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PRIVATE SCHOOL REVIEWS

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# St. Clement's School

## The Our Kids Review



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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 daughter; the one that offers the right challenges and the necessary supports; the one where she feels comfortable and included; the one that allows her to grow into a sense of herself and her place in the world; the one where people laugh at her jokes, and ache in the same places. The one where she knows, without question: those are my goals, these are my friends, this is my school.

## About Our Kids

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

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| 12. Crescent School                                      | 36. Royal St. George's College         |
| 13. Crestwood Preparatory College                        | 37. St. Clement's School               |
| 14. Elmwood School                                       | 38. St. John's-Kilmarnock School       |
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## Details: St. Clement's School

**Values. Care. Excellence.**

**Location:** Toronto, Ontario

**Founded:** 1901

**Enrolment:** 470

**Grades:** Grade 1 to 12

**Gender:** All Girls

**Living Arrangements:** Day school

**Language of Instruction:** English

**Curriculum:** Liberal Arts

**Curriculum Pace:** Standard-enriched

**Academic Culture:** Rigorous



## Introduction

St. Clement's School (SCS) is reimagining what it means to learn in today's world, while maintaining the core values of its founding more than 120 years ago.

Continuity and community are prized features of SCS, evident in the longevity of certain traditions—for example, the connection to the Anglican Church—and a commitment to keep its relatively small student body housed under one roof. “One of the things that really makes us who we are is the size of the school and the fact that, from Grade 1 to Grade 12, our students coexist and share the same spaces,” says Principal Martha Perry, noting that the girls are affectionately known as “Clementines.”

The sense of warmth and connectedness across SCS—between the girls, between the girls and staff, and among the staff—is evident almost immediately on entering the building. The school's tagline, “There's something special going on here,” rings true as you walk the halls, seeing a Senior School volleyball team preparing to leave for a game, Junior School students rehearsing a play, and teachers from multiple disciplines gathered for a professional development session.

“We have a lot of ways to get involved in our community despite being a small school,” says a recent graduate, who joined SCS in Grade 7. “So you end up knowing everybody from Grades 1 through 12, or at least being able to recognize them as a familiar face and say ‘Hi’ in the halls.” Junior School teacher Courtney

Pratt echoes this, saying, “I definitely know every single person in this building, and I haven’t had that at other schools. This gives us a nice family-like feel here.” All schools say they foster a sense of home, but any visitor to SCS will tell you that it rings true here.

According to Vice-Principal Heather Henricks, there is strategy behind these natural connections. “It can sound glib, but it’s true: we’re a tight-knit community,” she says. “Having a small student body in one building has always been a differentiator for us, but now we’re taking a more intentional approach to ensuring there are precise frameworks and common language across every grade. Whether it’s classroom instruction, co-curriculars, leadership opportunities, or experiential learning, students will experience consistency. The puzzle pieces of what every teacher is doing fit together.”

This effort to be cohesive is just one example of the school’s thoughtful, reflective, research-based approach. Since its founding, academic excellence has been a keystone at SCS. The school has always kept pace with the latest educational philosophies and best practices, but in recent years it’s redefined the whole notion of what it means to learn.

“We’re proud of our reputation as an academically focused school, but we want to be very clear about what that means,” says Perry. “Our aim is for students to see learning as an outcome in itself, beyond projects, assignments, and grades. Our teachers are always working to promote deep learning, where the girls are finding creative solutions to real-world issues.”

This isn’t the conventional kind of learning where teachers deliver content and students demonstrate their understanding of it through assignments and tests. It’s learning that can be unpredictable, even uncomfortable, and it doesn’t always tie up in a bow at the end. In other words, it can be messy. We heard this word more than a few times on our visit to SCS, but always in its most positive connotation. “We’re challenging our girls to engage in learning that’s messy,” says Perry. “We see learning as a process,

not a product, and that process isn't always straightforward." But neither is life outside the classroom, and the school is dedicated to producing adaptable, resilient learners.

It follows, then, that SCS is a place for students who are not just academically proficient, but inherently curious and comfortable colouring outside the lines. "At open houses, I explicitly say to parents that we can't promise to get their child into a specific program at a specific university," says Perry. "But we can promise to give them a learning experience where they'll be encouraged to question the status quo, take risks, and try things outside their comfort zones."

For a small school, SCS has robust offerings in athletics, a wide array of clubs and activities, and a comprehensive academic and social-emotional support program. It's also ahead-of-the curve in its efforts to create a welcoming environment for students—whatever their backgrounds or identities might be.

"St. Clement's really helps students find their place and be themselves," says Senior School teacher Diana Pai. "We want them to do more than fit in. We want students to feel like they belong."

## Basics

Located on a short residential street in midtown Toronto, just steps west of Yonge Street's bustle, SCS is an independent day school for girls. With a student population of about 470, students from Grade 1 to 12 learn and play in a single three-storey building. It's not grand or stately, and it sits fairly close to the sidewalk, without any of the sprawling lawns of some private schools. Still, mature trees line the building, and across the street there are lovely detached and semi-detached homes with the early 20th-century character of this midtown neighbourhood.

"St. Clement's is more about place than space," says Perry. "When you look at us from the outside, you may not see all the 'fixings'—the fields and amenities some larger schools have. So we attract parents who are seeking a quality academic program and are comfortable with the idea of truly being a community school. We're in the heart of the neighbourhood, and we use the neighbourhood parks and facilities. We're not a gated community." The neighbourhood is home to businesses big and small, including the national headquarters for Canadian Tire, the Heart and Stroke Foundation, and the TVOntario studios.

