

OUR KIDS

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PRIVATE SCHOOL REVIEWS

Hillfield Strathallan College

The Our Kids Review

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Strathallan College

Written by Hailey Eisen

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:

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| 4. Appleby College | 30. Miss Edgar's & Miss Cramp's School |
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| 18. Havergal College | 44. Sunnybrook School |
| 19. Hillfield Strathallan College | 45. The Bishop Strachan School |
| 20. Holy Name of Mary College School | 46. The Clover School |
| 21. Hudson College | 47. The Country Day School |
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Details: Hillfield Strathallan College

Academic. Personalized. Engaging.

Location: Hamilton, Ontario

Founded: 1901

Enrolment: 1,285

Grades: Nursery/Toddler – Gr. 12

Gender: Coed

Living Arrangements: Day

Language of Instruction: English

School Focus: Academic

Developmental Priorities: Intellectual

Curriculum: Traditional & Montessori

Curriculum Pace: Standard-enriched

Academic Culture: Rigorous



Introduction

“I’m a lifer.” This is something you’ll hear quite often when speaking with Hillfield Strathallan College (HSC) staff and students. By HSC’s definition, a “lifer” is someone who starts at the school as a toddler and graduates at the end of Grade 12. According to the admissions team, about 20% of the Senior School graduating class each year will fall into this category. “These kids join us when they’re as young as 18 months in either our Montessori or Junior School and stay for their entire academic career,” says Head of School Marc Ayotte. “There are a lot of life changes that happen during these years and it’s wonderful to watch our students grow and evolve during their time here.”

Ayotte’s own two children graduated from the College not long ago, and like the head of school, many of the College’s staff and teachers send their own kids to HSC. “I joined this school 14 years ago when my son and daughter were in Grades 1 and 3, and part of the magic for me was knowing they’d be able to be here with me all the way through high school,” says Ayotte. “This is the most student-focused school I’ve ever been part of. My kids are both very different and they were each respected for who they are as people and as learners.”

The sense of community created by HSC staff with a focus on making sure every student feels seen, respected, and valued is what the College prides itself on. It’s why former students return to work and volunteer here after graduating and alumni send their own kids.

When we visit the Hamilton, Ontario school on a cold fall day, the warmth of family is palpable in the halls and classrooms of each of the schools that inhabit HSC’s extensive campus. “My dad taught here, now I’m working here, and my daughter is in the Montessori School,” says Carrie Annable, chair of academic strategy. “It’s not as unusual as you might think. I teach the kids of many HSC alumni. People feel a connection to the College’s values, and they want their own children to be part of the community that they grew up in.”

But many HSC students also join at various entry points throughout their educational journey, either during their junior, middle, or high school years. The College has an excellent reputation in the region and just like those who grew up at HSC, new students describe being welcomed and embraced by the community, no matter when they join.

Abdul is a Grade 10 student who came to HSC in Grade 9 from a private school in Oakville. “I really like that HSC is four schools in one and that we get to work with younger kids and all gather together for Chapel as a whole school,” he says. “At my old school there were 30 kids in each grade and here there are at least 100. I’ve made so many friends in my grade and from different grades as well and have had the chance to learn from so many types of people.” Abdul is an active member of the Black Students Association, which he says has helped him build a community of students who understand his experiences. “It’s nice knowing there are people like me at the school. Growing up, I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many Black-identifying people. It’s really helped me grow as a person and made it easier to make friends.”

HSC is committed to providing a rigorous academic environment where learning is engaging and challenging, while also upholding this rich culture of connection. “As teachers we want the kids to feel like they belong here,” says Senior School French and Spanish teacher Antheia Cadette-Blasse. “We try our best to make them feel welcome and loved, and that we care about their education and about them as individuals.”

HSC is made up of four schools and each has its own unique character. Unlike most independent schools, parents have the option of choosing between an accredited Montessori School or the adaptive programming of the Junior School, both of which accommodate students until Grade 4. Middle School brings students together for a rigorous and project-based program that spans four years before feeding into the Senior School.

During our tour, we join the students and staff in Lawson Hall for a delicious, freshly prepared lunch. The menu includes hot and

cold items, of which there are a variety of choices, and the space is bustling with energy as staff and students dine alongside one another. It’s no wonder that many of the little ones tell us that lunch is one of their favourite parts of the day. This is not your typical school cafeteria. “The lunch program is especially great,” says Wendy Lam, HSC parent and vice-chair of the College’s Parents’ Guild. “They have a broad international menu, and the Head Chef makes sure there’s lots of food for all kids to eat no matter their dietary restrictions. In fact, when we are volunteering at the school, the moms will often eat in Lawson Hall, we love it.” Everyone at HSC eats their lunch here, though not all at the same time; and, both lunch and snacks are included in tuition.

As you might expect coming from a college that dates back more than 100 years, there’s a sense of pride in maintaining traditional events and customs at HSC. That being said, progress and change are also top of mind. Technology and innovation augment the curriculum and students are encouraged to follow their passions, explore their interests, ask big questions, and push themselves to try new things and think outside of the box.

This is a place where learning, problem solving, creativity, and risk taking are all celebrated. “I started at HSC this year because up until now I was at a public school in Burlington, but it was really easy and I wanted something more challenging,” says Connie, a Grade 5 student. “It’s been great, I love the activities, I love how athletic everyone is, and I love that I’m busy in class and not waiting around for the next assignment. There’s always something to learn and something new to try.”



The basics

Located on the scenic Hamilton Mountain atop the Niagara escarpment, Hillfield Strathallan College is a coeducational, independent school that offers personalized, hands-on education for students from 18 months to 18 years. One of the largest independent schools of its kind in Canada, HSC has four distinct but interconnected schools — Montessori, Junior, Middle, and Senior. Montessori and Junior go from toddler to Grade 4, Middle School is Grades 5 to 8, and Senior is Grades 9 to 12.

HSC's busing program makes it possible for students who live within a one-hour radius of the College to arrive via over 30 different bus routes, transporting them in from Beamsville to Mississauga and everywhere in between. Two busing options at the end of the day allow students to head home right after classes end or stay and participate in co-curricular activities.

HSC has a storied history that spans five locations within the city of Hamilton, two world wars, and a variety of iterations. Two distinct schools, one for girls and one for boys, were amalgamated in the 1960s as Hillfield Strathallan College. But the school's history dates back to 1901 when Highfield School for Boys was founded by John H. Collinson. Two decades later, in 1923, Strathallan School for girls was founded by Janet Virtue and Eileen Fitzgerald. While the mission of HSC, to deliver excellence in education, has remained the same throughout time, the values and means of achieving this mission continue to evolve. While both schools started out with a Christian focus, today HSC is non-denominational and committed to providing a multicultural, inclusive experience for all students.

