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PRIVATE SCHOOL REVIEWS

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## St. Margaret's School

The Our Kids Review



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## The Our Kids Review

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Written by Geoff Davies

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

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## Preface

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

## About Our Kids

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

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## Details:

# St. Margaret's School

**Supportive. Inclusive. STEM-Focused.**

**Location:** Victoria, British Columbia

**Founded:** 1908

**Enrolment:** 280 students

**Grades:** JK to Grade 12

**Gender:** Girls

**Living Arrangements:** Day and boarding

**Language of Instruction:** English

**Curriculum:** Traditional and IB

**Curriculum Pace:** Standard-Enriched

**Academic Culture:** Rigorous



## Introduction

Your first step onto the campus of St. Margaret's School feels like a breath of cool, calming fresh air.

The school sits on the southern end of Vancouver Island, a short drive from downtown Victoria, British Columbia. The campus is shaded by pine trees, next to a small lake, with a playing field, outdoor learning spaces, and wooded trails.

Walking across campus—between the buildings that house the Junior School, dining hall, design labs, science facilities, gymnasium, and more—you're likely to be struck, as you come around any corner, by a view of "Mt. Doug." Watching over St. Margaret's School, in the near-distance, is Mount Douglas—or *PKOLS*, in the SENĆOŦEN language of the W̱SÁNEĆ Nation. In the valley below, you have St. Margaret's School. Standing on the campus, it can be hard to believe you've barely left the city limits of Victoria.

"We're not isolated, we're not in the middle of nowhere, but we're off on this side street, and we have this little acreage, and all of this nature and trees," says faculty member Saloni Dholakia.

"There's this nice sense of 'We can go here' and 'We can go there.'"

While the city isn't so far away, what really beckons at St. Margaret's School is the sea, land, and sky, here on this campus where they all come together.

SMS is a place that's full of possibility, and that's what it instills in its students too.

"I think what we're really instilling in our kids is that they *CAN*," says Laura Kaiser, the boarding director and veteran staff member who has been with SMS for nearly 20 years.

"They *can* follow their dreams, they can do whatever they set their minds to, and they can be whoever they want to be."

This attitude — what Kaiser calls the "cheerleader" side of the school's personality, supporting students to achieve these dreams — helps create a school environment that's empathetic, supportive,

and inclusive.

Regardless of their age, and with each stage in their still-developing personalities, each individual student at SMS is meant to feel something else as well.

Empowered.

“We don’t tell them who to be,” says Mary Lue Emmerson, director of educational partnerships and pathways.

“We don’t tell them what a girl should look like, either — because a girl can be *whatever*, right?”

This sense of equity and empowerment is especially important when held up in contrast to what kids might experience at other schools, or what young women all too often face when they go out into the world.

“We only have to just look at our society as a whole to see that girls still live in a society that’s inequitable,” says Emmerson.

“What we do here is help them discover who they want to be, and we do it in a place that’s supportive, that’s kind, and very rigorous.”

With this comes a special emphasis on social-emotional learning, and the overall wellness of students.

Academically, the school maintains a strong focus on math, science, and the STEM subjects across all grades.

But at the same time, the SMS approach is that all subjects are best understood together, instead of being forced into false boxes or divided into silos.

Education here is intended to be interdisciplinary, experiential, and — most of all — transformative.

“I always say this is the best gift you can give your child,” says Emmerson.

“If you really believe that girls should have equal rights, equal opportunity, and should be treated equitably in this world — then why wouldn’t you start your daughter in a place where that happens every single day?”

## Basics

St. Margaret’s School, also known as SMS, is an independent, non-denominational, girl-centred school. It is an international centre for girls’ learning and leadership development, and the only girl-centred boarding school in Western Canada.

St. Margaret’s was the first girl-centred STEM school in Canada and remains a leader today. Founded in 1908, SMS is the oldest continuously operating independent school on Vancouver Island, and the island’s only all-girls school. Throughout its history, SMS has been and continues to be a trailblazer in all-girls education.