Stepping into the main foyer, the feel is welcoming and not in the least intimidating. But this unassuming façade belies a long, quiet history of academic excellence. The alums are impressive—historian and author Margaret MacMillan is a standout, but she's in great company—as are the acceptance rates, the scholarships

garnered, the marks achieved, and awards conferred. The school is a stellar example of its type, sitting at the forefront of girls' education. SCS is a prominent member of the International Coalition of Girls' Schools, an organization for which Perry, the current principal, sits on the board and has served as chair. SCS is a school that is seen as a resource by educators, one that demonstrates innovation while also staying true to an established heritage.

The academic program is divided conceptually between the Junior School, which includes Grades 1 through 6; the Middle School, which includes Grades 7 through 9; and the Senior School, which includes Grades 10 through 12. Grade 9 isn't included within the Senior School in part to provide a longer Middle School experience. That said, Grade 9 is an entry year, as it is in most schools of this size and focus. Each division has its own head of school and faculty, with some support staff, such as the librarians and the administrative team, serving them all. As a small school, St. Clement's has the capacity to be nimble and share expertise across the divisions.

Today SCS is non-denominational, though it maintains a friendship with its church, which is just a block away from the school. Students walk to St. Clement's Anglican Church for special events such as the Installation Service, where Grade 12 students share their commitments for the school year and receive the gold belts that set their uniforms apart, and celebrate Thanksgiving, Easter, and other holidays. The church connection is also evident in weekly assemblies, which may include a hymn and a prayer or meditation. These traditions are more cultural than religious, however, and the strongest thread connecting the current school with its past is the focus on the liberal arts, curiosity, civic commitment, and responsibility.

SCS students and staff are used to making the most of the space they have. In 2006, the school doubled its physical size with the addition of a 350-seat theatre/lecture hall, a second gymnasium, classrooms, an arts wing, a science wing, and a library. While

this was just one of several additions and renovations over the years (see “Background” below), you’d need to look very hard to find the seams between them. The overall feel is comfortable and surprisingly spacious, considering the limits of the property—it’s exactly the same size it was when the school bought it in the early 20th century—with a lot of clean lines and natural light.

Given the space limitations, it’s not uncommon for Clementines to work in hallways, empty meeting rooms, and gyms. On our visit, for example, a small group of senior students were collaborating in the foyer and a few Junior School students were tucked in a hallway nook reading together. It appeared to be both functional and cozy. Sharing facilities between divisions contributes to a culture designed to optimize a cross-generational experience. The entire school meets together twice a week, a cornerstone of school life that continued online during the pandemic shutdown.

“I love seeing the girls hanging out and studying all over the school,” says Perry. “We don’t want that to change.” What will change soon, however, is that their options for where they gather will widen dramatically. A 38,000-square-foot addition is set for completion in early 2024, offering adaptable, modern spaces where SCS students can spread out. That the school has decided to expand facilities—not enrolment—says everything about the SCS philosophy on ensuring every student is known and valued.

“This build will be transformational in terms of our ability to provide the best possible spaces for our students to learn in,” says Perry. “It won’t change our fundamental approach and values, but it will enable us to have more flexibility in carrying out our mission. We’ll have room for large groups to gather and not worry about making too much noise, and for small groups to have quiet meetings.” Feedback from students, staff, and alums have informed all the planning and design.

Some of the highlights of the new construction include an expansion of the current library, a technology and design lab equipped for robotics, a cafeteria (there was none before), a bright

and spacious Junior School art studio, a Junior science classroom, and large, open meeting spaces for the Middle and Senior Schools called “Hubs.” A new rooftop terrace opened in 2022, creating an inviting area for everything from assemblies to recess.

“We’re going to have purpose-built spaces for the kind of learning that we think is important,” says Vice-Principal Heather Henricks. “A few decades ago, we didn’t need rooms for experimenting, prototyping, and making, but now we do. It’s not that we haven’t been doing these things, for example in robotics, but now it will be more convenient—and exciting—for everybody involved.”

The school’s black-box theatre, Powell Hall, along with its two full-sized gyms, were the only places for bringing together full grades or schools—let alone the whole student body. Now, with the school hubs, it will be possible to have simultaneous meetings of big groups. And having rooms designed specifically for certain activities isn’t just convenient, says Senior School teacher Diana Pai, it’s conducive to deep learning. “If girls walk into a room where there are electronics components lining the walls, for example, or posters with French vocabulary, it prompts them to shift their mindset and transition smoothly into the learning about to take place.” Simply increasing the number of classrooms will also broaden course offerings in the Senior School and reduce class sizes in Middle School homerooms.

The teachers and students we spoke to are looking forward to moving into their expanded home, especially since everyone is staying together under one—much bigger—roof. “It’s just going to open up so many possibilities for learning,” says Junior School teacher Courtney Pratt. “As teachers, we can’t help but be excited about that.”





## Background

St. Clement's was founded in 1901 by Canon Thomas Wesley Powell, rector of St. Clement's Church of the Diocese of Toronto. The first classes took place in the parish hall, though they soon moved down the street after acquiring the current property in 1922. A photo in the collection of the Toronto Reference Library shows the property as it looked then: a lone farmhouse sitting behind some aging apple trees.