With a focus on academics as well as arts, sports, community service, and outdoor education, the College provides rich learning opportunities for its population of approximately 1,300 day students. Fostering a strong sense of self, HSC focuses on giving every student the opportunity to become the best version of themselves, gaining confidence while learning and growing in a safe and

nurturing environment. Academics are rigorous but accompanied by a focus on social and emotional development. Students are given space to try new things, fail, learn, and try again. The College's project-based learning (PBL) approach gives students the opportunity to explore areas of passion that are appropriate to their age and stage, while encouraging independence, resilience, and active participation in community.

Co-curricular programming is extensive and widely available to students beginning at the age of six. Athletics, arts, technology, and a variety of clubs round out the offering. The College's sprawling 50-acre campus is home to extensive biodiversity, green spaces for play and learning, and well-maintained outdoor sports fields and courts. The campus is made up of 12 interconnected buildings.

"The reason why kids are so happy here comes down to four main things," says Ayotte. "We have a high academic standard and are constantly challenging and supporting students, we have an individualized approach to learning, we provide a safe environment where all students feel well-known and loved, and we value leadership and provide students with many formal and informal opportunities to lead throughout their time at HSC." And above all, he adds, "it's the sense of community. You can be here from the time you're 18 months until you're 18 years old, on the same campus, with the same people, but you also get the opportunity to have a variety of different experiences and challenges."

While it may seem unusual to have toddlers and high schoolers coexisting within the same spaces, HSC seamlessly integrates the entire College in a variety of activities, including college-wide Chapel assemblies held every Friday. "It's normal to have a 3-year-old tell me that their best friend is a middle schooler," says Sheriann Heath-Johnson, director of enrolment. "You'll see the preschoolers in their little uniforms, taking a walk through the halls of the Senior School. And the teenagers just love that. They melt. They are polite, and well-mannered, and are always giving the little ones high fives when they walk by. That's just who we are at HSC."

Background

The HSC archives are a work in progress. Decades of paperwork and artifacts are currently being sorted and cataloged thanks to a group of alumni volunteers who now gather at the school every Thursday to tackle this task. “We are all from the class of ‘67 or ‘68, and we all have some experience in library science or museum curation,” says Trudi Down. “We have all volunteered to take on the archives project.”

With 100 years of history to sort through, it’s no wonder the job is so enormous. HSC has a brief history laid out on its website, while a longer more detailed version can be found in former head of school, Barry Wansborough’s book entitled “The Echoes that Remain,” which was published in 2001.

Like other schools with rich and vibrant histories, HSC draws upon and maintains some long-held traditions. The spirit of the College’s two mottoes *Excelsior* (Ever higher) and *Velle est Posse* (Where there’s a will, there’s a way) is captured in a number of events and traditions including the prefect installation, Remembrance Day and carol service gatherings, Chapel assemblies, house games, homecoming, and alumni reunions.

“Remembrance Day is a really big deal because we did start out as a military College, and as such we lost a number of students during the wars,” says Down. The community gathers annually on November 11 for a ceremony to honour the 47 alumni killed in the two World Wars as well as those who served and continue to serve. “All of the students take part in this service and many alumni return to the College for it.”

When Down attended the school in the 1950s and 60s, Chapel was held daily, at the start of the day, and involved bible reading and hymns. While it looks much different today, the College, which is nondenominational, does continue to value the coming together of students to share in performances, announcements, and school wide celebrations. Today, the entire College gathers weekly in the

large gymnasium in the Senior School, for a non-denominational assembly that often includes celebrating holidays and traditions from around the world. While most religious traditions of days past have been phased out of the school, they do still have a College Prayer and Hymn which are found in the College Handbook next to the Land Acknowledgement

Hillfield Strathallan College is the result of two schools — Highfield School for Boys (later named Hillfield School) and Strathallan School (later named Strathallan College) — coming together in 1962 on the College’s current property atop the Hamilton Mountain. “Back then it was an apple orchard,” Down explains. “Both schools maintained their own buildings at first, and classes were still separate. But the kids started to come together at recess and for meals.” Throughout the 1960s the schools began to merge and eventually the new name Hillfield Strathallan College was given to the school when it became a coeducational institution. According to the history documented in Wansborough’s book, there were some difficult years in the 1960s as the College attempted to find its way through debts and staffing challenges. Over the next few decades the College found its footing and flourished.

Upon delving into HSC’s rich history, a few key aspects come to light. The HSC tradition has consistently centered around a dedication to academic progress and a commitment to staying abreast of contemporary pedagogical trends. The celebration of the arts has been deeply ingrained in the fabric of the College, evident in well-documented musicals and plays dating back to its early days. Furthermore, HSC’s enduring commitment to service and community engagement has stood the test of time.

In 2001, the school celebrated its Centenary with a fundraising initiative that led to the building of the Centennial Gates outside the College on Fennell Avenue. According to records, from 2003 to 2010 Dr. Tom Matthews led the school as Headmaster with a focus on educating the whole child while preparing students for a life of new challenges and opportunities. In 2005, HSC was granted Armorial Bearings by Rideau Hall. The official Coat of Arms and new HSC



flag were unveiled on June 11 of that year by the Honourable Lincoln M. Alexander, former Lieutenant Governor of Ontario.

A number of additions to the campus have been completed over the years, including the 1999 building of the current Montessori School and music facilities, the 2014 construction of the 134,000 square foot Michael G. DeGroot Centre for Excellence including the Senior School, athletic complex, state-of-the-art music and arts rooms, and an alumni lounge.

As one might anticipate, the College's leadership has undergone several changes since its establishment in 1962. Most recently, Marc Ayotte assumed the role of head of College in 2010, succeeding Dr. Tom Matthews. Prior to joining HSC, Ayotte served as the head of Senior School at Southridge School in Surrey, B.C. Reflecting on his transition, Ayotte shares, "As I journeyed eastward, Dr. Matthews was venturing west to Vancouver." At the time Ayotte was enthusiastic about the opportunity to lead HSC into the 21st century and oversee the campus transformation to better cater to the diverse needs of all students. Ayotte has been dedicated to the field of education since 1995, initially as a mathematics teacher in independent schools.

"When my family and I relocated to our new residence in Ancaster, I had the pleasure of meeting an elderly couple, both alumni who graduated in 1935," Ayotte says. "They extended such kindness and support, frequently inviting my family over for tea to ensure we felt welcomed and at ease. Their eagerness to share anecdotes from HSC's rich history enriched our understanding and forged a meaningful connection."

Strong alumni connections such as these are woven throughout the HSC fabric. Students past and present feel the connection to the College and continue to get involved for decades after they've graduated. From providing bursaries and grants to welcoming students into co-op placements, to volunteering at College events, alumni find many ways to get involved. Any student who attended HSC, Highfield, Hillcrest, Hillfield, or Strathallan for at least one year is automatically granted membership to HSC's Alumni Association.

Facilities

As you enter through the main gates of HSC, the immediate impression is the expansive size of the property, creating a distinct campus ambiance. Unlike schools confined to a single building, HSC comprises a network of buildings and learning spaces, seamlessly connected by both indoor and outdoor walkways. Navigating the campus may initially call for a map to acquaint oneself with the layout.