“From an academic perspective, being a girl-centred school allows us to have the right kind of community and support systems available, so the girls feel safe and comfortable enough to take risks,” says Paula Procyshyn, the school’s assistant director of academics.

This is especially important, she adds, in potentially daunting subjects, like the STEM fields, and with the hands-on, experiential approach that is a cornerstone of an SMS education.

“Each of our students has a person they can go to, to ask questions and get support. Being a smaller community means they’re able to have deeper connections with their teachers and feel more comfortable approaching them.”

Combining a STEM-focused curriculum with an experiential approach has led to SMS adopting a specific framework that it follows across the board.

“STEM-X is the framework that we focus on,” says Procyshyn. “It’s how we teach things.”



## STEM-X

St. Margaret's stands out—not just on Vancouver Island, or in Western Canada, but across the country as a whole—for being a girl-centred, STEM-focused school.

“The STEM process is what I think is so special here,” says Lisa Ziebart, principal of JK to Grade 12.

“STEM is really about the process of inquiry. It's the process of curiosity, the process of digging deeper, and we really get to focus on that here.”

From Junior Kindergarten to Grade 12, St. Margaret's School teaches students to engage with the world with courage and curiosity—from the theoretical brink of physics, to environmental and social issues, to the mathematical wonders of a pinecone.

“Science and math are everywhere. For us to have a true understanding of the world, its challenges, and the issues that we face, we have to understand it through a STEM lens,” says STEM-X Lead and Curriculum Assistant Michael Jones.

“STEM is just a wonderful way to think about the world.”

“Girls learn best when there's a reason and a purpose behind it,” says Emmerson.

The approach at SMS is anchored in critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, problem solving, and building on these skills by tackling real-world issues. This decision isn't a decorative one—it's deeply pedagogical.

“We're interested in things that matter to us, right?” says Jones.

This kind of purpose-driven education makes lessons more meaningful to students and helps them find intrinsic motivation and take ownership over their education.

It can look like a class of Grade 2 students doing a module on “activism,” or a Middle Years student making a pitch to the administration for support with an invasive species awareness campaign (and getting it).

“We want our students, when they leave, to be leaders,” says Jones.

“That's not to say you have to be Prime Minister of the country, or a CEO. It's a focus on, in some way, making a positive change and making this world a better place for the people in our communities.”

In this way, the STEM-X approach at St. Margaret's School aligns perfectly with its focus on interdisciplinary education. It brings together not only different subjects, but also provides a bridge to the school's emphasis on social purpose and leadership development.



## Leadership

“St. Margaret’s is a STEM school, it’s an experiential learning school, it’s all these things,” says SMS parent Cheryl Major. “But every single bit of me says—first and foremost—this is a girl’s leadership school.”

As a parent, the essence of what she appreciates about St. Margaret’s School can be summed up in a single word: confidence. “Girls start losing their confidence around age 8,” says Major. “They say that’s when they start questioning their abilities, and I would say it starts even earlier than that.”

Major’s eldest daughter first started at St. Margaret’s years ago as a Junior Kindergartener. Her family first came to the school simply in search of childcare and a reprieve from waitlists. By the end of the year, she was reading.

But, for Major, that wasn’t the most important change she noticed in her daughter, even from an early age, as she grew up within the St. Margaret’s community. “She will say things to me, now as an 11-year-old girl, ‘I’m a leader. People care about and listen to what I have to say.’ ”

Avani Quinn, a recent graduate of SMS, says opportunities at the school for leadership development come in many forms.

As the head of the yearbook team, a member of student council, and captain of the rowing team, Quinn found out first-hand these opportunities can be both organic — like a friendship with a girl from a younger grade — and as intentional as a for-credit class.

“I was in Grade 10, and I was very set on going to med school,” Quinn recalls. “It was in my Leadership class that I had this kind of epiphany.”

What was that epiphany? “That I didn’t like science, that I didn’t want to do that for the rest of my life,” says Avani.