At the time, it was remote from the bustle of the city, though with the creep of urban growth and the extension of the Yonge streetcar line, followed by the subway in 1954, in time it was surrounded by a substantial residential and business community. SCS sits in one of the denser areas of midtown Toronto, where space has always been at a premium. The property is bounded on all sides by what is a predominantly residential neighbourhood, so all development of the property takes place within the parcel of land the school acquired in 1922.

The school was initially, if briefly, coed, and Powell's son Francis was one of the first students enrolled. "My father could do anything!" Francis later said, a perspective shared by many early members of the SCS community. Powell's goal for the school was to break away from the predominant educational model at the time: rote learning, rigid hierarchies of authority, and expectations of deference from students. He wanted to inspire children rather than subdue them and teach the basics while also fostering

a spirited appreciation for what the world had to offer.

Fostering curiosity was key for Powell. His students would be allowed to follow their interests and ask questions. They'd have a sense of responsibility, though not one born out of a fear of punitive measures. There was a loose association to the church—Powell was a canon and he named the school after a saint—though it was more cultural, noting a larger tradition without being tied to it. Then, as now, the leadership of the school was independent and secular.

The school continued to grow and develop in order to meet the demands of the time and the needs of the students. In 1932, SCS rededicated itself to all-girls education. By the 1960s, a time of social change, developments within the school reflected what was happening in the culture at large. “We must not be afraid of change,” said Alma Conway, Junior School principal at the time. “Change means growth. But we must be careful to keep what is of value to the past.”

The 1970s marked a period of capital growth, with the first of three major capital campaigns adding new buildings and instructional areas to the campus. Similarly, two other major campaigns would be launched at intervals over the next decades, each refining the school in a distinct way. The aim wasn't just to renew, but to respond to emerging educational practices such as co-curricular learning and allow space for experiential learning. The Building on Spirit Campaign, launched in 1992, expanded the buildings and renovated the interiors.

## Leadership

Martha Perry is one of those rare instances where the head of the school is also a graduate. She arrived in Grade 7 and graduated from Grade 13 in 1985. (She was one of the last girls to attend that culminating grade, which was removed in 1988.) “I’m not sure that I aspired to come back here,” she says with a laugh. “It just happened organically, and I’m so glad it did.”

Perry was a teacher and administrator at several independent schools, including Trinity College School, before joining SCS in 2002 as the director of admissions. “After only a short time, I was reminded of what it’s like to be in an environment where you’re really known and valued, and where girls have the opportunity for authenticity,” she says. “Students can be themselves here and let their guards down. They’re intelligent young women who have high expectations for themselves, and they don’t have to apologize for that.”

Perry left SCS after five years in admissions to become the assistant head of academics at Pickering College, then returned to SCS as principal in 2010. Taking on the top role at her alma mater sparked Perry to reflect on her time there as a student, what it meant to her development, and how the school had changed over the decades. “My passion back then was for sports and leadership,” she says. “I was less academically focused, so I felt there were certain expectations that I didn’t measure up to. The beautiful thing, though, is that the SCS community made me feel known and

loved. Now I have hindsight and wisdom, and I know those passions informed who I am today. My sports and leadership guided me to this role.”

As a school leader, Perry has continued her commitment to positive teamwork. “When you build a team, you’re asking people to work together to accomplish a goal, but you’re not asking them all to be the same,” she says. “People have different skills and capacities. So the aim is to lead different and diverse individuals in achieving a common goal. That’s really informed how I work with people.”

When we asked Perry’s colleagues about her leadership style, they affirmed that she encourages and celebrates staff members’ unique contributions. Every year, she invites every staff member for a “fireside chat,” where openness on both sides of the conversation is the norm. “She really takes on board whatever we tell her, in terms of our suggestions for improvement at the school,” says phys-ed teacher Christopher White. “Outside of these formal meetings, she also remembers everything from those 30-second conversations in the hallways—whether it’s personal or professional. It’s obvious that she cares so much about the people she works with.”

Senior School languages teacher Diana Pai says Perry’s door is always open, in the truest sense of the expression. “It makes such a difference to work in a place where you know you can go to the head of school with any concerns or ideas, or just for advice, and she’ll welcome you.” Perry works hard to set this tone of accessibility and approachability. “I’m a big believer in engaging as many people as possible and making sure that everyone is heard,” she says. “I also believe that you should try to hire people who are smarter than you to get more expertise around the table.”

When it comes to Perry’s connection with students, she also strives for openness and accessibility. Students know that they can usually drop by her office for a quick chat, even if it’s to question one of her decisions or critique a school tradition. “I encourage

the girls to challenge me,” she says. “They foster learning in us as teachers and leaders. For example, conversations with students around issues of identity have been an important push for me to learn more.”

In fact, Perry has made issues of equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging a key priority during her tenure (see “Student body, leadership, and diversity” below). Her genuine dedication to learning and growing in this area was apparent in our discussions, as was her colleagues’ admiration for her leadership in this area. “Martha is very much at the forefront of all of these important conversations we’re having,” says White. “And she acknowledges that if she’s asking her staff to look inward and reflect on these issues, she does the same and is very open and honest about it.”

School-wide assemblies will often address issues of equity and diversity, and Perry is always there to support students and teachers. In fact, you’ll find her at nearly every school event. Assemblies are one of her favourite parts of SCS life. “Getting everyone together twice a week is pretty special, whether it’s for meaningful learning or just for goofy spirit celebrations,” she says.

