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# Banbury Crossroads School

## The Our Kids Review



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## The Our Kids Review

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Photography by Lyle Aspinall for Our Kids Media

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ISBN 978-1-990397-20-2

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. La Citadelle International Academy of Arts & Science
23. Lakefield College School
24. Lynn-Rose School
25. Meadowridge School
26. Merrick Preparatory School
27. Metropolitan Preparatory Academy
28. Miss Edgar's & Miss Cramp's School
29. Niagara Christian Collegiate
30. Pickering College
31. Prestige School
32. Ridley College
33. Robert Land Academy
34. Rosseau Lake College
35. Royal Crown School
36. Royal St. George's College
37. St. Clement's School
38. St. John's-Kilmarnock School
39. St. Mildred's-Lightbourn School
40. Sunnybrook School
41. The Bishop Strachan School
42. The Clover School
43. The Country Day School
44. The Mabin School
45. The York School
46. Toronto Prep School
47. Trinity College School
48. Upper Canada College
49. Whytecliff Agile Learning Centres
50. Woodland Christian High School

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## **Details:**

# **Banbury Crossroads School**

**Location:** Calgary, Alberta

**Founded:** 1979

**Enrolment:** 150

**Grades:** JK - Gr. 12

**Gender:** Coed

**Living Arrangements:** Day

**Language of Instruction:** English

**Developmental Priorities:** Balanced

**Curriculum:** Progressive

**Curriculum Pace:** Student-paced

**Academic Culture:** Supportive

**Special Needs Support:** Withdrawal Assistance

**Gifted Learner Support:** Dedicated Gifted School



## Introduction

Banbury Crossroads School was founded by Diane Swiatek in 1979 with just two students and a dream. Her vision was to create a school where children could be themselves and learn in a way that best suited their needs. Located on the top floors of a former Canadian Forces Barracks at CFB Currie, now a heritage building, the school's unconventional setting has been a perfect fit for its unique, self-directed approach to education. The school has grown significantly from its humble beginnings, now welcoming more than 100 students from all backgrounds. Swiatek remained the head of the school to her last day, when she passed in the spring of 2023.

Banbury Crossroads School remains a family affair. Leading the school's operations today is Diane's son, Liam Cummings, who serves as the executive director. Cummings is deeply invested in carrying forward his mother's legacy and upholding her passion for personalized education. Alongside Cummings, Karen Harrison serves as the school's long-standing principal. As one of Diane's first teachers, Harrison brings extensive experience and a profound understanding of Banbury Crossroads' educational philosophy. Her dedication to the students and commitment to fostering a nurturing learning environment make her an invaluable and inspiring leader within the school's tight-knit community. The school's two vice-principals have each been with the school for more than 10 years, as well.

Despite its growth to over 100 students and the expansion of its teaching and leadership team, Banbury Crossroads has managed to maintain its comfortable atmosphere, which has always been a core feature of the school. The school's unwavering commitment to providing a personalized learning experience for each student remains at the forefront of its mission. No matter whether it was one or two early learners in Swiatek's living room or 100 students in a growing space with dozens of classrooms and offices and lockers, an intimate atmosphere has remained a core feature of Banbury Crossroads.

Several key elements set Banbury Crossroads apart from the rest: it spans all age ranges (from JK to Grade 12) and features multi-age classrooms; it offers very small class sizes where typically a classroom has a ratio of 1:8 (the highest they would ever go is 1:10); and it instructs using a self-directed, tutorial-style method that empowers students to make decisions and take ownership of their education. As they say, at Banbury Crossroads students "Choose to Succeed." Those who don't fit into the public system of mass education, or even into a more traditional independent school, will often find a home at Banbury Crossroads.

"What we're doing isn't for everyone, but it is excellent for the people who want specifically this," says Cummings, who also attended Banbury Crossroads as a student before building a career in the post-secondary sector in non-profit management and leadership. "It has for years felt like Calgary's best-kept secret. And I don't want it to be a secret!"

After over 40 years of operation and slow but steady growth, Banbury Crossroads is now at—true to its name—a crossroads. The school has taken the entire top floor of its current home in Currie Barracks, its home for the last 18 years and has expanded its student population to 100. The school plans to increase the student population to 150 in its current location and it's significantly increasing its after-school programs and extracurricular activities. The administration has already hired more teachers than it has ever had before, and it has increased their salaries to handle the additional workload.

But Banbury's moment of growth is occurring precisely when it needs to, according to Cummings—there is an increased demand on the independent system as a result of life after the pandemic, and Banbury Crossroads is particularly well-positioned to support students of any age who have struggled with either academics or mental health. The school's suitability in this regard comes because of its ability to draw upon a student's intrinsic motivation, to connect the school experience to the outside world, and to maintain a respectful and friendly atmosphere where students celebrate success and learn from mistakes.

"I don't think I would have been a teacher if I hadn't found [Banbury Crossroads], because what was going on in the public system was just not tasteful for me. And I think that anyone who's been here for a long time feels that way," says Principal Harrison, who started teaching phys-ed part-time for Swiatek in the 1990s. "I refuse to believe that there aren't 150 people out there who want a different style of education."

"It shakes the system up and makes us really look at ourselves as a school and adapt and change based on new students and new needs. It's never good to stay in the exact same place year after year after year," says Alanna Nagy, one of the school's vice-principals and teacher of social studies, health, and personal studies.





## The Basics

Banbury Crossroads School is located in building B1 in the Calgary neighbourhood Currie Barracks, a residential area that is a seven-minute drive southwest from downtown, right off Crowchild Trail. There is ample parking for parents and staff. There is also a busing program with two routes, one north-focused and the other south-focused. There are no official before- or after-school care options outside of the usual operating hours of 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., Monday to Friday, but there are a number of extracurricular clubs and activities run by teachers after school hours, available at a nominal cost. The school's administration has also been able to make some accommodations for families who are challenged with transportation and timing.