Quinn adds with a laugh that, yes, girls who feel the same way do thrive at SMS — they find a sense of belonging and the challenge that’s right for them, just like everybody else.

“It was thanks to the school and the learning opportunities I had there, that I discovered my love for social studies, the humanities, and concepts of justice.”

The experience helped Quinn discover a passion for the legal system, and for being an educator and a professor one day.

“My dream job is just to be at school all the time.”

SMS’s interdisciplinary approach allowed Avani to combine studies in law and science, incorporating their intersections with anatomy, physiology, and social justice, in a silo-breaking program for senior years students.

Quinn plans to study philosophy at the University of Victoria next, while returning to SMS as an assistant coach for the rowing program.

Instead of being a “lifer” at St. Margaret’s, Quinn was introduced to the school as a Grade 9 student in the public system, primarily focused on graduating early and getting out.

Assuming at first that an independent school would be out of reach financially, Avani was encouraged to apply by a teacher who pointed out the possibility of scholarships and support.

The rest is history — and needless to say, with all the opportunities for personal and professional development, Quinn didn’t want to graduate early anymore.

Leadership development, and promoting girl-centred education, is a role that SMS plays even off-campus, out in the community, says one Victoria-based parent.

From a parent’s perspective, when you compare the confidence and values that are instilled in SMS students to that of students from other local public and private schools, she says, the difference is striking.

“There was a leadership conference a few years ago at St. Margaret’s, with students there from SMS, from other independent schools, and from local public schools as well, and I was a presenter,” says Cheryl Major, an SMS parent whose leadership-rooted values and experience stem from a career in the military, the public

service, and communications.

“I did a little workshop and one of the questions I asked the girls was about, ‘What are you most afraid of?’” says Major.

“The girls from other independent schools said, ‘Disappointing my parents’; the girls from St. Margaret’s said, ‘Not achieving my own dreams’ or essentially ‘Disappointing myself’; and the girls from public schools said ‘Spiders.’ ”

St. Margaret’s students, when they’re at home, in the community, or off on their careers, find ways to express the leadership values they learn at SMS in a wide variety of ways.

This is a feature, not a bug. Part of the magic of how these values are instilled at SMS, is that “what a leader looks like” is never strictly defined.

## Programs

Enrolment at SMS runs up to Grade 12, with the day program being offered as early as Junior Kindergarten and the boarding program starting in Grade 7.

Educational programs start at St. Margaret’s School with the Foundation Years, which runs from JK to Grade 4. Junior Kindergarten at SMS is an enriched offering, known as Bright Beginnings, that runs throughout the school year and is designed to integrate easily with after-school care at SMS, to support working families in need of childcare options.

The middle years program at SMS runs from Grades 5 to 8, and is built on an interdisciplinary curriculum, with STEM and related fields being the prevailing focus. “Our Middle Years program is interdisciplinary by nature,” says Ziebart.

The program at this level includes a special focus on delivering a global, future-focused education. It also includes regular schedule blocks dedicated to social-emotional learning. Students are challenged to shape and drive their own learning journeys, with an emphasis on character building, personal growth, and self-advocacy.

In the seniors years program, from Grades 9 to 12, students prepare themselves for their upcoming adventures and achievements after leaving SMS. Before diving deeper into specific subjects they will need in preparation for further studies, students in Grades 9 and 10 can continue to enjoy an explicitly interdisciplinary curriculum through the school’s S.P.A.R.K. program.

S.P.A.R.K. stands for Synergy, Pathfinder, Action, Responsive, Knowledge. Teachers in those grades collaborate to intentionally design a responsive, concept-based program that brings together STEM, the humanities, and other disciplines, along with a community-minded, inquiry-based approach. For example, the current school year’s S.P.A.R.K. offers Grade 9 students a combination of English and social studies, while the Grade 10s study through the intersection of English and science.



“It was super,” says one student, recalling her Grade 10 experience in the S.P.A.R.K. program. “I personally found it really cool to see the connections and see how everything can kind of be tied together.”