“You really have to come for a tour to see what we are all about,” says Danielle Hourigan ’82, principal of the Montessori School and HSC Alumni. “Parents often say we are Hamilton’s best-kept secret.”

Exploring the outdoor areas of the campus, one will encounter strategically arranged clusters of chairs and tables, providing spaces for students to collaborate or unwind between classes. The College’s natural surroundings are abundant and vibrant, featuring lush outdoor gathering spaces, walkways, and playscapes. Numerous Junior School classrooms seamlessly open up to the outdoors, with garden beds located just outside. Gardening assumes a central role in the Junior School science curriculum, offering students hands-on experience in cultivating and harvesting food, among other valuable skills.

HSC combines the advantages of an urban campus, given its proximity to downtown Hamilton and accessibility to major highways, with the tranquil atmosphere of a country school, surrounded by abundant natural resources. The 50-acre campus shares 14.5 acres of land with the neighbouring post-secondary institution, Mohawk College, situated to its southwest. To the north lies an established residential community, while the St. Joseph’s Healthcare Centre is situated to the northeast. Access to HSC is via a scenic, meandering road up the escarpment, offering a serene and enchanting experience as you approach the school.

As outlined in the Campus Master Plan, several extensive rebuilds and updates are underway and expected to be finalized

within the next decade. While it may be challenging to envision significant renovations, considering the apparent good condition of the College, it’s worth noting that the newest building opened in 2014, and many of the existing structures trace back to HSC’s earlier days.

“When I arrived at HSC, they were in the midst of an expansion plan that involved the addition of a new Senior School and athletic complex. I had the privilege of witnessing and contributing to the realization of this project during my initial years here,” says Ayotte. “We expanded the College by 134,000 square feet in that process and continue to enhance both our internal and external facilities. Aligned with our strategic plan, which emphasizes experiential learning, we are set to optimize all our learning spaces and explore new opportunities to foster meaningful connections.”

Athletes and students with a penchant for staying active find ample opportunities at HSC. The facilities are abundant, featuring three tennis courts, eight grass fields, seven gymnasiums, and fitness studios. The DeGroote Athletic Complex offers ample space, accommodating the entire College for assemblies. The Central College Quad serves as a shared outdoor gathering space, and the school’s buildings are seamlessly connected..

The Virtue-Fitzgerald Centre for the Arts auditorium—a stunning, well-equipped venue—hosts all of the College’s arts programming. Additionally, there are numerous music rooms, visual arts studios, a paint spray booth, and a digital design lab. Other specialized classrooms tailored to enhance the student experience include science labs, robotics studios, and learning commons.

One college, four schools

What sets HSC apart from other independent schools is its ability to educate students from 18 months to 18 years on one campus, as part of one community. This continuity means families can theoretically decide on a school once and then stay put until their child is ready to apply to post-secondary studies. The College's strategic plan connects all four schools, and a team of faculty are dedicated to ensuring the entire College operates around the same goals and values.

The staff and students at HSC are all interconnected. "We'll have high school students coming to read with 4-year-olds, and the Grade 8s will teach the Grade 4s rugby, and when we walk down the halls we'll see kids saying hello to every person they pass. From the cleaning staff to the kitchen staff to the bus drivers, everyone who works here is part of a team and a family," says Erica Otaguro '07, the Montessori School vice-principal and a learning services specialist.

Each school has a different focus which is age and stage appropriate, but still remains connected to the others. The Junior and Montessori schools focus on inquiry and imagination, applying a variety of different pedagogical strategies to foster a love of learning. Early literacy and numeracy as well as social-emotional learning and self-exploration are all integrated into the primary curriculum.



Montessori

HSC's Montessori School is among the oldest continuously running Montessori schools in Canada. "We are now teaching the children and even grandchildren of students who went through the school," says Principal Danielle Hourigan. "That's a wonderful legacy." The Montessori program is a child-focused approach that was developed by Italian physician Dr. Maria Montessori. Montessori classrooms look and feel different from other classrooms and involve a lot of independent and small group work with specially designed learning materials. "The multi-year curriculum in each class allows every child to work across all disciplines and at a level personalized to their skill development," Hourigan explains. "Students self-select tasks and work independently with materials that feature a corrective element, affording the child the opportunity to reflect, problem solve, and self-assess work."

Hourigan says that all children can thrive in a Montessori classroom because the program is personalized and follows the developmental progress of the child, meeting them where they are. "Classrooms are multi-age and begin with toddlers up to two-and-a-half or three. There is another classroom for children who are three, four, and five years old, and another for children who are ages six to nine or traditionally Grades 1 to 4." The advantage of this model, she explains, is that students are free to work at their own pace and at their own level in each subject, rather than staying within the confines of their "grade." "For example, we'll have a six-year-old working at age level in language but then working at an eight-year-old level in math. We tailor the curriculum by skill rather than by age."

The HSC Montessori School has approximately 240 students, most of whom begin as toddlers. "Some of our students transfer from other Montessori schools because they're looking for a more fulsome school life experience," Hourigan says. "We have French, music, and gym specialists as well as access to 55 acres of naturalized space on campus. We have multiple gyms, a theatre, and a busing program.

And, kids can seamlessly transition to Middle School upon completing our program."

The Montessori School space is designed differently than other buildings on the HSC campus. Built in 1999, the school has two floors of classrooms, both of which open onto large communal spaces called 'the Piazza.' Downstairs are kids ages 18 months to five years, with lots of space for gross motor development. Upstairs are students ages six to nine where the Piazza provides space for them to collaborate, work in small groups, dance, and develop physical literacy. All classrooms have mindfulness areas where students can take a break and practice breathing exercises. The walls in Montessori classrooms are not overly stimulating and when you walk into a class your eyes go to the materials on the shelves, the "jobs" that students work to complete each day. Classrooms have their own bathrooms and are designed to meet the specific age and stage of the students. Doors are always open, and students can move fluidly into other Montessori classrooms. "All of the work is meaningful and purposeful, we don't do worksheets or seat work, everything is designed to connect with and engage the students," Hourigan explains.

Ana Knapp is a teacher in the Montessori building and also a parent of a former HSC Montessori student. What differentiates Montessori, she says, is that it's not a teacher-centered approach where the teacher stands in the front of the classroom. "Students arrive and go straight to work," she says. "They choose from whatever area they want to begin with, and we guide them through activities ensuring they make good choices and foster a balance in all areas of learning."

For her own daughter, who is now in university, Knapp found that the Montessori program fostered many valuable skills she continues to draw upon to this day. "Independent thinking skills were a big one," she says. "She is able to make choices for herself, both academically and socially and she's not concerned with what everyone else is doing. She does what she feels is best for her and always has. She also developed excellent work habits, the ability to manage her time, and a huge sense of curiosity."