Classes themselves take place between 9 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. Monday to Thursday—on Fridays, students end class early, at 1:45 p.m. for secondary students and 2:30 p.m. for elementary students. For elementary students each morning begins with time to set their goals and core subject schedule for the day. The schedules are set around complementary courses like music or drama and a daily outside break (weather permitting). Secondary students arrange their core subject schedules on a weekly basis—again, arranged around complementary subjects like physical education and drama—and choose when to take their morning break. Secondary students also typically spend one day a week at their student internship.



Banbury Crossroads School is certified by the Association of Independent Schools & Colleges in Alberta and the Canadian Coalition of Self-Directed Learners, and it follows the Alberta Programs of Study. Banbury Crossroads is also one of the few schools in Canada to offer a self-directed program, let alone in a class size of 1:8. As a result, there are currently 21 teachers, plus the principal, Harrison, for a coeducational student population of 90–100 across JK to Grade 12, including local and international students. Boarding is not provided on campus and parents must arrange homestay accommodations for students if necessary. The school's goal is to increase the number of students to 150 within the next two years. There are also plans for the school to enter the process to become an IB World School by 2027, which, if successful, would make it one of the few self-directed IB World Schools anywhere.

The current space arranges students in classrooms according to the subject, instead of by grade. There are rooms for science, math, language arts, social studies, English, visual art, physical education, and drama/music, while the kindergarten ages have their own space. The school has recently expanded into larger spaces to increase storage, science, and creative facilities. There are no official playgrounds or outdoor facilities, though there are green spaces around the building used for recess as well as frequent field trips to satisfy physical education requirements. Nearby playgrounds are a 10-minute walk away. There is no cafeteria at the school, so students are required to bring lunches and snacks with them for the day, but there are several kitchens with microwaves and sinks to use. Banbury Crossroads has plans to expand their space in its current building over the next two years to add even more amenities. One of the first items on the administration's wish list is to add a gymnasium.

Tuition fees for domestic students are set at \$16,500 (Junior Kindergarten through Grade 1 students), \$17,500 (Grades 2 through 6), and \$18,500 (Grades 7 through 12). International students'

tuition fees are set at \$29,800 per year. There is ongoing enrolment in the school for domestic students, though most new students begin at the beginning of the fall term. No entrance exam is required, but parents and children who are interested in attending Banbury Crossroads begin with a few initial screening questions, followed by a conversation with the admissions team and a teacher and a two-day trial in the school (not available in the summer). The goal of this process is to ensure that the student is a good fit for the school and the school is a good fit for the student.

# Teaching And Learning Philosophy

## **Background and Self-Directed Learning**

Operating out of her apartment in Calgary, Alberta Diane Swiatek opened the Banbury Crossroads School with two elementary-aged students on November 1, 1979, shortly after it was registered as a non-profit organization. It was the first student-focused, self-directed learning private school in Calgary, and is the fourth-oldest private school in the city. Once enrolment reached 12 students, Banbury Crossroads phased out of a residential model and into more traditional classroom settings, often leased from public and independent schools, like Balmoral Hall School and Bridgeland School. It ventured into commercial spaces across the quadrants of Calgary before landing at its current location in 2005, where it plans to stay for the foreseeable future.

In developing the approach to her own school, Swiatek was highly influenced by the Summerhill School experiment, which was launched in England in 1921 by educator Alexander Sutherland Neill. One of the most famous schools in the world, it is democratically governed. At Summerhill School there is a guaranteed right for students to play and all lessons are optional. Banbury Crossroads School is based upon the concept of “freedom with responsibilities,” or as Swiatek often put it, “liberty.” This concept means that students are in control of when and what they study, but it doesn’t mean that adults aren’t there to reinforce understanding of the connection between choices and outcomes and to guide the decision-making

process. This approach necessitates a deep level of mutual respect and equality between each student as well as between students and staff. Banbury Crossroad's teachers and staff work closely with students to reinforce positive behaviour and decision-making skills, promoting a deep level of mutual respect and equality between each student and staff member. This unique approach to education fosters a sense of independence and self-reliance, while also providing a supportive and nurturing environment that enables students to reach their full potential.

“When we consider a child's natural interest in things, we begin to realize the dangers of both reward and punishment. Rewards and punishment tend to pressure a child into interest. But true interest is the life force of the whole personality, and such interest is completely spontaneous,” Neill has said.

Banbury Crossroads differs in a few significant aspects from Summerhill—it does not board students; in fact, it encourages families to continue the school's teachings at home; and it does require class attendance. Otherwise, Swiatek took to heart two fundamental lessons from the Summerhill School experiment: “One is that children have a right to be happy, and second, that children should have the right to determine the course of their own lives as long as they don't interfere with the rights of others,” she said. “I loved that.”

Swiatek took this notion even further by researching the history of mass, mandatory education—when teachers or private tutors were moved from small classrooms into large lecture halls to accommodate compulsory education for youth that was installed in Canada in the late 1800s. Suddenly, teachers had to devise lessons for tens of students at once. This resulted in a few familiar traits of the current public education system: grouping students by age, teaching an age group at the same speed, and defaulting to the lecture method.

“Often in the public system with a set schedule, you lose students moving too slowly or with academic challenges, but it also sets an artificial limit for students who are exceptionally good at,

or who love, a subject and want to go further,” Cummings told the *Calgary Herald*.

