, economics, and French as a first language."

Mme. Chantal noted that the school's philosophy is based on practical facts. "Even by Grade 12, students need support," she says. "It would be unfair not to encourage them to be well-rounded in their learning, because they're still figuring out their interests and abilities. They have to narrow and specialize in university, so they need as much information as possible to make that decision."

One recent graduate told us that the balance of arts and sciences at La Citadelle has been pivotal to her postsecondary success. "Focusing on humanities and social issues, in combination with the sciences, provided me with an all-encompassing, holistic approach not just to academics, but to the world," she says. "This is very advantageous since students who enroll in university programs are expected to be well-educated across a variety of subjects. Having taken visual arts, drama, philosophy, and more, I learned to appreciate the sciences in a more creative way, which has certainly helped me thus far in my undergraduate studies." Like her peers at La Citadelle, this student was accepted into several

prestigious Canadian and American universities, but she chose Health Sciences at Queen's University. "Thanks to La Citadelle, I was prepared to take on and do well in this challenging program, having not only the academic basis but also the important study and life skills such as work ethic and discipline."

Another graduate we spoke to said that she's continuing to take a holistic approach to her education at the postsecondary level. "I'm following the school's encouragement to explore a variety of subjects, including arts and humanities," she says. "This has been beneficial in a few ways. It's helping me develop a wider range of skills, like critical thinking and creativity. It's also giving me a better understanding of different cultures and perspectives. Plus, it's allowing me to discover interests I might not have explored otherwise."

A student in Grade 12 who's planning to enter a robotics AI program shares this sentiment. "Even though I'm going to do a tech-focused degree, I've been taking visual arts throughout high school," he says. "I've learned a lot of drawing techniques and other creative skills that I think will serve me really well. I've also just learned the discipline and study habits it takes to get ahead in university."

Secondary school faculty take advantage of the small-sized classes to shape their courses according to students' interests and talents while still meeting provincial requirements. "We have this real flexibility to customize and individualize our teaching," says Mr. Matthew. "As an English teacher, I often have the same students several years in a row. I know where they are in their learning and where they want to go. So I create assignments that stretch their abilities and play to their strengths. Maybe they want to complete assignments as creative writing, for example, or they might have an interest in journalistic writing."

By the fall of their Grade 12 year, many students receive acceptances from multiple postsecondary institutions. It's not surprising, given that in recent years nearly the entire class graduated





with at least an 80 percent average in their six best courses, and with most achieving a 90 percent average or above.

Pedagogical Approach

Headmaster Abouchar is highly discriminating in the hiring process, but he's really looking for two essential things: specialization in a teachable subject, and a commitment to truly know and care for students. "I can teach someone to write lesson plans and design evaluations," he says. "But I can't teach someone to be passionate about sharing their knowledge, be kind to children, and model good character."

A recent La Citadelle marketing photo showed a Grade 2 student surrounded by his teachers—all 11 of them, with expertise ranging from computer studies and art to math and music. While faculty don't need a B.Ed. at the school, they do need at least an undergraduate degree in the subject they teach, and many have graduate degrees. "We're well-versed in our subjects, and we can elevate the standard curriculum with our expertise," says Mr. Matthew, who holds a masters' degree in comparative literature and taught at the postsecondary level for six years. A substantial number of teachers also have real-world experience in areas such as business, law, and the arts, and some of them teach part-time while working in their professions.

Parents commented on the advantages of having their children learn from multiple individuals with varying teaching styles, even in the early grades. They liked the versatility this instilled in their young learners, given that students have an increasing number of teachers as they move through the educational system.

Many of the faculty at La Citadelle have long tenures, a sign of a strong school community and teachers who are happy. In fact, about 60 percent of teachers have been there for more than 10 years. One graduate said this of her former teachers: "They're respectful and extremely skilled professionals in their disciplines

who help students from the moment they enroll in school. It's very clear that all the staff are there to support you and genuinely care about your growth and progress as a student and learner."