Students from St. Margaret's have a 100% acceptance rate to post-secondary institutions and tend to be in the driver's seat when it comes to choosing where their education will take them next. Senior years students can have the added benefit of getting accustomed to university-level learning while still in high school.

St. Margaret's is an International Baccalaureate (IB) World School and now offers the IB Diploma Programme (IBDP) for Grade 11 and 12 students. The IBDP at St. Margaret's focuses on providing students with the ability to develop critical knowledge and thinking skills that can be applied to real-world situations through an experiential, inquiry-based approach. The IBDP framework builds upon the S.P.A.R.K. program and encourages the students to think even more deeply about the world around them and their place within it, preparing them to handle whatever comes their way post-graduation.

To set students up for graduation success, senior years' students get dedicated support from the school's faculty, including guidance counselling. Students are provided with individual attention in co-developing their academic plan and receive one-on-one support to help them explore options for university. They get help to prepare their applications, apply for scholarships and awards, and explore their personal strengths and passions that will define their careers to come.

Leadership development is an important focus at SMS. It's a theme that runs through each and every grade level, beginning right in Junior Kindergarten all the way through Grade 12.

Students of all ages are taught that they can be leaders in many ways in the world and are instilled with the confidence to seize upon that. Opportunities for student leadership and mentorship are woven into all aspects of an SMS education, both formally and organically.

To position students as leaders in a thriving world, SMS recognizes that personalized learning and enrichment must be provided across the whole school (this includes being responsive to the needs of all learners); all of its programs and courses are intentionally designed with this purpose. This allows St. Margaret's to offer programs that make a difference beyond the classroom walls.

## Facilities

Students have the run of a 22-acre campus for their learning environment — a tranquil, wooded setting that's nevertheless a short drive to the downtown core of British Columbia's capital city.

The site is tucked away in a quiet residential neighbourhood in the suburban district of Saanich, where it sits adjacent to green spaces, trail systems, and recreational areas, while boasting several of its own. Students can take advantage of a range of high-quality facilities, both inside and outside.

The school's buildings are modern and welcoming. They include a LEED-certified building (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), an athletics centre, dance studio, arts studio, performing arts stage, several residence buildings with in-house amenities, a culinary arts room, and the dining room at Alexis Hall.

Recent updates to the school's computer lab and much-beloved woodworking shop — complete with the advanced technology of a CNC machine — have been the latest modernizations.

To support its high standards in curriculum delivery, St. Margaret's also has dedicated lab spaces for biology, chemistry, physics, robotics, and middle years science. For the school's wet labs, where students get hands-on experience with advanced experiments, SMS provides additional support in the form of prep rooms and a dedicated lab technician.

Outside, students arrive on campus in front of the modernized main office building, under the shade of tall fir trees. Students come and go along the main trail that leads between the campus buildings, toward the playing field and tennis courts down below. Up on the hill, tucked into the woods with a view of Mt. Douglas, sits the Nature House, one of the school's outdoor learning venues.

The outdoor spaces at SMS cater to all ages, stages, and interests. There are dedicated playgrounds for both the Junior School and the Kindergartners. There are courtyards where older students congregate and various gardens scattered over the grounds.



Whether the students are developing green thumbs, learning about food systems and sustainability, or simply enjoying getting their hands dirty, these gardens and growing spaces play an important role.

“It's important for people to know where their food comes from,” says one Grade 6 student who we meet along the way. She is a member of the Green Club at SMS, and this morning she is planting carrots in a new edible garden, sitting in the space between two classroom buildings.

## Community

Having recently come to SMS from a coed public school, this Grade 6 student says she finds it easier to focus here and feels embraced by the community.

“Everyone wants to be here a bit more,” she says. “Everyone is trying to be everyone’s friend.”

Besides the school’s small size, part of its charm is that all students — from JK-12 — are all there in the same place, learning and living together.

It’s not entirely unusual for an independent school to offer a full range of grades, covering all or most of the years from Kindergarten to high school graduation.

But what is rare and special is how, at St. Margaret’s, the foundation years, Junior School, Middle School, and Senior School programs are all in the same place, on the same campus, and very much part of the same community.