“This traditional way is way easier for teachers. But I can lecture brilliantly to a light post and there’s no learning that will happen. The learner has to be participating,” Swiatek said. “What I want them to do is to develop autonomy.... Young people often complain about being disempowered because they just do what people tell them. But the skills that we’re focusing on here are how to identify goals, manage their time, organize their space and materials, implement their plans, self-assess, and make decisions.”

While some may think that a student-paced approach will mean that less-favoured subjects will get ignored, it actually implies that the student needs to find the motivation to fuel their choices instead of having motivation forced upon them by a timetable. That could manifest in an interesting assignment, developing a focused interest, or even simply meeting curriculum requirements in order to advance to the next grade.

Rhiannon Boyd, a former student of Banbury Crossroads and now parent, spoke to us about her daughter Charlotte, three years into her time at the school. “It’s been just a world of change for her. It made more sense to her because she was like, ‘Well, I don’t want to read this book. I want to read this book.’ And they’re like, ‘Okay, read that book and then tell us all about it.’”

Though a self-directed approach often reveals improvements in attitude and academic progress in the short term, the benefits of self-directed learning are sometimes most evident once students make the jump from high school to university, as Banbury Crossroads alumni Thomas Kaune discovered. He found that internal motivation in the student becomes paramount. “When I went into university, I felt very well prepared.... This process helped me to mature a lot in a very short period of time. I learned quickly that people say that ‘In university, nobody cares.’ You still pay for [university]. If you show up, that’s good for you. If you don’t show up, they don’t care,” he says.





Another alumnus, Erik Olsen, felt the impact of Banbury Crossroads in university as well because he was already accustomed to finding the right motivation, creating a plan to get to his destination, and seeing it through as quickly as he could.

“When I was supposed to be in Grade 3, I was already doing everything in Grade 4... That segued to graduating at 16 because I was a full year ahead,” he says. “[In university] I was really interested in genetics, and I remember looking at the calendar and the course descriptions, finding this one that I really wanted to take, and then I mapped backwards how to get there, and I just went and did it.”

At Banbury Crossroads, decision-making skills start to build as early as Junior Kindergarten. “It might be challenging, especially for a three- to five-year-old, to make a choice. But what I focus on is exploring the choices and then exploring what happens after the choice,” says Sydney Green, the Junior Kindergarten teacher. “If a kid says, ‘I’m going to eat everything’ as soon as he gets here, I won’t say ‘No,’ but, ‘Let’s be mindful of how hungry we might be later.’ Or, ‘Later, when you have no food for lunch, just remember the choice that you made now.’”

In line with a student-paced and tutorial style of instruction is the effort to remove any kind of academic competition between students: that’s why there are multi-age classrooms, no grades on report cards until Grade 9, and no external rewards for finishing an assignment, activity, or subject grade level.

“We don’t give them candy or stickers for doing well. We try to make them internalize their achievement and celebrate that. ... I have a ‘That was easy!’ button; whenever someone finishes a unit they get to press it and we dance as a group and everyone celebrates each other,” says Doan Tran, an elementary math teacher and one of two vice-principals at Banbury Crossroads.

Some aspects of self-directed learning may still seem avant-garde or experimental 100 years after Neill’s Summerhill School opened, but they happen every day at Banbury Crossroads, a school built on the mission of finding a better way to teach students at any



age. Kaune agrees with that mission. “[There’s] not much from 200 years ago we still apply today,” he says. “So, I don’t know why we still hang on to this idea of factory education [elsewhere].”

### **Small Class Sizes**

Another feature key to the identity of Banbury Crossroads, even as it positions itself to grow into its next phase, is the small class size and the ratio of eight students to every teacher. An Alberta Teachers’ Association study has found that “classes of fewer than 17 students to one teacher are most effective” and “students in smaller classes outperform their peers in larger classroom settings.” While the public system often contains classes of 30 or more, and many other private schools still maintain classes with more than 20 students, Banbury Crossroads’ class sizes stand out as uniquely low.

At Banbury Crossroads, an 8:1 ratio has the following results:

### **Tailored Teaching**

Individualized support from teachers has been crucial to Banbury Crossroads’ success with the self-directed learning approach. While the student is empowered to take ownership of their education, they are guided every step of the way by invested, passionate teachers who have the energy, time, and attention to give them.

Ruhi Jaswal, a Grade 10 student who recently joined Banbury Crossroads says, “I’m not the best at science. And what’s really nice about the school is it’s like almost a one-on-one with your teacher. I’m actually understanding the material.” In less than a year, her grades in science improved by around 30 per cent. “If you have a problem, you can find one of your teachers and they will talk to you. They’ll spend a whole hour with you if they need to. They have the time.”

Tran says, “I really do get to know the students, we do connect on a different level, so I can help them the way they need to be helped. Because every child is different, they learn differently. When it’s smaller, you can see that. And if you need some gap teaching, then we do that as well.”

Green feels the same way about her three-to-five-year-old students. “I never have a set lesson plan because I want to make sure that whatever I’m doing is catering to their needs at the time. So, if it’s a day where everyone is having a hard time regulating, they’re having a hard time sitting down, I’m not going to sit down with them and do a lesson because that’s going to be really hard and they’re not going to get everything that I want them to get out of it.”

### **Closer Student-Teacher Relationships**

“I have children who aren’t even in my class who come to me asking me for advice, or whatever. And it’s really nice because you just get to know everybody,” Green says.

Small class sizes give teachers a closer perspective on the educational requirements of their students, and students benefit from closer personal relationships. At a time when a major motivating factor for families looking for alternative schools revolves around mental health and anxiety, having open and communicative relationships between teachers and students is more important than ever. In fact, in addition to the natural connection that arises from having low class sizes, Banbury Crossroads implemented a program that pairs students with a “mentor teacher”—someone who reliably checks in with their students in the morning to see how their schedule, schoolwork, and progress are going, but also to see how they’re doing physically and mentally.