With such a close-knit student community, it's feasible for teachers to know every student at La Citadelle students very well—not just their academic strengths and challenges, but their personal interests and concerns. In this cozy learning environment, they often also know their families. As a result, teachers adjust their methods for each student. "Our commitment is that no student will ever be left behind," says Mme. Chantal. "This is possible because we know them and their learning styles so well."

Parents sense this commitment and had only good things to say to us about the faculty. "The teachers are caring and passionate about their job, taking an interest not only in the kids' academic experience in their classroom, but in all aspects of their development," says one. "They expect the best from the kids each day and do their best to provide the same, with a lot of feedback and coaching for any kid who needs it."

The students we met told us that they feel this circle of care around them. One middle school student, for example, says: "The teachers try their very best, and succeed, at making sure everyone feels welcome and safe. I'd describe them as caring, challenging—as in challenging us to do things they know we'd be good at—and trustworthy."

A senior secondary student told us that his teachers have always been aware of when he needs a bit of extra attention. "Maybe it was a section in one unit that I was struggling with, and the teacher would pair me with a student mentor or a peer tutor who had mastered it," he says, "or the teacher would take some one-on-one time with me." A graduate we spoke to said that faculty members use a variety of strategies to meet students' unique needs: "They engage students through interactive lessons, encourage critical thinking, and provide support for individualized learning."

There's no sense of hierarchy or division among faculty

members. They're a friendly, collaborative bunch who come together across grades and subject areas to determine what's best for each student. "Students are known from all these different vantage points by all these different adults," says Mme. Murielle. "The result is that we get as complete a picture as possible, and can cooperate to meet students' needs."

Those needs often extend beyond academics into social and emotional learning, and teachers don't shy away from that. In fact, it's a clear expectation of the job here. "We're not just teaching a student," says Mme. Murielle. "We're teaching a whole child with preferences and worries and varying home contexts." Mme. Denise echoes this, saying, "We care for our students as individuals and educate them as citizens, beyond the subjects we're teaching."

As much as the school relies on clear systems and expectations, there's still a warmth to the whole learning environment. As Headmaster Abouchar points out, "We have our notebooks and homework and exams, but everything is done with affection and joy, so the kids have a good feeling about everything." And, as mentioned above, teachers customize their lessons and styles based on their knowledge of each student. "We're very attentive and responsive to our students' needs," says Mme. Denise.

Based on our conversations across the school community, the La Citadelle faculty is a cohesive, collaborative, caring group wholly dedicated to students. "We're all here for the kids," says Mme. Chantal. "We're not here to clock in and clock out. We give a lot of ourselves."

Bilingual Education

One of the first questions parents often have when considering La Citadelle is whether they need to have some knowledge of French, so they can support their children's learning. The answer is a categorical no. "Parents are attracted to the idea of their children

having the benefits of fluency in Canada's two official languages," says Headmaster Abouchar. "People that value education tend to value additional languages."

La Citadelle is a school that nurtures true bilingualism, meaning students learn both French and English as first languages—especially if children start their academic careers here. "Language acquisition occurs the best when you're younger," says Mme. Chantal. "That's why the children's days are largely conducted in French until upper elementary school." It's not until Grade 6 that students can choose to take math in English. This option is largely targeted to students who join the school in Grade 6 and have limited French. But even those who join in the secondary years graduate with a higher level of French than their peers taking French courses at other schools. Any new student joining after Grade 2 is enrolled in what La Citadelle calls the "Francisation" program, where they receive extra support in the language until they can keep pace with their classmates.

We spoke to a student who went through the Francisation program after joining the school in Grade 5, and he said it took barely a year before he was fully on par in French with his bilingual peers. He and others we met often expressed the belief that their language skills would give them an edge in postsecondary education and their careers. According to a student who had been at La Citadelle for nine years, the dual language program is demanding but worthwhile: "At first the bilingual aspect can be challenging, but over time and with the help of teachers and friends, you end up getting comfortable with it," she says. "With Canada as a bilingual country, French is important to have and it's great for travelling too."