Beyond formal events, though, Perry is a familiar face in students’ daily lives. “She’s a very present leader,” says Junior School teacher Courtney Pratt. “I see her every single day. She walks around the school and pops into classrooms and just listens to what we’re doing. She’s very much part of the team.” After school, when most students have left, Perry likes to wander around and check out the new art on the walls, projects on display, and experiments in progress.

As for how she thinks Clementines see her, Perry has an accurate grasp of student opinion, based on what we heard from the girls. “I think they see me as an authentic person who’s not afraid to make mistakes and doesn’t need perfection all the time,” she says. “They know I can be fun but also strict when I need to be.”

Looking back on her own student years at SCS, and the school’s earlier history, Perry sees a consistent commitment to

academic excellence and holistic development for girls. The last few decades, however, have gone a step further. “To me, the difference now is that we’re nurturing girls’ voices even more,” she says. “Making sure students understand that their perspectives are important—particularly diverse voices and perspectives—is a much bigger focus.”

Looking toward the school’s future, Perry is determined to keep moving forward in this focus while preserving the best of the past. She will sustain close cross-grade interaction, for example, even in the expanded SCS building. “When I was in Grade 7, I remember coming in and meeting the Grade 13s and thinking they were so grown up and wise, and I could consult them on my decisions and actions,” she says. “On the other side, the oldest girls have to remember that there are six-year-olds looking up to them. As staff and as senior students, we can be reminded a lot about curiosity, and the passion and joy of learning, from our younger students daily.”

It’s those kinds of interactions that Perry seeks to promote in the development of the curricular and co-curricular programs. “First and foremost for me, I want people within our environment, regardless of who they are, to feel known and valued,” she says. “I’m a people person, and St. Clement’s is all about connections and community.”





## Academics

St. Clement's has long been known for academic rigour, but in recent years the school has transformed what that means in practice. Academic rigour looked very different in the 1990s and 2000s, and even just a decade ago, says Perry. "Before, it was about acquiring content knowledge and having five hours of homework every night, but now we've made a massive shift—which I love—towards ensuring that our girls learn how to learn. At St. Clement's, learning is a process, not a product. This is a big change in philosophy, and many educators and schools have been slow to make it."

While other less progressive schools still measure success mainly by the volume of facts students can recall on exams, SCS is adapting its academic approach to suit a changing world. Students have to apply their knowledge to real-life problems, examine subjects from diverse viewpoints, and tackle issues with no easy solutions. Deep learning, which is what SCS strives for in all its academic programs, goes well past the acquisition of surface skills and knowledge. Instead, students learn to think creatively and critically. It sounds simple, but only a minority of schools have gone as far as SCS to promote this approach.

"While our school was already on the path of change, the pandemic confirmed that we were heading in the right direction," says Perry. "We're teaching our students to persist and thrive when things are uncertain or unclear. They're adaptable and courageous

when there's no black-and-white answer. Whether it's inside or outside the classroom, we challenge our students to be uncomfortable in the learning process."

That place of discomfort is where deep learning happens, according to Henricks. It's also where girls gain the mindset and skills to succeed in times of ambiguity and disruption. "When things are familiar and straightforward, and there's always a right and wrong answer, not a lot of actual learning goes on," she says. "We want students to embrace the messiness of deep learning. We don't see our job as simply preparing students to get into university and get good marks there. We see our jobs in the realm of human development, in developing learners. That will serve students well, whatever they do beyond SCS."

This reimagining of learning shapes the whole SCS student experience. In the classroom, it means frequent reflection on what discoveries happen along the way when girls delve into an individual or group project. It also means more questioning and exploring, and less focus on delivering a glossy final assignment or perfect test.

Senior School languages teacher Diana Pai explains the approach this way: "Getting the right answer is still an important goal for students, but so is tracking their own thinking and making it visible to us as teachers. That enables us to help the students identify where along the path they might need a little more support, but also helps the students take some pressure off themselves to enjoy more of the learning journey."

St. Clement's teachers foster this mindset across the grades and curriculum. In phys-ed, teacher Chris White encourages his students to examine how acquiring specific skills will serve them through their adult lives. "Working on their soccer abilities now may mean the girls can coach later on, or play a weekly pick-up game with their colleagues," he says. "We want them to see the wider scope of learning beyond getting a grade or completing a course."

Teaching spaces are modern and flexible, allowing instructors

to vary delivery to meet the demands of the content and curricular outcomes. On any given day, you're as apt to see classes engaged in anything from lecture to Harkness discussion to group work around a piece of project-based learning. The design of the classrooms is equally flexible, with movable furniture that can accommodate pods of interaction as easily as full-group discussion and presentation. "The key is engagement," says Amy Paradine, head of the Middle School, "and that means engagement with the teacher, with the learning, with the environment, and with each other." While all spaces have the latest technology, it's nicely stowed, with lower-tech tools, such as whiteboards, more prevalent than screens.

SCS requires much of its students, but within a context of comprehensive support (see "Wellness" below). "The academic program is built around the notion of balancing challenges with resources," says Henricks, including fostering a culture of achievement rather than one of competition. The schools' approach to assessment reflects this philosophy as much as possible. Students are, of course, aware that grades are important, but the school's key message is that marks are an incomplete metric of personal success. "When people talk about cultivating 'soft skills' second to academic skills, I don't see them as soft skills," says Perry. "I see them as core skills—the critical thinking, communication, and collaboration." Teachers present grades as personal, not comparative, urging students to see their successes on their own merits, rather than in relation to the successes of others.