“Because the school is so small, we get to have that one-on-one time with the teachers, and we get to have those deep conversations with them,” says Grade 9 student Hans Lau, an international student from Hong Kong. “Before I came to Banbury, it was very difficult for me to see how I acted around people and see how I behaved. But once I started talking to my mentor teacher about this kind of stuff, she helped me a lot with my mental health, my self-reflection and all. And I think she helped me to become a better person, especially a better friend.”

Jaswal feels similarly about her ability to be comfortable with the adults at Banbury Crossroads. “You get more personal with them, and it’s more of friends than teachers.”

This level of involvement in student lives is not something that every school can achieve—it takes a certain, inherent commitment when a teacher accepts a position at Banbury.

“The teachers have to be ready to work with individuals all day long,” said Swiatek. “And it’s interesting, when I’ve taken [prospective families] around and we’re talking to the teachers, I’ve had some say the same thing I used to say, which is, ‘I want to get around to every single student every single day.’”

And when relationships like these are formed, they tend to extend beyond Banbury Crossroads as well. Tran’s own children attended the school for a time, but once they left for the larger social environment of a public school, she noticed their attitudes toward teachers had changed. “Because they have such a great relationship with the teachers here, when they got to a new school, they were not afraid of [their teachers]. If they have questions, they’re always asking and advocating for their learning as well. It was really interesting to see that as a parent as well, because my son’s like, ‘Yeah, I didn’t have enough time to do this in class, so I’m going to ask my teacher for an extension,’” she says.

### **Closer Supervision and Conflict Resolution**

Although anyone who has or is currently associated with Banbury Crossroads notes its excellent track record in reducing bullying and intersocial conflicts between students, even the best school can’t fully eliminate that problem. But when teachers are better able to monitor what is going on inside their classroom, they’re not only able to closely assist with academic challenges, but social ones as well. It’s something that the school administration takes very seriously, as many of their students come to the school looking for an environment free from as many social stresses as possible due to anxiety or other challenges such as bullying.





So, when issues do arise, teachers are able to notice and act quickly. While any type of bullying or retaliation isn't tolerated, administration follows a P.E.T. (Parent Effectiveness Training) problem solving approach and draws from their Conflict Resolution Policy to address the issue with understanding and respect on both sides. "It's about active listening. So, we're acknowledging the feeling, and then allowing everyone in the meeting to have a say as to what went on. Everyone has their own perspectives," says Harrison.

Even the youngest students at the school start to grasp the concept of working through issues with their classmates when their teacher is able to notice challenges before they happen. "I find that the challenging behaviours are minimal in my class. Because every time a child is not regulated or they're having a challenging day or I can tell that they need something, I can offer my guidance ASAP, or I can problem solve with them, or if there's a conflict happening between two people, I can look right away and go to it," says Green. "And because there's only four of them, they are so close, they're like brothers and sisters. It's so cool. Those four people are the ones that you're always problem solving with, you're negotiating, you're figuring out how sharing works, how voting works."

### **Happier Teachers**

It's not only students who benefit from smaller class sizes; it has a tangible impact on the teachers' quality of life as well. But, then again, happy teachers make happier students.

"The first thing that caught my eye [about Banbury] was the small class sizes, because I was coming from traditional childcare centres where the ratios are pretty high, especially when you're in an environment with three-to-five-year-olds," says Green. "The teacher mood level always affects the children. I'll find that even on a day that's challenging for me, I'll be frustrated in traffic for example, I come in and then throughout the day, the kids are frustrated with each other. I'm like, okay, I need to keep myself

in check here. But in in an environment of 20 kids, it's really hard to not be anxious or to be on a high nervousness level every day.”

At Banbury Crossroads, small class sizes are its calling card, and the impact of having such intimate dynamics ripples throughout the entire institution: in its staff, its policies, its culture, its alumni, its student families, and its day-to-day operations. As Kaune puts it, “It doesn’t mean that a positive outcome is guaranteed, but what does guarantee is that you’re not just a number.”

### **Multi-Age Classrooms**

Parents who are knowledgeable of alternative approaches to education may be familiar with the concept of grouping children of different ages in the same classroom; it’s a feature of the Montessori method, and it even occurs in some public schools when two grades in a course merge together. At Banbury Crossroads, students are grouped in classes across larger age ranges: Grades 7 to 12, Grades 2 to 6, and from Junior Kindergarten to Grade 1. But the size of the school means that students are in constant contact with those of all ages.

“This is not unique in the world at large—indeed, this describes the world at large—however, it is certainly unique in schools. This multi-aged approach fosters peer learning and trust and comfort between people of various ages. As well, it does not socially penalize those students who are working either ahead of or behind their peers,” Swiatek wrote for *Our Kids*. “You are out in university where there’s people of all different ages, you’re out in the workplace and your boss might be younger than you for all you know. So it’s very good for young people to learn they can trust older people. And it’s very good for older people to learn they’d better be trustworthy,” she said.

Not only do multi-age groups better reflect the real world, as Swiatek noted, they remove the social penalties of either advancing quickly or taking a slower pace to one’s studies, because the overlap in subject matter softens the parameters of what “success” or “progress” looks like.

In fact, older students often step into the role of tutor. “Let’s say I have a friend in Grade 7, and he needs help with his math that I’ve already done. I can help him with that. And if there’s someone in Grade 11, they can help me with mine,” says Jaswal.