Junior school

While it may be unusual for a school to have two distinct choices for the primary years, both the Montessori and Junior Schools are thriving at HSC. “When parents ask us which school is better, we always recommend they visit both. It’s really about the feeling you get when you’re here. No matter which option you chose, you won’t go wrong,” says Lisa Mitchell, vice-principal of the Junior School and mom of two HSC grads. “One school will resonate more with you, and that’s the best choice for your child.”

The Junior School, she explains, believes in best practices, research, and evidence-based teaching methods. “One thing that sets us apart is we can use anything that works, we aren’t confined by a specific philosophy or style of teaching.”

Like Montessori, the Junior School welcomes students as young as 18 months and has approximately 225 students. “Our mission is to foster a passion for learning in each child,” says Principal Shailau Spivak. This is accomplished through an adaptive curriculum, inquiry and project-based learning, and a balance of teacher-directed and student-driven learning.

Open concept classrooms and interactive learning set the Junior School apart. It has a small school feeling, but has access to the resources and community of the larger College. A garden curriculum brings science to life with outdoor gardens and even indoor plant walls. Students are encouraged to follow their passion and independent projects based on student interest are common. Literacy is top of mind, and teachers are trained in the most recent science of reading pedagogy, ensuring every child feels comfortable and confident when learning to read.

For Lavin, a Grade 4 student in the Junior School, one of the most interesting parts of school is being able to investigate research topics and present them to the class. “My first project was on the French Revolution,” he says. “We usually get one period a week to work on it, sometimes we go to the library or what we call the

Learning Commons, and we do some online research and we also read books about the subject.”

For Marcus, who is in Grade 2, science is especially interesting. “We have our own garden and recently we got to do a kale investigation,” he explains. “We grew it and picked it, but it was covered in bugs, so we had to figure out why and understand what happened to it.”

The Junior School typically has two cohorts per grade and all classes have fewer than 18 students. “Our usual class size is 13 to 14, but that varies year to year depending on the students we have,” says Kathleen Collins, a Junior School teacher and curriculum coordinator. Small classes and dedicated teachers help achieve the school’s primary focus which is, as Collins says, “to raise happy, healthy, joyful kids and create an environment where they feel safe and supported and free to learn.”

From anti-racism, to Indigenous education, to pluralism and diversity, the school provides a variety of lenses through which the students can see the world. “We have important conversations as a staff to ensure we are able to bring this information to our students in a way that’s age and stage appropriate while exposing them to a diverse range of resources,” says Collins. Teacher education is on-going and staff at HSC seem to share a love of learning with their students.

The guiding principles of REACH: respect, effort, attitude, control of self, and honesty, are the basis upon which the Junior School is governed. “We talk about them on a daily basis; they’re part of our school-wide vocabulary,” says Allison Wall, a learning service specialist. “Our Grade 4s have the opportunity as the oldest in the school to act as ‘REACHers,’ working with younger students, reading stories to kids, and acting as peer mediators on the playground.” The REACHER program allows students to initiate leadership within the Junior School, preparing them for a wealth of future opportunities at HSC and beyond.

Middle school

Students from the Montessori and Junior Schools, along with students new to HSC, come together in Grade 5 for the beginning of Middle School. From Grades 5 through 8, students continue on an individualized learning journey with a focus on academics, service, and leadership opportunities. With an emphasis on project-based learning, students have the opportunity to turn traditional subjects into inquiry-based projects.

Students who grasp concepts quickly are always granted enrichment opportunities while those who need additional time and support, have access to that as well. Most Middle School teachers have specialized education in the subjects they teach. Beginning in Grade 6, students have a full rotary schedule, working with a different teacher for each subject. Grade 5 and 6 classes are capped at 18 and Grade 7 and 8 classes typically have 20 students or less. There are 325 students in total in the Middle School.

This year's Grade 6 program has its own unique timetable that includes blocks of time for project based learning (PBL), explains Carrie Annable '97, the school's chair of academic strategy. "Instead of being in science class, for example, they'll be in a PBL block with their science, English, and social sciences teachers and they'll be working on a project based on a question. The question is, 'how can we improve biodiversity on our campus,' and the students are working on projects which they'll showcase as part of an academic fair. The solutions they develop will be put to use to improve our campus."

It's this sort of unique learning opportunity that attracts parents to HSC. It's a chance to dive deep into something, to build a schedule around a way of learning that the teachers and kids become invested in, and the opportunity to work on real-world, practical projects that combine curriculum with life skills.

"I learned early on in my career that students learn best when they're doing things, when they're thinking and acting like a

scientist," explains John Hannah, HSC's science teacher and head of eco programming. "Students learn much faster when they're engaged. So when our Grade 6s are working on their biodiversity project, we bring in experts from our community to engage with the students, to pose interesting questions, and to connect them to real things happening in the field."

"So many exciting opportunities are available to students during these years," explains the Middle School's vice-principal of school life, Jessica Setzkorn. "In Grade 6 students begin instrumental music and in Grades 7 and 8 they take a performing arts course. In Grade 8 students have an opportunity to be part of an accelerated French program and for those looking for enrichment in Grade 8 they also have the opportunity to write Grade 9 math exams and jump right into Grade 10 math if they stay at HSC for high school." HSC also introduces Flex Time in Middle School which is a half an hour at the end of the school day where students can participate in social-emotional learning opportunities, House intramural sports, community gatherings, and House meetings.

Culture plays a really important role in the Middle School, and creating a community where students feel safe to be themselves, explore their identity, thrive academically, and come into their own is what HSC is all about. "The middle schoolers here all know each other, they start their days together, they all have lunch together, and they finish their days together. It's a happy, joyful place and the students want to be here. They have tons of spirit and pride and it's wonderful to watch," says Setzkorn.

Senior school

Once in the Senior School, students from Grades 9 to 12 are given an opportunity to take on leadership roles, explore their position in the global community, focus on service, and expand their knowledge within a variety of subject areas from languages and STEM to the arts, sciences, and business, among other things. All HSC students share a love of learning and a desire to push themselves beyond what comes easily to them. They're encouraged, throughout their time at the school, to try new things, explore a variety of interests, and develop skills that they'll carry with them into post-secondary studies and beyond.

There are 540 students in the Senior School, and while Grade 9 is an intake year, there are often as many as 100 students who apply every year for 25 spots. Most students come into Grade 9 from HSC's Middle School. Classes are relatively small with a maximum of 22 students in Grade 9 and 10 classes. In Grades 11 and 12 numbers vary significantly. "You might have 12 people in a yearbook class and 20 in an AP microeconomics class," explains the College's director of enrolment, Sheriann Heath-Johnston. "With so many options to choose from, the numbers are interest dependent."

With more than 130 course options, the Senior School provides a supported and challenging academic program. All subjects are taught at the academic level with an option to take Advanced Placement exams in Grades 11 and 12. Classes are taught in state-of-the-art classrooms and by teachers with expertise in their subject areas who are passionate about supporting and guiding students on their educational journeys. Beyond the compulsory credits, students are encouraged to explore their interests through a wide variety of elective credits.