St. Clement's offers more Advanced Placement (AP) courses than any other school in the country. The dedication to AP is based on the conviction that it meshes better with the Ontario curriculum than other curricula, such as the International Baccalaureate. Students are free to take as many or as few AP courses as they like. In any case, SCS graduates—about 60 each year—are an impressive bunch. Most attend the leading universities in Ontario, but 15% opt for international schools (over the past five years, 25 girls

have gained admission to Ivy Plus institutions).

Those statistics are no doubt validating, but they're not top of mind for the SCS faculty and administration. They're too busy turning out courageous, adaptable learners equipped to weather an uncertain future. "We want to make sure that when our girls leave us they know how to manage when things don't go their way," says Perry. "They're not defeated when they stumble or the answers are hard to come by."





## Pedagogical approach

Since the learning journey is more important than the destination at SCS, teachers take a flexible, personalized approach to education. Our conversations with teachers from different divisions and disciplines made it clear that they're united in their goal of producing self-aware, creative, resilient students. "Some schools say they have individualized learning for every child," says Henricks. "We don't make that claim, but we do make sure that we know students as individuals. This is possible in a school of our size, where everyone shares a building, and it allows us to understand their needs and leverage their strengths."

Again and again, SCS teachers spoke to the benefits of the school's structure. "I get to see the students again and again over the years, whether as their teacher, coach, or just a familiar face," says social sciences teacher Mark Will. "It gives us a basis for our working relationship. Students know that I'm invested in their success because they saw it in Grade 8, and they saw it in Grade 9, and now they're [seeing it again] in Grade 11."

To build these trusting relationships, teachers give students "a voice and choice" in their learning whenever it's appropriate. "In my courses, I allow the students to express their learning in a way that's meaningful for them," says Will. "So they may produce a flow chart, a mind map, a video, or a drawing. The more they make these decisions, the more they discover what modes of representation best suit their learning styles—crucial knowledge for

them to have in the long term.” Diana Pai, curriculum department leader for the languages department, sometimes allows senior students to choose their own assignment deadlines. “When they set the date, they bear the responsibility,” she says. “They find out if long or short deadlines are best for them and refine their time management skills.”

SCS teachers favour project-based and small-group engagement, in line with the research on how girls learn most effectively. “Girls value the opportunity for collaboration, but they still need to learn how to do it effectively,” says Perry. You won’t see typical “stand-and-deliver” teaching in SCS classrooms. Grade 11 students take on STEAM projects, for example, where teams approach a real-world issue, then propose, design, and often prototype solutions to it. “My group made a prototype which we presented,” says a student. “I loved it because I think it was very applicable to life and it wasn’t mostly focused on one subject.” Says another, “My favourite was cultivating a group of bacteria using plasmids from jellyfish. The purpose was to explore antibiotic resistance through genetic recombination and an interesting side effect—a glow under UV light—which was really cool to see.”

The school also emphasizes cross-disciplinary approaches to studying current issues. One program that exemplifies this effort to transcend academic subject silos is Integrated Studies in Grades 7 and 8, which combines history, geography, and language arts. Social sciences teacher Mark Will, winner of the 2022 Prime Minister’s Award for Teaching Excellence, says this unique SCS academic offering empowers students to understand the big picture. “Instead of asking students to create an incredibly detailed project that’s quite granular in its focus, we ask them to recognize the connections across topics. We might study a novel about a natural disaster, for example, and consider the natural forces that cause that type of event. At the same time, we could look at the historical context of the setting.”

In every subject, or group of subjects, teachers require students

to reflect on their learning. Very recently, SCS formalized this requirement with the introduction of digital portfolios across the grades. Courtney Pratt, a Junior School teacher who piloted the portfolios in Grade 6 classrooms, says students now have living documents that record their growth and remind them of their individual needs and strengths. “They record their biggest take-aways, what they found difficult, what they would do differently next time, and how their learning skills like collaboration and responsibility progressed over the year. The girls present these portfolios to their parents at teacher interview evenings, and we’ve had great feedback from families.”

It was clear from all our interactions with the school community that, as teachers guide students on their learning journeys, they’re dedicated to the girls’ development as whole individuals. “Every faculty member here is invested in students’ success,” says Will. “Not just their academic success, but their personal growth, their ability to interact with other people, and their capacity to lead others in the future.”

## Co-curriculars

There's a lot going on at SCS before and after the official school day. The co-curricular offerings are surprisingly broad given the size of the student body, with plenty of options for involvement in a full array of teams and clubs (including some you might not find elsewhere, such as the philosophy club and classics club). The musical offerings are equally expansive, from chamber choir to jazz band.

Participation—not perfection—is at the heart of the co-curricular culture, so students feel comfortable trying new things as well as drilling down to build on existing skills and interests. Co-curriculars are designed to be an extension and augmentation of student life, an arena to meet new friends and spark new interests.

Annual grade-wide trips and spirit events build community and inject fun into the school calendar, along with experiential learning opportunities that include local, national, and international excursions. Grade 7 and 8 students attend camp sessions hosted at Camp Arowhon and Camp Timberlane, two of Canada's foremost camps. They offer girls a chance to get into nature, though often the most lasting results come from getting them out of their familiar, urban environment. "They make new friends, which is particularly important in Grade 7," says Amy Paradine, head of the Middle School, "and get to know themselves, perhaps in new ways." The school's membership in Round Square, a global organization of schools dedicated to global experiences that

develop character and confidence, provides an entrée to international experiences.