Last year’s annual report from Banbury Crossroads remarked on a new program that capitalized on this multi-age relationship between older and younger students: last year, they implemented a new mentor program between ESL students of different ages. It worked so well that the school is expanding the program beyond ESL classes this year.

But perhaps the most important impact of having a school culture steeped in social mixing of all students is the camaraderie that is built between students. Ultimately, it serves Banbury Crossroads’ guiding trait of providing a warm, welcoming, accepting atmosphere.

“I’ve been pretty shocked to see how very different grades, like from Grade 12 to Grade 7, are able to become friends. Because in my old school, it was very rare to do that,” says Lau.



## School Culture

The Banbury Crossroads printed brochure states: “One of our most outstanding attributes is that we exert tremendous energy to develop effective social skills and a harmonious environment.... Self-responsibility, autonomy, and resiliency are necessary for personal emotional health, and for providing citizens with the means to create a healthy democracy.” As previously explored, its central attributes—self-directed learning, small class sizes, and multi-age classrooms—directly contribute to the value of harmony as demonstrated in all the school’s operations. And the goal of this carefully crafted culture is not only to create happy students in the present, but future satisfied and productive adults.

From its original conception, Swiatek underscored “mutual respect” as the underlying principle at Banbury Crossroads: between teachers and students, between staff and parents, and between students and their peers. It’s the foundation of the P.E.T. approach to conflict resolution and teaches students “their right to determine the course of their own lives, as long as they respect the rights of others to do the same.”

“I’ve been in a lot of schools. I have never felt the atmosphere that happens here,” said Swiatek. “What I want here is for the kids to have a voice and for people to listen to them, and for them to listen to others. Every single child here is important. They’re most important in the world to their parents, but everybody else is important, too. And they have to learn that.”

Parent Rhiannon Boyd says, “It’s neat because she can be one of the weird kids, or she can be one of the smart kids, or she can be one of the whatever. There are no bullies, there are no cliques. It’s a unique experience.” Two more parents, Sol and Carol Mumey, who had two daughters attend Banbury Crossroads, add that even when conflicts do arise—as they inevitably do when people of any age work closely together—teachers are more on top of resolving them quickly. They also said that the “fun and very relaxed” atmosphere was a selling feature for their daughters.

That ethos of mutual respect also manifests in the way staff run the school administratively. “People in our work environment, I find they model those same skills, so we are able to have constructive and crucial conversations that need to happen in a really respectful way,” says Trudie Douglas, school registrar, a new role implemented as the school prepares to grow.

The overall culture of Banbury Crossroads, in addition to its unique academic and instruction style, contributes to its appeal to students who have not succeeded in other traditional educational settings, and for students who were successful but wanted more freedom or opportunities for self-expression.

“Students that just don’t quite fit the mould tend to do really well here because their peers are quite accepting,” says Cummings. Hand-in-hand with that acceptance is a deep, schoolwide understanding of mental health issues, another common reason certain students are drawn to the school, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and its period of isolation at a critical time in a student’s development.

“Everyone is really nice. Most people can even tell if you’re having an off day. They’ll ask you, and be like, ‘Are you okay? We probably shouldn’t bug them too much,’” says Jaswol. Her classmate Cole Jones, who began Banbury in Grade 6 and is now in Grade 7, agrees. “2020 wasn’t the best year for anyone, but essentially, I was just pretty depressed. And my mom told me that there was a school I could go to that would help focus on my mental health. If

I wasn't going to make friends, I didn't know what I was going to do. So, thank God, I actually managed to make friends," he says. "As I started last year, I was definitely sort of childish, but I had friends and teachers to help improve myself." Jones specifically cites the mentor-teacher policy at Banbury as helping him address and overcome his mental health challenges.

"Mentors basically help keep [students] on track in their school, facilitate conversations between peers if there's any conflicts, and most importantly, have mental health check-ins. It's a real conversation, especially post-COVID. We have a lot of students that struggle with trusting people and talking to people, and having that mentor teacher there, to have someone to talk to and make sure everything's okay, really helps them a lot," says Nagy.

Nagy adds that there are many policies in place at Banbury Crossroads to create a culture that acknowledges and celebrates all aspects of a student, not specifically their academic achievement. For example, the annual Grad Day picnic (a favourite tradition for both student body and teachers) brings the whole school together at the end of the year to celebrate the graduating students. It also gives each student a moment to shine with a creative award named specifically for each individual.

"They're fun, playful things like Most Sarcastic or something like that, just so students know that we appreciate every aspect of their personality. It's not just about academics, we have those two things combined," she says.

"I think what I like most about Banbury is how it's a lot less stressful. I think an issue with schools today is that I think it brings a lot of stress to students with academics, grades, and test scores. [At Banbury] it's more about seeing what you are best at, seeing what talents you have, and seeing how unique you are in the school. They don't really try and push you to becoming a straight A student," says Lau.

## **Field Trips and Real-World Connections**

Inside the school's walls, Harrison and her team go to great lengths to create a warm, comfortable atmosphere. To Swiatek, it was equally as important to complement that environment with strong connections to the real world. "If kids don't have real-life learning it makes me wonder what we're doing. Because the whole point of school is to teach kids about the world outside. So why do we put them in four walls and block up the windows in many cases?" she said.

The Banbury Crossroads website goes deeper:

"Simply spoken, parents need assistance from teachers in helping young people to discover information about the complex world they live in. Utilizing a parent-teacher partnership is the most effective way to help youth gain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that would allow them to participate in a contributive way to their culture and the world at large," it says.

When students reach the later years of high school, they typically have the opportunity to engage in internships with local organizations and industries for valuable career experience. But the connection between lessons and the real world begins in the earliest grades, as Tran explains in her elementary math classes.