"Take culinary arts for example," says Senior School principal, Taya Cicchetti. "We have 100 kids enrolled in this program, one of our fastest growing offerings in the Senior School." Perhaps it's because the course is offering kids real-life skills that they can

carry into the world with them, or perhaps it's because they feel empowered to learn about the food industry, sustainability, and food sourcing, among other things. With Grade 10, 11, and 12 culinary arts electives available to choose from, students have the opportunity to really dive into this subject. And, they have a lot of fun doing so.

Another popular elective area is technology, encompassing classes in art and design, graphic design, communications technology, film and television, and more. The Senior School features a unique venture known as "DesignWerx," where a group of Grade 11 and 12 students annually manages a small business. Cicchetti notes, "They collaborate with real clients, engage with our College's communications department, and undertake projects for parents and alumni." The students handle tasks such as designing logos, developing websites, and executing various design projects, providing a valuable opportunity for hands-on experience in these fields.

Speaking of practical experience, HSC offers a co-op program for Senior School students, forging partnerships with organizations both within the Hamilton community and beyond. Cicchetti explains, "Our aim is to graduate students equipped with real-world experience and skills that extend beyond the classroom. This way, they can seamlessly integrate practical knowledge with their academic expertise, becoming well-rounded graduates."

Co-curriculars

HSC has an impressive roster of co-curricular programs. In fact, almost everyone we talk to at the College mentions co-curriculars at some point in the conversation. The College has a huge offering of athletics, arts, and other clubs, activities, affinity groups, and travel opportunities that students have access to. While academics are extremely important, it's clear that raising well-rounded individuals with a variety of interests is a priority.

The College's busing program, which is included in the tuition, is designed so that students can go home right after classes at 3:30 p.m. if need be, but they can also stay and participate in the many co-curricular offerings. These are divided into three terms and begin to come available when the child is 6 years old. The second bus leaves the school at 5:00 p.m., giving students the chance to take advantage of all that the school offers after hours.

Senior School students have more than 50 co-curriculars to choose from each term, giving students an opportunity to discover their passions, uncover new interests, or hone existing skills. It's an opportunity to make friends and connections beyond the classroom. These connections often start when the students are quite young and carry throughout high school.

For younger students there may be fewer co-curricular options, but there are still plenty of sports teams, arts programs, and clubs to get involved with.

From community leadership to recreational activities to inter-school athletics, competitive clubs, and the arts, the choices that HSC presents its students with are impressive. The school's co-curriculars are teacher and staff-run. Co-curriculars run four days of the week, allowing everyone to go home on the early bus on Fridays. Most programs are divided into fall, winter, and spring terms, while some run for two consecutive terms, like the Middle and Senior School's annual musical.

Some examples of popular co-curriculars include craft club, wellness club, social justice club, Spanish club, indoor rowing, Vex Robotics, photography club, cooking club, and media club.

Service is a big part of the programming at the College. Elev8, for example, is a service club that sees a group of students going downtown to Hamilton's Gore Park to serve those in need and ensures that all of the leftover food from the school's cafeteria is repurposed. Students are also able to forge connections through affinity clubs. From the Black Students' Association to the Asian Students' Association, Muslim Students' Association, Inclusivity+, and many more, there's always a place for everyone at HSC.

"We've also had an increasing demand for competitive academic co-curriculars, on-par with athletics and the arts," says Ayotte. "Things like Model UN, DECA business case competitions, and HOSA [Health Occupations Students of America] health sciences competitions have become super important to our students and something really exciting for the school to be part of."

The arts

As we pause during our tour of HSC in front of the 400-seat Artsplex theatre, a large wall is adorned floor-to-ceiling with Broadway-style cast photos spanning many years. The profound importance of the arts at HSC comes to life through these photos. For enthusiasts of the theatre, there's a palpable sense of wonder while gazing at the array of productions, from *Matilda Jr.* to *Clue*, *The Addams Family* to *Cabaret*, and many more. HSC offers arts education in four categories: dramatic arts, music, technology education, and visual arts. Each program is led by accomplished specialists who not only foster creative exploration but also encourage students to actively participate, take risks, and relish the joy of creative expression.

"I wouldn't say we are an athletics school or an arts school, but rather we provide a really excellent balance with opportunities for everyone," says Ayotte. "A great example of that comes from our most recent stage production where a Grade 10 student, who I would say is the best basketball player in the school, had a role in the musical. And I asked him if he'd ever done this before because he was really good. And he told me that he just wanted to say he'd been in the musical, so he did, and it was awesome." What was most notable, Ayotte says, is that no one asked, "What's the basketball player doing on stage?" because this is what students expect at HSC. Involvement is universal.

All four HSC schools prepare and present dramatic productions each year. Sets and costumes are elaborate, and there are many opportunities for students to get involved. Senior School students choose from a variety of arts electives that explore developmental drama, mime, and improvisation. "There is a rich history of excellence in the arts at HSC and it's a deeply valued component of our school life," says Nora Hammond '98, the College's director of arts. "The arts empower us to lead fulfilling lives. They are the lifeblood of a meaningful educational experience."

Music appreciation is part of the curriculum from the early

years, with singing and creative movement integrated into much of the Montessori and Junior School days. Participation in the Junior Choir gives students the opportunity to perform at the school and around the greater Hamilton area. The Middle School Choir plays a large role in College events including the annual Carol Service. Instrumental music begins in Grade 6. Middle School instrumental ensembles include concert bands and a jazz band.

In Senior School, students have many music electives to choose from including vocal, instrumental, and jazz. The HSC Senior ensembles are award-winning. There is also an opportunity for students to sign up for private music lessons during school hours for an additional fee.

"Every year our Senior School puts on a musical and a stage play and these are open to anyone," Hammond says. "The Middle School does an amazing musical production each year, and the early education division has multiple performances as well. Faculty lead these programs but the stage crew, tech support, and props are all done by the kids. There are so many different ways to get involved."

Other performance opportunities include concerts, jazz nights, and collaborative programs with guest musicians. The College's Friday Assembly often has student-led performances as well.

There's also a great deal of emphasis on arts when it comes to design and multimedia communications. Opportunities for students include understanding technological and computer concepts as they relate to the design process and graphical information displays, 3-D animation, web design, videography, and printed stationery. Visual arts are emphasized throughout the College with art being part of the early years curriculum and becoming more detailed and elaborate as the years progress.

"Something else we do, that's really special to HSC, is a bi-annual staff, alumni, and parent musical. It's a chance for past graduates to return to the College and for adults to have some fun. It always turns out really well and is a great community builder," says Hammond, who is herself an HSC alumnus.

HSC is also in the process of designing a music production

studio, which they believe will draw more students into the process. “We are finding there’s a real interest in music and sound design and our goal is to draw students into the arts in as many ways as we can,” Hammond says. “We have this beautiful theatre that just had a facelift this past summer, and among other things we’ve upgraded the tech, lighting, and sound to ensure the best performances possible.”