In secondary school, more courses are available in English, though French is a mandatory course through Grade 12 for most students. There's some leeway on this rule, for example for international students who join midway through secondary school. "Sometimes that requirement isn't conducive to certain students'

success,” says Mr. Matthew. “But for those students who continue with French through the four years, we present a Bilingual Certificate, which can be helpful on post-secondary applications.”

On our visit, we found older students mostly chatting in English when they were outside the classroom, but inside the classroom it’s a largely French environment. Even the student newspaper is bilingual.

Character Education

Headmaster Abouchar believes that a teacher’s job is not just to instruct students in the academic fundamentals, but to educate them in the core values held by good citizens. It’s telling that the school’s official values place equal emphasis on the more serious standards—**Excellence, Discipline, and Achievement**—and the ‘softer’ ideals of **Compassion, Respect, and Harmony**. There’s no harshness in the cultivation of good character at La Citadelle. Instead, there are clear expectations in a caring atmosphere.

On our visit, we quickly noticed students’ courtesy and friendliness with guests. The interactions we observed between staff and students were cordial, even playful, yet teachers didn’t hesitate to point out small uniform or behavioural infractions.

“You can’t let students fly completely on their own,” says Headmaster Abouchar. “It’s a balance between giving them the responsibility and freedom to make choices and having clear boundaries that aren’t negotiable, such as attending classes and following the rules, treating others with kindness, and working hard. We instill the core values when they’re young, and it’s rewarding to see them internalize and take ownership of them as they grow. But, just as important, we always treat students with respect. So there’s reciprocal respect underlying everything here.”

Character education is embedded in curricular and co-curricular programs at all levels. “It’s in the classroom, on the soccer

field, during recess, and on field trips,” says Mr. Matthew. Several school community members shared their pride in how students conduct themselves on field trips. “We often have people asking us about the school because they’re so impressed by our kids,” says Mme. Chantal.

Parents told us they felt great pride in seeing students’ behaviour at school events. “I’m always amazed at the conduct of the student body at school functions,” says one parent of three students. “They’re friendly, interested and interesting, and respectful. Science fair, for example, is amazing to me to see how well the students can present and communicate, and for an atrium full of almost all the kids, there’s still a sense of order, not mayhem.”

In all of our conversations with families, they emphasized just how much they value the school’s attention to their children’s character. “My kids know what is expected of them and have learned to give their best,” says one parent. “While that doesn’t necessarily mean straight As, they are polite, respectful, helpful, talkative and engaged students. They strive for high marks, and when they put in the work, they realize those goals. But this school doesn’t just teach the kids the academic lessons, they teach critical thought and how to be good humans, which you don’t always find.”

The students and graduates we spoke to recognized and appreciated that character education is embedded throughout the learning experience. “One of the factors that differentiates La Citadelle from other schools is that it emphasizes a rigorous academic schedule while ensuring a thorough approach to all facets of education, and instilling students with important values,” says one graduate. A Grade 7 student agreed: “We learn a lot of compartment skills and how to treat people, which I don’t see from other schools.”

For all of these reasons, Headmaster Abouchar’s criteria for hiring teachers goes beyond their academic qualifications to encompass their alignment with the school’s values and dedication to positively shaping students’ character. “You’ll never see a teacher walking past children having a conflict in the hallway just

because they're not his or her students," he says. "We get involved whenever there's an opportunity to teach skills such as conflict resolution or attentive, respectful listening.

Parents' alignment is also critical, says Mme. Murielle, who directs admissions. "We're looking for families who believe in what we're doing and will partner with us to give their children a solid education."

According to Headmaster Abouchar, there's never been an incident of theft or vandalism at La Citadelle, something he attributes to the trust he and his staff cultivate with students. "Nobody has ever taken anything or damaged anything because we cultivate trusting relationships," he says. "And they're happy to be here. That's what education is all about: instilling integrity, responsibility, and respect in students, values that are not merely words but lived principles here."