Reflection has always been a critical part of experiential learning at SCS, but recently the school created a common framework for teachers to follow during and after the experience. “We’re being more overt in focusing on the learning that takes place when students try new things or go new places,” says Henricks. “Teachers ask students to notice—really notice—what they’re seeing and hearing and doing, then think critically, ask questions, and maybe do further research.”

Teachers build experiential learning into the curriculum in large and small ways, whether it’s a trip to Ottawa to delve into government and citizenship or a game of Monopoly in a business class. “We’re helping students understand that they don’t have to travel far to have exciting learning opportunities,” says Junior School teacher Courtney Pratt. “A lot of the time it can be local or right on campus, such as when we invited the building engineers from our construction project to talk to our Grade 3 class.”

In terms of trips designed to support less privileged communities—typically called “outreach” or “service” trips—SCS takes a very thoughtful approach. “We believe it’s imperative that our students understand the notion of assisting others in an empathetic and compassionate way, not in a sympathetic way,” says Perry. “I’m skeptical of service trips that involve going somewhere, helping in some way, then leaving without taking stock of the larger implications of what that all means. Instead, we focus on forming connections with people and organizations over long periods of time. We build relationships and ask students to monitor the real impact of their actions.”

Some examples of this type of targeted experiential learning include partnering with St. Clement’s Anglican Church to sponsor a Syrian family and supporting refugees from the war in Ukraine. Most notably, SCS has a 13-year partnership with the Moose Cree First Nation, which involves regular visits to schools in Moose

Factory by students and faculty and a collaboration with a group of elders. “We strive for our girls to understand what it means to be a respectful person in a different community, as opposed to simply ticking it off community service hours or adding to a resume,” says Perry.

In keeping with the school’s liberal arts approach, both artistic and athletic co-curriculars are prominent at SCS. Grade 7 and 8 students mount a play each fall in the state-of-the-art performance space, Powell Hall. Recent productions have included *The Wizard of Oz*, *Anne of Green Gables* and *The Velveteen Rabbit*. (“It was amazing,” said a parent about that one.) For Grades 9 and up, there’s an annual production which is often a musical, though not always. Co-curricular productions take part in regional competitions.

The athletics program is strong, despite SCS not having outdoor facilities on site. There are two full-sized gyms and a wealth of recreational resources nearby. Phys-ed classes and cross-country practices take place, weather permitting, at Eglinton Park and facilities for ice hockey, swimming, and tennis are within walking distance. Says Director of Admissions Elena Holeton, “Just because we don’t have our facilities right within our school walls doesn’t mean that we don’t compete well in those sports.”

The school offers a broad and balanced offering of sports competing in CISAA (Conference of Independent Schools Athletic Association) and OFSAA (Ontario Federation of School Athletic Associations) events. Many of the 40 teams are strikingly successful, given that they compete against much larger schools. In the last year of competition prior to the pandemic, SCS achieved golds in CISAA cross-country, skiing, and tennis. As with all the co-curricular programs, however, the culture of participation rules the day. The recreational sport options are equally broad and varied.

It was clear in our discussions with coaches that the aim of the athletic program is to inspire active lifestyles. “We provide a plethora of opportunities for students to try a sport, improve their skills, and maybe ultimately compete,” says coach and phys-ed

teacher Chris White. “In the Junior School, there are no cuts. Everyone can have the experience of representing the school as long as they commit to practices. It’s different in the older grades, but whenever we can make more than one team to avoid cuts, we do it.” The approach obviously works, given that 75% of students take part in at least one team.

## Student body, leadership, and diversity

St. Clement's identifies itself as a small school, though it's not tiny by any stretch. It's more about the small-school feel and the strong sense of community. Principal Martha Perry greets the students each day, by name, as they arrive. "It's not an insular school," says a parent. "Small doesn't mean that it's closed in. There's a real sense of exploring the world, seeing what's beyond the boundary of the school. But also, when you come back to the school, there's a real sense of home." In the words of a recent alum, "I think the fundamental thing that I took away from St. Clement's is how important community is to me."

Cross-grade connections are both spontaneous—the inevitable result of learning in one building—and intentional. Developing leadership skills is central to the school's mission, and it's tied to the faculty and staff's commitment to the evidence-based advantages of all-girls education. "As we say," says Perry, "you need to see it to be it. And every leader at St. Clement's is a young woman, so girls are constantly seeing female leaders."

The SCS Leadership Program begins in Grade 1 and progresses—with formal leadership training and gradually increasing responsibilities in classroom activities and co-curricular and special events—to Grade 12, when every student holds a formal leadership role. "Having taught in the Junior, Middle, and Senior

Schools, I've been able to watch the girls' leadership qualities and characteristics evolve over time," says phys-ed teacher Chris White. "By their final year, the students are ready to apply everything they've learned. And the Grade 12 roles aren't tokenistic. The girls are managing important positions, and the school relies on them doing a good job." The leadership roles run the gamut from heads of clubs and committees to positions in the graduating class executive.

Similar to the reimagining of learning at SCS, the school has been redefining what leadership means in recent years, says Henricks. "We're trying to move away from the idea of leadership being a hierarchical thing, where you have a title and position of power and that's the only way you lead. Instead, our message is that leadership can be a collaborative experience, and it's about staying connected to your values."