Athletics

The athletics and phys-ed programs at HSC work hand-in-hand to meet the needs of both competitive and recreational athletes while developing skills in students from toddler to teen. With extensive facilities including tennis courts, grass fields, and beautiful gymnasiums, students have access to everything they need to be successful in sport. Teams begin in Grade 3 and as students get older, they have the opportunity to play against other independent schools across the province. “The strength of our program is in its variety,” says Paul Masotti, the director of athletics. “We have basketball, soccer, rugby, swimming, alpine snowboarding, and volleyball, just to name a few.”

All students are welcome and encouraged to participate. “Even kids who don’t see themselves as athletes have the opportunity to build confidence and develop their skills,” says Masotti. You’ll find

a lot of well-rounded students at HSC who participate in a variety of co-curriculars while also making time for athletics.

“My daughter is in Grade 10 and she’s in the band, does Model UN, and competed in snowboarding for the school last winter,” says parent Jing Guo. “Right now she’s playing girls basketball and when she told me she was going to try out, I was surprised. I asked her ‘do you even know how to dribble?’ But she tried out, and because the school has two teams, everyone gets an opportunity to play. She tells me ‘Mom, I’m getting better,’ and that makes me so happy.”

Student interest guides many things at HSC, even when it comes to sports. “I’ll give you a good example of this,” says Ayotte. “In 2011, during my first years at the school, we didn’t have a girls hockey team. So a bunch of students put together a proposal to build a team, and in that proposal they had me as the coach. And we took their proposal to heart, and I’ve been the coach ever since. While it seems like a no-brainer that we should have a girls’ team, it was the students’ passion and ideas that brought it to life.”

HSC is well equipped to provide students the space, equipment, and coaching to reach their goals, whether that’s a personal best in a 10k race or learning how to double dutch. “Through sport and play, students develop leadership, perseverance, and a positive understanding of the connection between a healthy body and a strong mind,” says Masotti.

E-Week

From Iceland to British Columbia to the shores of an Ontario summer camp, there are many exciting opportunities available to HSC students during the College-wide program called E-Week (short for “experiential week”), which takes place the third week of September every year. Students talk about this time with great excitement, recalling experiences they’ve had and those they’re looking forward to. During this week, the classrooms at HSC are empty and every child participates in some sort of experiential learning. The Grade 5 to 12 students typically go away somewhere, choosing from a menu of options that have additional cost associated with them. The younger students do their own mini-E-Week on campus and through a number of day trips. The Grade 9s all go to an Ontario summer camp together, a bonding experience that kicks off their time in the Senior School. In Grades 10 through 12 students have more choices, with some really exotic and exciting trips available to them. Duke of Edinburgh trips are also available to students during E-Week.

“When I was in Grade 10 we went camping in B.C.,” explains a Senior School student. “I had never been tent camping before. We made our own food, cleaned our own tents, and really immersed ourselves in nature. We not only had a real outdoor adventure but we also made stronger connections with the other students on the trip.”

E-Week gets kids away from their desks and out into the world, a type of learning HSC believes strongly in. For some students it’s the first time they’ve been camping, or the first time they’ve traveled internationally, or the first time they’ve been away from home.

Other travel opportunities take place throughout the school year as well, from theatre trips to Stratford, to sports and outdoor education trips, to tech trips in Los Angeles, these travel experiences provide great learning and growth for students. Every year Grade 5s go on a ski trip to Quebec. For some students, it’s much more than just a few days away on the slopes.

“When my daughter was in Grade 5 she got really anxious about the ski trip,” recalls HSC parent Jing Guo. “She would cry whenever she thought about having to be away from home for three nights. I tried everything but I couldn’t help her. In October I was at an event, and I heard the College’s counsellor Gina Ranger speak. After the talk, I approached her and told her about the anxiety my daughter was experiencing. She offered to help. Closer to the trip, I emailed her and set up an appointment for her to meet with my daughter. Gina gave my daughter a little doll to help with her worries, and she ensured that all of her friends would be in the same cabin. And I can tell you that after that meeting, my daughter completely shifted how she was feeling about the trip. I didn’t hear from her once the whole time she was away. Rather, I got an email from her teacher with a photo saying she was having the time of her life. And when she came home she said it had been the best trip ever.”

Student well-being

As the College counsellor, Gina Ranger takes on the crucial responsibility of ensuring that all students' social and emotional needs are addressed. She emphasizes, "It's a top priority for us because, without a sense of safety, security, and being heard, students cannot thrive."

Students have the opportunity to meet with Ranger for various reasons, often through teacher or parental referrals. Ranger proudly notes, "Nowadays, requests also come directly from the students themselves, showing their awareness of when they need assistance and their confidence in seeking help."

In addition to individual sessions, Ranger engages with groups in classrooms, addressing topics such as social skills, friendship dynamics, and presentation skills. She elaborates, "This week, for instance, I've been collaborating with a group of Grade 2 girls on social skills, using a little tea party activity to navigate through challenging friendship dynamics. When a specific class is grappling with issues, the teachers promptly involve me, and I conduct social-emotional learning sessions as needed."

With a social worker assigned to the Senior School and Ranger providing support to the lower schools, everyone at HSC has access to mental health resources when needed. HSC also brings in many external speakers to work with students and parents, recognizing the need for this type of education, especially in the post-Pandemic world.

Mindfulness and well-being breaks are built into classroom schedules from a very young age, and teachers recognize the value of taking time for breath work and self-reflection. Every year in January HSC hosts GLOW (Gathering Lessons On Wellbeing), a series of activities and events that support mental health education, social and emotional well-being, and physical wellness. Led by faculty and the Senior School prefects, including the well-being prefect, the programs include workshops and lessons as well as

hands-on challenges.

Another well-attended program is the after-school club, Stress Busters. Alison Wall explains, "Gina Ranger and I developed this club to assist students in recognizing their emotions and to offer healthy outlets for stress. Most importantly, we make sure to infuse a lot of fun into the process."

Additional support and connections for HSC students in the Senior School are provided by guidance counsellors and tutorial leaders. Ayotte notes, "With increasing pressure on students in planning for their post-secondary studies, we have expanded our team of guidance counsellors to establish a comprehensive student success centre here at HSC. These counsellors accompany their designated students from Grade 9 through the Senior School, guiding them on their path toward post-secondary education." In Grade 9, each student is also assigned a tutorial leader who offers both academic and social support. Ayotte shares a personal anecdote, stating, "My own son developed a close relationship with his tutorial leader, and that individual had a profound impact on his academic success."

School life

HSC is one of the largest independent day schools in Canada, yet despite its size and the wide age range of students, we are told over and over again that everyone on campus feels like they're part of a family. It's this community feeling that brings many new families to the College and encourages many alumni to return with their own kids.