"I do community walks, looking for math in the community. One time we were looking at houses for patterns. The Grade 5s last year, we were learning about angles and they were able to connect it to their science projects with ramps and levers and all that. We were asking 'Why is this slope higher?' Or 'Why do [builders] make it the way they do?' It's really interesting to see them make that connection right into the real world," she says.

It's due to the small class sizes of Banbury Crossroads that such lessons can take place in the school's immediate surrounding area. But classes also frequently venture farther away, as field trips are a crucial element to the school's academic plan. In some cases, they are crucial: without a gymnasium or science lab of their own, physical education and science classes often require trips to nearby facilities to execute the Alberta provincial curriculum.

In the last school year, students went on field trips to places like Bragg Creek Provincial Park and Ptarmigan Cirque, the Military Museum, the Telus Spark science centre, the Calgary Zoo, the Tsuut'ina Museum, theatres and art galleries, the Rothney Astrophysical Observatory, and facilities for wall climbing, frisbee golf, kickboxing, trampolining, indoor ice skating, curling, gymnastics, dance, swimming, and archery. And they also featured guest speakers like Mayor Jyoti Gondek and the school's city counsellor, a Ukrainian refugee, as well as professionals in the local journalism industry.





## Student Population

According to the school's latest annual report, there are four types of students at Banbury Crossroads: those who come at an early age and remain, those who come after attending school elsewhere, those who come after or in combination with homeschooling, and those who come from foreign countries (international students make up 20%-50% of the total student population). Domestic students tend to come to Banbury Crossroads from across the city; families tend to choose the school for its extremely unique traits, not for its geographic location or convenience, though it is centrally located.

Banbury Crossroads School's wide range of ages, from JK to Grade 12, means that there is no typical student profile. In fact, the main mission of Banbury Crossroads is to appeal to a child on their own terms, so a "typical" student is antithetical to its core operations. Nevertheless, a successful student at Banbury Crossroads will be independent and naturally interested in learning.

"We trust that they're already motivated. That's what the human animal is born as. Someone who wants to master their environment," said Swiatek. Or, as Harrison puts it, "They need to be interested in learning and can't have been totally jaded by the whole thing."

That isn't an exaggeration; Banbury staff are sympathetic to students who are looking for alternative schools after unsuccessful, often stressful periods in other institutions with rigid school years and age-based classrooms (and the social penalties of "not keeping



up” that go along with that). “On average, about half of our population have diagnoses and/or challenges that make completing a grade in 10 months difficult, and in some cases not recommended by psychologists,” says Banbury’s 2021–22 annual report. The other half of students do not have such challenges, and in fact are usually bright or gifted, but have likewise struggled with other factors in the traditional system.

“If they’re young, their parents know they’re going to read early and they don’t want them to be held back,” said Swiatek. “Or they’re active and their parents know they won’t want to sit still. Or parents react to their unhappiness in school because they’re bright and got turned off. Or they’re power resistant because gifted kids have an agenda of their own.”

As a result, Banbury Crossroads teaches gifted and struggling learners alike, as well as students who are coded; admissions tries to maintain a balance between these students so the school can help as many deserving kids as possible while ensuring resources aren’t overly strained and less needy students receive ample attention as well.

Students who come from homeschooled environments are often looking for a steppingstone in socialization opportunities that isn’t as daunting as a larger independent or public school. Conversely, students who attend Banbury for their younger years sometimes desire more socialization at a larger school.

According to the school’s registrar, Trudie Douglas, international student registration is an area that could grow in the student makeup of Banbury Crossroads due to provincial regulation changes. Though students are accepted from around the world, they often come from China, so the school has added two teachers who are fluent in Mandarin. And the diversity of Calgary is often represented in the domestic student body as well, so the school offers international students a true experience of Canadian multiculturalism.

“This school is very diverse. There are a lot of different cultures and backgrounds, and that’s what I like about Banbury too,” says Lau. “I think they’ve taught me a lot more about the Canadian

lifestyle. It's very different from Hong Kong, obviously, and I think they help me become more accustomed to it and understand it."

Overall enrolment remained steady in the years leading up to the pandemic, but in the past two years the school saw a large increase in the student population and now has around 100 students enrolled. While most new students learn about Banbury Crossroads by word of mouth, the increase in enrolment is connected to more recent efforts to increase Banbury's public awareness as well as parental concern following the pandemic.

"A lot of parents are realizing now where kids are struggling because they got to see it first-hand at home. Here they know that [students] have that one-on-one relationship and basically have tutors for their kids in school every single day. That's a huge drive for parents, especially for our older students, who are missing skills because it was taught online," says Nagy, who has seen significant growth in both elementary and high school grades during her time at the school.

Because of its nature, there is rarely a student that wouldn't succeed at Banbury Crossroads, but Harrison admits that students are a better fit at the school when they are independent in their learning, and when they are at least moderately well-adjusted socially, with few behavioural issues.

"Students stand out like a sore thumb. In big schools, they can hide, but they can't hide here," she says. "There are designated schools for disabilities, so they're going to give you a lot more support. And even in some public schools, they have way more aides or psychologists than we do."

Still, students can learn how to manage emotional and behavioural challenges through the school's environment, like with Grade 5 student Aulie Wright-Maley, who joined the school in Grade 1 after his autism resulted in struggles in his previous school. "I was really worried and did not want to leave my other school. I thought it would be worse, but it turned out to be better," he says. "I like it because it really reduces stress for me ... I

don't really lose my temper anymore." Kids like Wright-Maley and Jones, who admits he "has been different [his] whole life," appreciate the freedom, understanding, and trust they receive from the school's administration.