When girls step up as leaders, they receive points in the house system—a central part of student life at SCS. "The house system is one of the reasons I came to the school," says a recent graduate. "I just really love all the passion and the spirit that's involved." The four houses are named after British royal houses—York, Stuart, Windsor, and Tudor—complete with colours, mascots, student leaders, and faculty. On spirit/house days, you'll find everyone dressed in their colours and ready to compete in a variety of activities. "There's a real sense of fun, spirit, and camaraderie at SCS," says Perry. "Even on regular days, there's always laughter in the halls."

Yet Perry and her colleagues know that, over the school's history, not every girl has felt part of that camaraderie. "For upwards of 12 years, we've been working hard to ensure that SCS is an inclusive community," she says. "I don't believe in EDI [equity, diversity, and inclusion] being an add-on. I think it can be quite performative, so our focus has been on creating an environment where no one feels like they have to conform, and everyone feels safe and [has] a sense of belonging."

According to Perry, students have driven many of the changes

related to EDI at the school. “Research shows that students in all-girls schools tend to be more civically engaged and motivated to make things better,” she says, noting there are three student-led committees focused on EDI work at SCS: the Gender & Sexuality Alliance, the Indigenous Affairs Circle, and the Anti-Racism Committee. “The beautiful thing is that the changes our students have promoted still adhere to our core values of respect, integrity, community, creativity, and spirituality.”

In 2021, the school hired its first Director of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, Mahlon Evans-Sinclair. An educator and EDI facilitator who spent most of his career in the United Kingdom, Evans-Sinclair co-leads the EDI Committee with Henricks. “It’s one thing to have our curriculum, library books, and special events reflect the school’s commitment to EDI, but we’re trying to go a step further,” says Henricks. “We’re collaborating with staff so that they’re ready for the impromptu conversations that come up after an assembly, for example. Maybe they’re math or physics teachers, but they need to know how to guide students in conversations that may be uncomfortable or potentially emotional.”

Adapting language traditionally used at SCS is one of the school’s strategies to promote inclusiveness. The “Head Girl” title is now “School Captain,” for example, and graduates are referred to as the gender-neutral “alum” rather than the feminine “alumnae.” The Gender & Sexuality Alliance also introduced the Pronouns Project to provide educational opportunities around pronoun use.

“We ask our students to reflect on their learning all the time, and we’re asking the same of ourselves as a school and faculty when it comes to issues of inclusion and belonging,” says Perry. “We have to examine our own biases and lenses, take a hard look at how we’ve been doing things, and listen to what students and alum are telling us. It’s ongoing work and there’s much left to do, but it’s an exciting time.”





## Wellness

There are offices and meeting rooms devoted to wellness-related programs and services at SCS, but the school's efforts to promote students' social, emotional, and physical health transcend these spaces. In 2009, then-principal Patricia Parisi developed LINCWell (Learning, Individualization, Nurturing, Creativity, and Wellness), a comprehensive program that encompasses classroom learning, co-curricular offerings, counselling, and more. "Principal Parisi had the prescience to think of LINCWell as a school-wide approach, not an additional layer," says Perry.

Wellness doesn't have any clear boundaries at SCS. "It isn't just counselling, and it isn't just curriculum development," says Director of Admissions Elena HOLETON. "It really is absolutely everything." There are many tools, protocols, and practices throughout the school that are tangible evidence of the LINCWell program. In the school's existing LINCWell facilities, depending on the day, you might see student leaders hosting a mindfulness activity, hot chocolate mornings, after-school homework clubs, various drop-ins on a range of wellness topics, or students just seeking a quiet place to hang out.

The goal, says HOLETON, is "to provide the students with a toolkit of strategies that will help them as they move forward in life," including strategies for organization, academics, communication, and mental and physical health. "We wanted to make sure that this wasn't a program that was seen as something just for

when you had an academic problem or something. This is really supporting the girls in their full growth, so that they can tackle whatever comes at them as life goes on.”

Just as SCS empowers students to be adaptable, resilient learners in the academic realm, the school equips girls with the knowledge and skills to manage all aspects of their health and development. “LINCWell is about building students’ independence and guiding their self-management abilities,” says Perry, noting that part of that support involves ensuring that every student has at least one adult at the school that they trust to consult on any personal or academic issue. It could be a counsellor, of course, but also a current or past teacher or coach.

There’s a keen awareness among all teachers and administrators at SCS that the school is academically rigorous, and students may need support in navigating the pressures that can come with this status. “We’re not trying to eliminate all challenge from the girls’ lives, because that’s not reality,” says Henricks. “What we are trying to do is give them the tools so that, when they face those challenges, they can better manage them. We know we can’t teach our students everything, but we can and do prepare them for the specific realities of our changing world.”

## Getting in

The main entry years for admission are Grades 1, 6, 7, and 9, though there's some flexibility for students hoping to enrol at the school in other grades. Overall, the acceptance rate stands at about 50%, though it varies across grades.

Applications typically begin online, and parents report that there are no surprises along the way. The application requirements are typical of private schools of similar size and scope, including three recent years of report cards. Applicants take an entrance assessment, and it can be written any time up until the end of January.

An admissions interview is part of the process, with the student being interviewed alone for about half of the time before they're joined by parents. Director of Admissions Elena Holeton takes pride in making the process as friendly and straightforward as possible, and parents confirm her success in that regard. "It was very different from the other interviews I've done this year," says one student, "because it felt more natural and more like a conversation."