For Travis Schneider '98, an HSC alumni and lifer, sending his own kids to HSC was really important to him. He wanted them to have access to the broad range of experiences and opportunities the College affords. "HSC gives the kids a chance to try a lot of things and ultimately decide what they love and what they're passionate about," he says. "They're able to participate in a variety of sports as well as arts. My kids are all playing instruments and my older son is in a lot of clubs, including the entrepreneurship club which is something he's considering pursuing down the road."

But it wasn't just the programming or academics that drew Schneider back to the school when he had his own kids, it was the community he grew up in that he wanted his family to experience.

"We had been living in California for years but when my eldest child got to a certain age I found that even though they were at a really good private school, there were things they were missing from their school life," he says. "This was among the reasons why we moved back to Canada—to enrol our kids in HSC. I genuinely value this school and I knew that if my kids could get in here it would be a huge opportunity for them."

Today Schneider is a member of the College's Board of Governors, maintaining that strong alumni connection that many like him share. While he says that the academics at the private school his kids were attending in Southern California were excellent, "what I was really missing was that culture. HSC is different," he says. "Students here are brought up with a perspective on how to be good citizens of their community and the world around them. They're



really well-rounded and that piece was missing in California. While HSC has modernized its curriculum and facilities since I went here, they've really preserved the values, traditions, and beliefs that have always been part of the school."

Students who go to HSC are notably busy, with many academic and co-curricular activities to take part in. There's a culture of trying new things, getting involved, and being active members of the HSC world.

"Our students don't see any limits because they are surrounded by other kids who don't see limits," says Ayotte. "When you're surrounded by ambition and success, it becomes self-evident to strive for that."

The same goes for the staff and teachers. "We have a school filled with passionate, devoted faculty and staff who go above and beyond every single day to support one another. It's a unique working environment and truly a family. No one at HSC goes unknown. Everyone knows your name here," says Lisa Mitchell, the vice-principal of the Junior School.

This student-teacher connection begins at a very young age and doesn't diminish as students get older. If anything, that bond is strengthened the longer you stay at HSC. Families are also connected to the school community, and while they come from many different cities around Hamilton, there are plenty of opportunities to be involved with the school, attend events, and feel that sense of belonging.

Wendy Lam is vice-chair of the Parents' Guild and has been an active member since her kids joined the school in 2019. "We are often busy running events and organizing fundraisers, but we also make time for social events. I have made a lot of friends through HSC. We meet for hikes and coffee and we have lunch together. It's a really great community here."

For the students, friendships at HSC extend far beyond the classroom. "We have kids who take the bus together every day for the entire time they go to HSC, and those friendships are very strong," says Heath-Johnson. "You will often see bus drivers attend

graduations to support the students they come to know so well. And then, you have friends in your House and those are from a variety of grades. And there are friends who you know from co-curriculars, from working on a performance or being part of a team. And of course, older students often work closely with younger students in leadership roles and those relationships are also very important to the kids."

The Houses Heath-Johnson is referring to share similarities with those found in other independent schools. Upon enrolment at the College, every student is assigned to a House, and family members, including alumni, remain in the same House. The HSC coed House teams are historically named after Canadian trees (from Highfield) and Scottish rivers (from Strathallan) each distinguished by its own colour. One of the House Captains, a Senior School student, elaborates, "We engage in sports, participate in games and challenges, and organize various events. Serving as a captain is a fantastic experience; we have a lot of fun together, and it involves a lot of effort and dedication."

Learning at HSC

There is no typical HSC student because, as we are informed, HSC accommodates a diverse range of learners. Kathleen Collins, the Junior School curriculum coordinator, emphasizes, “Our program is shaped by student voice and choice, making it particularly suitable for neurodivergent students.” She adds, “We prioritize flexibility, allowing students to approach tasks in a manner that suits them, and our programs are designed to offer robust support for various learning styles.”

In her role as a learning services specialist, Junior School, Allison Wall offers support to both students and teachers at HSC. She explains, “I assist students in the school who may require additional support and those following an independent learning plan.” Allison continues, “At times, I bring students to my office for extra help, and I also dedicate time collaborating with students within their own classrooms. The combination of our small class sizes and attentive teaching staff enables us to identify students’ needs early on, ensuring that each individual receives the necessary resources and guidance for success.”

When it comes to reporting, HSC adopts a unique approach. Recently, they revamped the format of report cards, replacing number and letter grades with detailed written assessments. Carrie Annable, chair of academic strategy, explains, “Up until Grade 8, we have introduced written assessments to enhance students’ comprehension of their progress and guide their next steps.” She adds, “Research indicates that when end feedback is provided, students tend to focus solely on the final grade, overlooking the nuances in between. Our Montessori School has consistently evaluated students in this manner, proving to be effective. The objective is to ensure students grasp expectations and can articulate the necessary steps to progress to the next level.”

The principles guiding learning at HSC encompass personalized learning, PBL, and experiential learning, extending across all

four schools. According to Ayotte, “Authentic learning transpires when the curriculum is both engaging and pertinent, and we firmly assert that learning extends beyond the confines of the classroom.” HSC provides abundant outdoor education experiences, community service initiatives, individual and group projects, as well as opportunities in technology and design, contributing to a dynamic and constantly evolving learning environment.

The school has its own children’s museum called “The Living Room,” curated by HSC educator Amanda Rogers and adorned with student contributions. The space is dedicated to fostering critical thinking skills through inquiry, research, and hands-on learning. It serves as a hub for students to delve into research and investigate topics of interest. Abounding with artifacts collected by students, The Living Room is a collaborative effort. Rogers works closely with individuals and small groups on research projects, guiding them to become authorities on subjects of their choosing. She assists them in discerning valid sources, locating information, and transforming their ideas into projects that evoke pride.

As is expected in any reputable independent school, prioritizing student support and learning is fundamental at HSC. The College offers a comprehensive ebook titled *Supporting Student Learning*, providing prospective families with detailed insights into the school’s learning supports and services, teaching and administrative frameworks, student accommodations, and the significance of parent-school communications. In addition, HSC extends a warm invitation, encouraging families to visit the campus, engage in conversations with relevant faculty, and invest time in evaluating whether HSC is the ideal fit for their child.

Getting in

“In terms of admissions, we have a specific process that we follow based on the student’s age and stage, but all families should begin the process approximately one year ahead of when they’d like their child to start at the school,” says Heath-Johnson. “For the majority of students the admissions process will involve some type of visit. For younger children it may be an hour, while older kids will spend a day with us.” Middle School and Senior School students will typically be required to submit a portfolio of work along with their application. They may also be required to complete entrance exams and interviews.

“The application process does not change much from Grade 5 to Grade 9. When we select students to join our school, it is not always the student with a 99 percent average, it’s the child who can advocate for themselves, who is passionate about coming to HSC and can explain why we are their choice school. It’s a student who wants to get involved in school life, who wants to be part of our community, who is well-rounded and engaged. And, of course, strong academics.”

HSC has a rolling enrolment process and students may have the opportunity to join the school at every grade if there is space available. “In general there are usually one or two spots per grade that open up, though we have had grades that are completely full,” says Heath-Johnson.