While enrolment increased over the past two years, Cummings is hoping to reach 150 students next school year, and 300 in the next ten years, though "the challenge is that if we grow too fast, it's imperative that we don't lose the spirit of what we're doing."





## Academics

Banbury Crossroads School follows the Alberta Programs of Study as its core curriculum, though teachers can tweak, slow, or advance a student's lessons as they see fit in the student-paced, tutorial-style instruction method employed at the school. The school also completes required standardized testing—though due to the school's size, the average result is often skewed by the individual students in a grade as opposed to the success or failure of the instruction at the school.

More often, teachers choose to assign projects or assessments that are tailored to a student's strengths or interests: they can choose to complete an essay through writing, video, or presentation, for example. Teachers are also compelled to rethink projects or lessons each year in a multi-age classroom; when students return to the same teacher year after year, they can't do the same assignments each time. Staff admit that it's a valued exercise in creativity.

In fact, testing and grades do not resemble the traditional model until Grade 9, which is when university applications begin to track a student's academic record. Before Grade 9, assignments, tests, and report cards at Banbury Crossroads refrain from giving numbered or lettered grades. Feedback is instead conveyed through student-teacher instruction and report cards featuring a closely detailed summary of a student's experience at the school from a holistic perspective.

“I think it's better for students to see what they can work on rather than attaching a number to it. It's much more valuable to their growth rather than just seeing that number on a report card.

So you get a four, what does that mean? It gives the teachers much more flexibility in showing students what they need to work on. But also, during report cards, parents have a very good idea where their students stand or where their child stands, which really helps them as well,” says Nagy.

In her math class, Tran will occasionally assign a test to her students, “but just so that they have a concept of what test writing is about.... They always want a mark, so I do write the marks down, but it’s not on their report card. I tell them, ‘This is for you.’ But then I’ll sit down and say, ‘Okay, so you still need to work on this,’ and I’ll probably go back and give them more questions based on what their needs or weaknesses are,” she says. In this way, exams and assignments serve more as teaching tools rather than merely to grade performance.

The lack of emphasis on grades at Banbury Crossroads, just like its multi-age classroom approach, goes to great lengths to remove the usually socially fraught dynamic of academic competition among classmates. Instead, teachers use a student’s internal benchmarks to dictate when it’s time to move on to the next level of a subject. This is what the school refers to as “teaching to mastery,” or as Tran puts it, “Everyone has their capabilities, right? So, we try to teach them to the best of their ability.”

Due to this philosophy of teaching to mastery, the priority in Banbury Crossroads academics is to improve skills based on the student’s progress, not on arbitrary timelines set by the school district. In the end, particularly in high school grades, there are clear benefits.

“If it takes them longer, okay, but then they still leave with excellent grades. We don’t tend to graduate students with 60% averages,” says Cummings. “We will bring students in who are promising and a good fit even if they have a 60. And then they might leave with an 80.”

Also, according to Cummings, students who are applying to post-secondary institutions upon high school graduation tend to

be accepted into their top choice. Furthermore, the independence and emotional maturity built by Banbury Crossroads' philosophy not only gets students accepted into post-secondary school but sets them up for success once they enter it.

In some cases, teachers go above and beyond the call of duty to ensure students are meeting their full potential. "They said, 'Hey, why don't you think about university?' It never crossed my mind, that was never even on my radar that I would consider going to university here," says Kaune, who assumed he would eventually go back to Germany after his time at Banbury Crossroads and playing hockey in Canada. "I had an opportunity to write the English Proficiency Test for the University of Calgary, which Diane suggested, and she actually took the time to drive me down there and support me getting through the process. And so I wrote that exam at that time and got very positive results, which allowed me then to apply to the U of C as an international student." Kaune, now a citizen, is still in Calgary with his family today.

At Banbury Crossroads, academics are not the only factor in determining a child's progress or well-being, but that doesn't mean that the school isn't confident in its academic rigour. With a strong track record of shepherding students through the Alberta curriculum and into post-secondary schools, Cummings is looking at adding the International Baccalaureate program to the Banbury Crossroads' academic offerings by 2027. To his knowledge, this would make Banbury Crossroads one of the first IB schools with self-directed learning as well as low class sizes.



## Administration

Banbury Crossroads School's unique position as a small school with close relationships with students makes it an attractive place for teachers. What drives teachers to work at Banbury Crossroads is a passion for the school's mission and to improve the lives of its students, and oftentimes teachers stay at Banbury for most of their careers. This is evident in Tran, Nagy, and Harrison themselves—they've each remained at Banbury Crossroads though it was their first or second position out of teacher's college.

The school has recently hired more teachers to bring the current staff to its highest level in the school's history. This is being done as the school readies itself to grow over the next several years and more demands come from an increase in students to teach, more parent communications, and a significant rise from six to about 25 extra-curricular activities and clubs that are planned for the next school year. The school also hopes to restart their internship program for high school students, which was paused during the pandemic.

"It's a very dynamic environment in terms of what we can do. I like this job because there's a small group of us in administration, and as long as the six or seven of us agree to change something, we can change it by next Monday," says Douglas. "In some of these larger organizations, you put in a proposal, then you give them a needs analysis, and then you give them a financial analysis. By the time you get something done, the need is gone. So, we can be extremely responsive here to the parents' needs and the students'."

The teachers at Banbury Crossroads also practice with each other what they model for their students: mentorship, collaboration, and teamwork is central to the staff dynamic. Particularly for a new teacher like Green, that support from her colleagues has been instrumental to her success and satisfaction with her job. “We’re all so passionate about making this work as well as we possibly can. As a first-year teacher here, because of that network that’s always there, I have no worry that I can do my job, ever. And I always have mentors. Diane is huge in that she’ll check in with all the teachers and make sure that we’re doing the best job that we can, and all the other teachers are just so nice,” she says.