In fact, Holeton avoids the word "interview." "It really is more of a chat," she says. "There's no preparation necessary, because the applicants know who they are, and that's something we want to find out. It's also a chance for them to ask us questions." She adds that it's very much a two-way street, and parents should take the time and care to ensure that the school is the right fit for them.

"Admittedly, it's a stressful process for everyone," says a

current parent, “but the admissions team is there for you.” Other parents note that new families should not feel that they need to tread lightly; they should ask any and all questions, reach out to current parents and students (something that admissions can help with), and jump on any opportunities to get into the school for tours, open houses, or events.

“The application process was absolutely seamless and well-organized,” says another parent. “Once my daughter was accepted, the transition process was just so well-organized. For example, the school had scavenger hunts for new students, so they had a chance to see where all their classes were. There was also a picnic for all the new girls where they had a chance to get to know some of those students who were already at St Clement’s.”

The application period begins in August and the deadline is December 1 for the following September. Admission decisions go out the last week of February. Needs-based financial aid is available for students applying to Grades 7 through 12. A third-party invigilator assesses applications.

## Parents

Based on our conversations with families, SCS scores high marks for the depth and breadth of its communication with parents. “Before you even have a question or concern,” says one, “there’s some sort of seminar or information that comes out about it. And there’s always substance. Whether it’s a mail-out or the principal’s blogs, there’s something that I learn.”

The quality of the academic program also earns praise. “It builds confidence and skills,” says a parent. “After Grade 12, they have a great foundation to do whatever they want to do.” Another adds that, “there’s time for fun as well as the academics,” something the administration makes a priority. There are also ample opportunities for SCS families to participate in enjoyable activities, thanks to the dedicated Parents’ Association. From a back-to-school Welcome Fair each September and regular coffee mornings to major fundraisers such as the annual Jingle Mingle holiday market and cocktail party, the association hosts multiple events throughout the year.

Beyond these lighthearted occasions, the home-school connection is a daily priority for SCS staff. “We make sure we communicate with families on a regular basis, whether it’s around curriculum at the beginning of the year or just knowing where to go with questions or concerns,” says Perry. “Parents who choose St. Clement’s generally have some alignment with our school values, and that’s a wonderful foundation. But we value feedback so we can continue learning from parents.”

Senior School teacher Diana Pai, who has been at SCS for nearly 20 years, says that the school strives for openness on both sides of the parent-teacher relationship. “We share the common goal of the students being happy and thriving. Even when a student is experiencing difficulty, we keep that in mind and work together towards solutions. Sometimes parents will know things that we may not know, and sometimes we’ll see things that parents may not have known.”

As at any school, sometimes problems come up, and difficult conversations with parents are necessary. But Perry says that there’s a strong basis of trust in families when many girls have been Clementines since Grade 1. “It truly is a partnership with parents. That doesn’t mean that it’s always straightforward and easy. But we’re exceptionally blessed here with a really great parent community that shares our mission of supporting the girls’ learning and growth.”

## Alums

The school's strong community ties last well beyond graduation. "Our alum are remarkable," says Perry. "Their amazing accomplishments—both in professional and personal life—provide evidence for our current students and prospective families that SCS is a special place." Graduates stay in touch with the school in a variety of ways, including formal reunion events and book clubs. Many also contribute their time and expertise by returning as mentors or speakers, whether in person or virtually. "Since the pandemic began, we've accessed alums from all over the world who were willing to meet with students," says Perry. "We're going to continue doing that, along with on-site visits."

Perry relies on graduates of all ages as sounding boards when she's making important decisions about the school. "They're key advisors for me," she says. "I have one particular alum from the class of '55, for example, who offers her perspective and wisdom. I also meet regularly with a group of young graduates to get their feedback on how prepared they felt when leaving SCS."

Illustrious alum include historian and academic Margaret MacMillan (mentioned above), CBC foreign correspondent Adrienne Arseneault, and novelists Claudia Dey and Sheila Heti.

Current students seem to be very aware of the strong alums tradition they're part of at SCS. "It makes me happy that, although I'm graduating, I'm going to be able to come back and visit, and I'll still feel like I'm part of this community," says one. "I'm really thankful that I'm part of a place that I can return to and still feel as if I belong there."

## The takeaway

The academic program at SCS is unquestionably top-tier, but for many students it's the school's close-knit community that's the defining element of their time there. This is a place that promotes girls' understanding of themselves by encouraging them to go just that little bit further—in the classroom, on the field or stage, in a leadership position, or even in a conversation.

“The environment nurtured a confidence in me by allowing me to feel a proud comfort with who I was,” says '85 graduate and principal Martha Perry. “I was able to be me. I continue to carry that confidence, which enables me to bring voice to my thoughts, convictions, and ideas. Everything we do at SCS is designed to create this same experience for current students.”

The strength of the school lies as much in providing strong academics as it does in creating a foundation for being resilient and responding productively to successes and challenges. “How we react and respond is a choice,” wrote Perry in a blog post during the COVID-19 pandemic. That includes meeting challenges with a sense of humour and a playful attitude. “I believe in happy endings. We will get there because we are tougher than we seem and think.”

The school is committed to delivering on its mission to develop exceptional women who are compassionate, curious thinkers and open to new experiences. “I'm really excited about our future,” says Perry. “We're already seeing the benefits of our focus on learning as a journey and a process, not a product. And this is just the beginning.”



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"The academic program at SCS is unquestionably top-tier, but for many students, it's the school's close-knit community that's the defining element of their time there."

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