Academic Support and Wellness

Academic support and attention to student well-being aren't extras at La Citadelle. They're a central priority for teachers and administrators, and a part of the fabric of students' everyday experiences.

If a student in any grade is struggling, teachers will quickly identify him or her and offer up to one hour of after school support. "Usually teachers recommend students for help, but you can also request it," says one student. "During the period, the teacher focuses on what you need help with and not an overall lesson. It's typically one-on-one with no more than four to five students with the teacher, and there can be different grades." It's a free program run by teachers, not student tutors or external tutors, and it's highly encouraged, if not mandatory. In either case, student participation isn't a problem because the school has made it just another part of the school day.

"There's absolutely no stigma around this academic support, because we present it to students as a way to reinforce their learning," says Mme. Chantal. "It's considered normal, so nobody experiences negative feelings about it. They just know that everybody needs help sometimes so they can feel confident, and that their teachers care about how they're doing." As Mr. Matthew puts it, "The kids are on board, and their families are on board, because they know it's necessary and it's going to help the kids get up to speed."

This assessment proved accurate, based on our conversations with students and graduates. "La Citadelle was always extremely sensitive and supportive to any of my needs as a learner, whether that be putting in extra time to help me understand a concept or using different teaching methodologies to help accommodate my learning style," says one graduate. "This environment helped me reach my full potential as a student."

Parents told us they loved the convenience and effectiveness of having the school's own teachers support their children,

rather than needing to hire outside tutors. Faculty also prefer this approach, according to Mme. Denise: “Often when you bring a child to a tutor they don’t communicate with his or her subject teachers about what they’re teaching the student, which can be counterproductive.”

Two senior teachers handle postsecondary application counselling, offering customized, one-on-one support to students at all stages of secondary school. As mentioned above, students reliably gain early entrance to their first choices of program and institution. In recent years, Mr. Matthew says that the majority of graduates have entered STEM and business programs.

Social and emotional support is woven throughout La Citadelle’s programs, from formal courses to informal counselling and consistent modelling by staff members. “Our community is very tight-knit, and every student has at least one teacher or staff member that he or she feels comfortable talking to about non-academic matters,” says Mme. Chantal.

While some large schools employ designated staff members to address student mental health, at La Citadelle the responsibility is distributed among all adults in the school. Caring for and meeting students’ comprehensive needs is an intrinsic part of the school’s dedication to holistic education. “We regularly meet to discuss which students might be struggling with issues that aren’t strictly academic,” says Mr. Matthew. “We take a team approach to this support and value transparency, when it’s appropriate, because it helps us know what our students are going through and how we can best support them.”



Co-curriculars and Extracurriculars

For a small school, La Citadelle offers students a rich variety of educational and recreational experiences outside the classroom.

Staff members bring their unique interests and expertise to the many clubs that run after school every day. “All the teachers and administrators wear many hats, which is wonderful because we get to step outside what we were hired to do and innovate with the kids,” says Mme. Murielle. “I’ve led clubs that teach students Photoshop and jewelry making, for example. Everyone who works here has outside skills and hobbies, and we’re go-getters in the sense that we want to share them with students.” Other clubs range from debate, chess, robotics, newspaper, technology and drama. There’s also sports teams and a newly formed dance team, which one student was excited to tell us about.

Recently, the school has started bringing in third-party providers for some after-school activities such as self-defense. Yet the prevailing philosophy is that the school can’t be all things to all students when it comes to non-academic pursuits. “We tell prospective parents that if their child wishes to pursue specialized extracurricular activities like competitive hockey or swimming it’s better to seek professional training,” says Mme. Murielle. “Here your child will still be able to participate in lots of clubs and sports, and have a chance to develop new interests and skills.”

Younger students tend to get involved in several clubs, while secondary students are less involved because they’re more focused on their studies. They do, however, frequently help run events and activities for their peers in lower grades. “The older kids are great about volunteering, and it creates a strong sense of community across the school,” says Mme. Chantal. Mme. Chantal also oversees the Student Council, something that attracts many secondary school students. “We include Grade 8 students on the

council because it helps them overcome their shyness and creates a nice bridge to secondary school,” she says. “I love watching the council transition from being a team that’s never worked together at the beginning of the year to a strong group of friends.”