For older students the traditional intake years are Grade 5, 7, and 9, three years when the cohorts grow. People looking to enroll for Senior School often try to get a spot in Middle School to ensure there will be space. “Middle School has the most flexibility and Grade 9 is certainly our most competitive year,” Heath-Johnson explains.

For little ones, many join HSC at 18 months. When they do, it’s with the understanding that HSC isn’t a daycare, it’s a place where families want to begin their child’s educational journey — one that will take them at least until Middle School if not beyond. “In the

interview process we look for kids who are here to say,” says Heath-Johnson. “It’s not unusual to have 100 applications for 15 spots in our toddler program. People come to us via word of mouth and they’re choosing this type of education because they want to see it through.”

Choosing between Montessori and the Junior School is a very personal choice and often families rely on their *‘gut feeling’* after touring both schools. Some come specifically for one school and others choose the program they believe will best suit their child.

Students join HSC at various grades in the elementary program. Some come from local public schools, looking for more challenges or a more well-rounded program. Others come from private schools or other Montessori schools, looking for a place where they can stay through high school. Families find HSC by word of mouth, alumni send their kids here, and some stumble upon the school through their research and never look back.

“I remember when I was ready to send my kids to HSC I scheduled a tour with an admissions officer,” says parent Jing Guo. “I remember walking through the halls and we stopped a student to ask some questions. They were super polite and spoke so eloquently, I was extremely impressed. I thought, I want my kids to be here. I had volunteered in the public schools before, and it was a very different feeling.”

Money matters

HSC is a not-for-profit independent school, registered as a charity. Tuition fees are determined annually, like other independent schools, based on forecasted operating costs. HSC tuition includes many services and supports such as a hot lunch program, school bus services, student supports, professional counselling and health services, among others.

“Up until Grade 5, tuition covers everything the children need,” says Heath-Johnson. “From daily snacks and lunch to transportation and co-curriculars, and care until 5:00 pm when the late buses leave. The only extras are uniforms and the occasional day trip.” Busing starts for children at 3 years old and a few rows of bus seats are built to accommodate small children.

From Grades 5 to 12, families will receive the same inclusions mentioned above, but will pay for books and some course materials along with a variety of mandatory and optional trips.

In the Senior School the largest expenses beyond tuition are books and travel. Families should be prepared to pay, not unlike a University experience, for textbooks. A buy-back program is offered at the end of each semester to help offset these costs. Students will also experience a menu of travel opportunities. E-week will offer choice based programming, from camping to local modules to international experiences. There are also additional optional trips that align with service, athletic, and subject-specific initiatives.

The HSC Financial Aid Program is available to eligible parents/guardians of domestic students enrolled full-time in JK/M4 and above. Families who expect their annual income to grow as their children do can apply and qualify for financial assistance, which is awarded in the form of a bursary. HSC provides one-year, non-renewable bursaries and families must reapply each school year. Awards may be provided up to a maximum of four years. “Our financial aid program is robust and it’s there to help families who need a little help,” says Heath-Johnson.

“Our scholarships are donor supported, and there are many of them. These begin in Grade 9 and both new and existing HSC students are eligible to apply. “It’s worth taking a look at our scholarship offering because there are many one-year merit scholarships to consider celebrating not just academic ability, but leadership, diversity, and innovation.”

Heath-Johnson is also eager to mention a full-coverage scholarship that has been created and is fulfilled by an HSC family. “I have to tell you about this one stand-out opportunity made possible by the Morgan family,” she says. “This is a hybrid bursary scholarship opportunity created by an individual who valued their time at HSC so much they wanted to make it available to a student who financially would not be able to consider our school.” The eligible candidate must have all the talent of a scholarship applicant but without the financial means to attend HSC. “My job is to work with local organizations each year to identify eligible students and families,” she continues. “It is alumni like this, taking care of the next generation of students and community that show you what the HSC community really is all about.”

The takeaway

Atop the Hamilton Mountain sits an independent day school that's large in size but as close-knit as they come. With four distinct but interconnected schools, HSC is a place where students can thrive as toddlers through their teens. The unique dynamic at HSC fosters cross-grade collaboration, allowing students to serve as leaders and mentors. Younger students look up to their older counterparts, and within this tight-knit community, everyone is known, respected, and validated.

HSC places a strong emphasis on academics while offering a rich array of co-curricular activities. The College values character development and prioritizes nurturing independent, driven, and innovative thinkers. Notably, alumni often return not only as parents but also as teachers, volunteers, and board members. Faculty and staff entrust their own children to HSC and rave about the positive impact the school has.

Often referred to as Hamilton's best-kept secret, HSC is accessible to students from a broad geographic range, thanks to the comprehensive busing program included in tuition. For those ready to work hard, prioritize learning, and actively participate, HSC provides a plethora of opportunities. The school encourages students to discover and pursue their passions, offering extensive learning experiences beyond traditional classroom boundaries. Students must be prepared to embrace unique challenges, explore independent projects, and balance a rigorous academic and co-curricular schedule.

HSC's curriculum integrates PBL, inquiry-based methods, and individualized learning. Outdoor education, coupled with access to 50 acres of naturalized land, enriches the overall experience. Co-curricular activities are available to students starting at age 6, with an emphasis on providing a diverse range of programs. The school values the equal importance of arts and athletics, complemented by a variety of other clubs, programs, and activities.

In a unique offering, lunch and snacks are not only included in tuition but are also prepared from scratch using local ingredients by an HSC culinary team. Customized daily menus, featuring a wide range

of choices, make mealtime in Lawson Hall a favourite for students.

From the vibrant dining room to the well-lit halls and stunning campus common areas, a sense of joy, laughter, and camaraderie is ever-present. Community is paramount at HSC, and those who actively contribute to the culture of kindness and engagement will undoubtedly thrive in this vibrant educational community.

Our Take: Private School Reviews

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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| 2. Académie Westboro Academy | 28. Merrick Preparatory School |
| 3. Albert College | 29. Metropolitan Preparatory Academy |
| 4. Appleby College | 30. Miss Edgar's & Miss Cramp's School |
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THE PULSE OF CANADA'S LEADING SCHOOLS

Since 1998, families have trusted Our Kids to help navigate the private school landscape. Drawing on years of 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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FROM THE REVIEW:

"HSC is committed to providing a rigorous academic environment where learning is engaging and challenging, while also upholding this rich culture of connection."

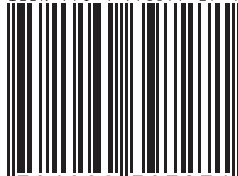
"Fostering a strong sense of self, HSC focuses on giving every student the opportunity to become the best version of themselves, gaining confidence while learning and growing in a safe and nurturing environment."

"HSC is one of the largest independent day schools in Canada, yet despite its size and the wide age range of students, we are told over and over again that everyone on campus feels like they're part of a family. It's this community feeling that brings many new families to the College and encourages many alumni to return with their own kids."

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