## Parents and Alumni

At Banbury Crossroads, students are more than a number or a grade. As a result, so are their parents. With a school this small and a staff so dedicated, parents are partners in their children's education when they join the Banbury community.

Teachers have an open-door policy when parents have a question or concern, and they're trained to apply the same P.E.T. strategy (which emphasizes understanding and mutual respect) to resolving issues with parents. In general, parents feel very confident in having teachers immediately respond to issues that arise during the year.

In fact, some parents grow so close to the school that the family atmosphere extends to them as well, like Rhiannon Boyd, who completed eight years at Banbury Crossroads as a student from the age of three years old (she was one of Swiatek's first students in her living room). Now that her daughter attends the school, she knows first-hand that "the premise has not changed, it has been about independent, autonomous learning from the beginning."

In Boyd's case, she has received similar support from Banbury staff as a parent as her daughter does as a student. After Boyd's father passed away, she began struggling with pickup and drop-off due to her work schedule and drive times. "They're like, okay, let's set you up with a partial at-home curriculum," she says. "Diane and Karen have made every single effort possible for me to be able to keep Charlotte going to Banbury. They go over and above to make it so that your child can be successful."

For Carol and Sol Mumey, they didn't expect to send either of their daughters to a private school, but their eldest daughter Julia began having issues and refusing to attend her public school. An assessment diagnosed her as gifted as well as anxious in social situations, a combination that's not uncommon. "She coded both ways and the [former] school, they said they were going to help us, and I guess they tried, but it just wasn't working out," says Carol Mumey. Banbury provided the right environment to access her motivation to learn again. "Gifted kids, it's wonderful that they're smart, but on the other hand, they notice things before they maybe should and then they get worried about it. It wasn't that she never loved learning, she has social anxiety. She's very introverted, but she has great social skills." A positive experience with their eldest daughter at Banbury Crossroads eventually led to their youngest joining the school as well. Now at the University of Calgary, they're both continuing their studies.

A sticking point between parents and school administration over the next few years will undoubtedly be tuition fees. Until recently, Banbury Crossroads was one of the cheapest independent school options in Calgary that wasn't faith-based. That is no longer the case as the tuition has increased to almost \$19,000 for domestic students. But parents should keep in mind that this increase in tuition is also paying for the rise in clubs and extracurricular programs for Banbury Crossroads students, raises for teaching staff, and contributions to the planned expansion of the grounds. Given that there are a number of other schools in the Calgary area charging thousands more for class sizes sometimes over 20:1, Banbury Crossroads represents a good value, though its facilities don't yet match the offerings found in larger, more expensive schools.

To Douglas, who is both new to the private education sector as well as to Banbury Crossroads in particular, tuition is still seen as a significant mental barrier to parents, but one that is changing as the demand for individualized attention grows and bigger cracks appear in the public system. "I think as people realize what

it's about and that it is affordable, potentially, for families, I think a lot more people will go this route," she says.

## The Takeaway

After over 44 years of operation and slow and steady growth, very little has changed about Banbury Crossroads School's guiding philosophy, academic approach, and cultural mission. And that is largely due to founder Diane Swiatek and the vision she left behind, actively carried out by the school's current leadership.

Shortly before Diane's passing in spring of 2023, Cummings said, "She's been here 43 years. She's 74 now and still loves coming in every day. And I think that she will probably be tootling around the halls in some capacity as long as she wants to be here." She did, in fact, come in every day until her last.

As the executive director of the school, Cummings is levelling up Banbury Crossroads to continue to appeal to families with higher expectations of what a private school experience could offer in addition to the close care and attention that is central to Banbury's mission. Throughout the "growing pains" that the school and administration may feel, the focus will remain on keeping Banbury Crossroads true to itself, according to Harrison and other staff members.

"We are the only one that's small, we're the only one that's private, we're the only one that's self-directed, and we're the only one that goes from Junior Kindergarten to Grade 12," said Swiatek about what makes Banbury Crossroads unique. "I want this school to go on beyond me simply because I want kids to have this choice. I want them to not have to go to a traditional classroom." This mission remains central to the operating philosophy of the staff at the school.

The formula works as it is, but there is undoubtedly room to grow and improve: in its teacher salaries, in its offerings of typical school features like aftercare, its activities and clubs, and its academic advantages with the potential addition of the IB program, and particularly in its building facilities. As long as the school can maintain the teacher-to-student ratio and continue to prioritize developing each distinctive student on their own terms, those changes may not be as dramatic to Banbury Crossroads as they may seem. And as a potential result of a growing student base at the school, perhaps the philosophy of self-directed learning, multi-age classrooms, and 8:1 teacher to student ratios won't be such a novel approach in the future. "I really wish a lot more people knew about the school so then this kind of way of learning can expand to across the country," says 14-year-old Lau.







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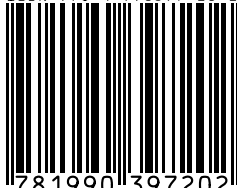
### FROM THE REVIEW:

“Despite its growth to over 100 students and the expansion of its teaching and leadership team, Banbury Crossroads has managed to maintain its comfortable atmosphere, which has always been a core feature of the school.”

“In line with a student-paced and tutorial style of instruction is the effort to remove any kind of academic competition between students: that’s why there are multi-age classrooms, no grades on report cards until Grade 9, and no external rewards for finishing an assignment, activity, or subject grade level.”

US: \$8.50 CAN: \$11.50

ISBN 978-1-990397-20-2



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