One graduate we met told us how much the Student Council meant to her. “I was on the Student Council, including being Student Council President, all throughout high school,” she says. “It provided me with a wonderful opportunity to interact with the parents, members of the school committees, and other students while coming up with initiatives to support the student body and foster meaningful connections through activities between the students.”

The gymnasium/auditorium is a magnet for pick-up games of basketball or volleyball after school, but athletics are more recreational—providing a wide array of sports clubs—than competitive at La Citadelle. This isn’t to say that fitness isn’t a priority at the school. Unlike in the public system, where secondary students need just one physical education credit to graduate, students continue physical education courses through Grade 12.

Field trips are integral to the student experience at all levels. From day trips in early elementary school to overnight leadership camps and international excursions in the intermediary and secondary years, students augment their curricular and co-curricular learning by exploring the world outside the classroom. When we visited, Grades 6 to 12 students had recently returned from a trip to Spain, France, and Italy, where they immersed themselves in the culture, history, and cuisine.

“Some of my favourite memories include visits to museums, exhibits, and science fairs,” says one graduate. “I had an unforgettable trip to Italy and Greece, which provided me with lifelong experiences and memories. Bonding with my classmates during field trips—and camping trips specifically that focused on team-building and leadership—were fantastic.”

Some of La Citadelle’s co-curricular offerings are geared towards fostering students’ civic literacy. Beyond helping their

peers within the school, students frequently volunteer at local and international not-for-profit organizations such as food banks and old-age homes.

Student Body / Diversity

On our visit to La Citadelle, we observed a lively, well-mannered, diverse student body. It seemed to reflect the overarching sense of ease and good humour in the atmosphere, which makes visitors feel welcome and comfortable.

Several students told us that it's easy and desirable for them to form connections beyond their grades, given the school's infrastructure. "It's interconnected, which makes everyone flow and make friends with everybody," says one Grade 7 student. "The students are all really friendly and not afraid to say hi. Different grades mix at recess and play together, so I have friends in almost every grade. It's a very connected community. We're like one big family." On breaks and at lunch, we noticed students of varying ages gathering to chat and play games—something that's quite unusual in most schools, where grades are silos.

Ample leadership opportunities allow older students to interact with and guide their younger peers, from assisting at summer camp to being leaders in the House System. Frequent friendly competitions and spirit days further unite the student community. "I would describe the student body as extremely respectful, supportive, and ambitious," says one graduate.

Multiculturalism was one of the key pillars in Headmaster Abouchar's founding vision for La Citadelle. "My goal has always been for this to be an environment where students from all backgrounds, cultures and religions can feel at home and thrive," he says. Based on the discussions we had across the school community, Headmaster Abouchar has succeeded in this aim. "The school's commitment to fostering an inclusive environment, where students from various backgrounds collaborate and learn from each other, contributes to a rich and vibrant educational experience," says one graduate.

Today, the student body comes from more than 30 different





cultures, including several international students, and they're all celebrated in various ways during the school year. Not long before we visited, the school hosted its annual Multicultural Soirée, a banquet featuring food, dress, and dancing from multiple traditions.

Getting In

“The admissions process at La Citadelle is friendly yet firm, casual yet comprehensive—reflecting the mix of lightheartedness and informality at the school. It stands apart from the rigid admission process often associated with private schools, which generate urgency and induce anxiety with prospective parents,” Headmaster Abouchar remarks.

It all starts with a written application, but in-person meetings with parents and students are the true test. “We insist that parents take some time off work to come and meet us and tour the school,” says Mme. Murielle, who manages admissions. “We want to get to know them and let them get a real feel of our school.”

“Prospective kindergarten and elementary students visit the school for varying durations, with elementary students sometimes coming for a full day. At the secondary level, prospective students undergo a series of interviews and formal assessments as part of the admission process. This allows the school to better understand them and their future post-secondary goals,” says Mme. Murielle.