Walking across the SMS campus, across the field there are two students dancing and jumping in unison, waving their heads around in what appears to be a TikTok video in progress.

But what stands out is the fact that one of them stands half a body’s length taller than the other.

“My girls will tell me they have friends in all grades of the school,” says parent Cheryl Major.

“They know other students across all grades, and they have so much mentorship time with older girls, and, now that they’re getting older, they have opportunities to be mentors and leaders for younger girls as well.”

Leadership and engagement are at the heart of the mission of St. Margaret’s School: “Confident learners, inspiring leaders, creating a thriving world.”

“Honestly, it’s the community — the community that’s created by that triad of student, teacher, and parent,” says Saloni Dholakia, the school’s numeracy specialist.



“There’s this level of comfort and safety that kids have on this campus — and when you feel safe, and you feel ‘at home,’ then you are able to take risks and do amazing things.”

The emphasis on care has always been there at SMS, and if you look closely, it should be no surprise.

It’s right there in the school’s motto, “Service with Love”—and it’s entrenched in the SMS values as one of the “5 Cs”: Connection, Courage, Curiosity, Challenge, and Care.



## Background

The area on southern Vancouver Island where St. Margaret’s now sits had been the home of Lekwungen-speaking Indigenous peoples since time immemorial — namely the communities known today as the Esquimalt Nations, Songhees Nations, and WSÁNEĆ Nations.

In 1908, the city of Victoria was still a small colonial outpost, sitting on the edge of the English-speaking world. Canada was a dominion of Great Britain, and Confederation was still a work in progress. On the mainland, the city of Vancouver had been founded just over a dozen years earlier. The first B.C. provincial curriculum was just a few decades old. Steamships connected the world, empire was the order of the day, and for the settlers arriving here, much remained unknown about these deep forests and vast landscape.

### The Fenwick sisters

Among those arriving in Victoria from afar at the turn of the 20th century were the three founders of SMS, sisters Isabel and Edith Fenwick, arriving each one after the other, each making the journey by themselves.

The Fenwick sisters were the daughters of a cloth merchant in northern England, part of the middle-class that emerged in Victorian times. They attended a series of girls’ schools in England and finishing school on the Continent, gaining a wide-ranging education — from European languages to music and the arts — that would have stood out for women at the time. They had worked in schools and private homes across Great Britain before deciding to leave for North America.

The idea of starting a school of their own may well have been taking shape for Isabel Fenwick when, with an ever-increasing number of students under her care, and operating out of a family’s private home, she wrote to her sister Edith, encouraging her to

make the trip to join her.

It was on Cook Street in downtown Victoria that St. Margaret's School opened its doors for the very first time in 1908. Edith had arrived from England, and the Fenwick sisters had been joined by Margaret Barton, a friend from their finishing school days in Europe, and soon the trio were operating a full-fledged, fast-growing, all-girls independent school.

By 1911, the school had gone through — and grown out of — three locations, with plans now in the works for its fourth: the large, modern building at the intersection of Fort and Fern Streets, which would become the school's beloved beating heart for decades to come, until the 1970s.

But tragedy was about to strike, claiming the lives and cementing the legend of the school's founding Fenwick sisters.

### **Tragedy on SS Iroquois**

In April 1911, the day after finalizing plans for the new school building, Isabel and Edith Fenwick, along with Margaret Barton, were to take an Easter vacation on Salt Spring Island, one of the gems of B.C.'s Gulf Islands.

They travelled by rail to the ferry docks, where they boarded *SS Iroquois*, a steamer that regularly carried freight and passengers through that route. The skies were brooding and weather was moving in, when the ship slipped its moorings.

Caught by a strong wave shortly after departure, the ship capsized and sank within minutes. The ship was overloaded with poorly stowed cargo, which likely shifted as a result of the wave. Of the 32 souls onboard, only 11 survived. The Fenwick sisters were not among the survivors.