Yet Mme. Murielle doesn’t just evaluate students’ ability to manage high academic expectations. She also wants to know whether parents are on board as partners in their children’s learning. “Families need to be willing to support students along the way,” she says. “We need to be aligned on the basics in terms of our philosophy. Every student at La Citadelle will take exams, give presentations, and complete homework. They’ll be courteous and respectful. It’s non-negotiable, and we have to be certain that parents are fully on board with that. The fit with the parents is equally crucial.”

Tuition is on the lower side of the spectrum among private schools, and any increases are modest and consistent. “Our Headmaster’s background is in the public sector, and he strongly believes that every child should be able to access the quality of education we offer here,” says Mme. Murielle. “He rejects the

notion that education should be exclusive or elitist.” Sibling discounts and academic scholarships ranging from approximately \$300 to \$4,000 are available. Parents pay extra fees for uniforms, books, the optional hot lunch program, and field trips.

In recent years, La Citadelle has expanded its intake of international students, but with a cautious approach, explains Mme. Murielle. “Last year, we received many applications and admitted only three. We take this responsibility seriously and maintain a selective process. Prospective students must demonstrate a strong work ethic and a willingness to become integral members of our close-knit community. Feeling safe and forming friendships are paramount. International applicants are required to undergo English proficiency tests, and we offer ESL programs for an additional fee.”

Parents

Parents, and in some cases, extended families, depending on each student's situation, play an integral role in La Citadelle's close-knit community and underscore the importance of family involvement within the school. On the day we visited the school, parents were gathered in the atrium for the monthly morning café-croissant. It was well-attended, which is the norm, and had a warm, comfortable feel.

“When you join, it's not just the kids but the whole family that becomes part of the school,” says one parent. This is true in several ways. First, La Citadelle embraces families into the community, inviting them to social events like the morning café-croissant, galas, student performances, and other celebrations. But the school also brings parents into the fold as partners in guiding their children's holistic education.

“Families, teachers, and administrators must be united in their dedication to students' academic and character education,” says Headmaster Abouchar. “The parents at La Citadelle are fully committed to the school's philosophy of a holistic, bilingual education and do their part to support us in delivering that education to their children.”

Headmaster Abouchar and his staff expect parents to be accountable and engaged. Not that parents should micromanage their children's school work—let alone do it—but that parents should stay in-the-know by monitoring the homework that comes home, for example, and ensuring that it gets completed each night. The school makes this easy by requiring every student in Grades 1 to 8 to record their assignments and tests in an agenda that must be signed daily by parents.

Like most private schools, La Citadelle relies on parents to fundraise and run special events. Based on our conversations, there's never a shortage of volunteers. Careful vetting at the application process means that the parent community is made up of highly

motivated, willing contributors. “We believe that parents’ presence at school shows children that they matter. It can be just accompanying them on one field trip, or showing up to help at one event. It doesn’t have to take that much time,” says Mme. Murielle.

The parents we met had varying degrees of involvement at the school, depending on their capacity, but they all felt it was enjoyable and meaningful. “I think we espouse a similar value system to what’s modelled at the school, and because the teaching faculty and headmaster encourage parent involvement as appropriate, it feeds back into the community,” says one parent, who’s served as a class parent and volunteered at bake sales and BBQs. “It allows for meeting the broader student body and gives me a chance to see my kids interact with their friends.”

Mme. Chantal frequently collaborates with the Parent Support Committee in her role as advisor to the Student Council. “Our student leaders work with parent volunteers, and I get to see how much they give to our school community,” she says. “I think it comes down to having the same core values. We look at ourselves as one big team here.”

The school keeps parents informed through a parent portal on the website, emails, and a weekly newsletter from the headmaster. The latter is both comprehensive and heartfelt, reflecting Headmaster Abouchar’s signature style. “The communications to parents are very regular and thorough,” says one parent.



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