But Margaret Barton was. She was eventually found, unconscious, and pulled from the frigid water, her hands injured from clinging to a capsized lifeboat and searing steam pipes.

Her rescuers were three men from the Cowichan First Nation

who paddled to the site to aid in the recovery. William Tzouhalem, Bob Klulwhalem, and Donat Charlie saved three lives in total, and were awarded gold medals for bravery. The captain, meanwhile, was charged with manslaughter.

### **Margaret Barton**

Margaret Barton recovered and went on to be a key leader at St. Margaret's School for years to come. Students of hers, years later, would recall her scarred hands and her dauntless determination to carry on to establish and lead the school that had been a shared dream, after the tragic loss of her friends.

From its new home in downtown Victoria, St. Margaret's school would grow up with the city, adapting to the times and the many challenges they brought. Two World Wars, the Great Depression, dizzying new technological breakthroughs, an emerging Canadian identity, and evolving social values — the school's Fern Street location would see St. Margaret's through it all.

So would Margaret Barton. She would continue to serve at the school's Headmistress until 1928, and again from 1936 to 1939. In 1941 she sold her business interest in the school and registered SMS as a non-profit organization.

By the time she died, 30 years later, life at St. Margaret's School would look very different. Science and technology were opening up more and more avenues for students to explore, while changing social mores created new opportunities for the young women going through SMS's doors.

One of those young women was Frances Oldham Kelsey.



## Frances Oldham Kelsey

Frances Oldham Kelsey is known today as a heroine of modern science, both for the gender barriers she broke in the mid-20th century and for the countless newborn babies she saved from pharmaceutical harm.

U.S. President John. F. Kennedy awarded her the President's Award for Distinguished Federal Civilian Service in 1962 in recognition of her "excellent judgment" and determination in making sure American mothers were never prescribed the drug thalidomide.

Thalidomide has been widely marketed across Europe, as well as Canada, as an aid for anxiety, sleep, and morning sickness. She took note as concerns arose that thalidomide may be causing severe birth defects in newborn babies, and withheld approvals for the drug to be sold in the United States.

She wrote a scientific paper on her research validating these concerns and went on to testify before Congress. She was later made a Member of the Order of Canada. Today, the science wing at SMS bears her name.

Long before these accomplishments and her life-saving role, she was a student at St. Margaret's School, from 1928 to 1931, setting her up — even back then — for scientific studies at the undergraduate and graduate level.

But her ability to pursue her PhD in the United States, and break the sturdy glass ceiling of the times came down to a stroke of luck and touch of fate.

Frances Oldham Kelsey later recalled something strange that stood out in the acceptance letter she received.

"It started out, 'Dear Mr. Oldham' — and here my conscience tweaked me a bit. I knew that men were the preferred commodity in those days," she recounted years later. "To this day, I do not know if my name had been 'Elizabeth' or 'Mary Jane,' whether I would have gotten that first big step up."

## The Lucas Avenue campus

As the 20th century roared ahead into the changing times of the 1960s, it became clear that another change was needed. Increasingly too small for the growing school, and in need of extensive repairs, St. Margaret's historic downtown home could no longer meet SMS's modern needs.

In 1970, SMS acquired the 22-acre property on Lucas Avenue that it now calls home. Construction began on modern, spacious buildings. Students traded the old urban schoolyard for a green landscape, wide open spaces, and the vivid scents of the countryside.

Students and staff made the move on foot, walking from the old campus to the new. Back then, much of the distance they travelled was undeveloped. When students re-enacted the walk in 2011, it looked very different. So too did the school they were returning to. Something that has stayed the same however, throughout the history of SMS, is the aim and approach articulated when the school first opened its doors: "To consider the special requirements of individual girls, and to give to each one as much attention and consideration as possible."



## The teaching environment

Speaking to teachers, leaders, and alumni from the school — women who were in these students' shoes themselves a few decades ago — you start to notice a common thread in how they remember their own schooling.

It's the outline of a spectre that's still quietly there, influencing the school in terms of what it wants to remedy, and what it doesn't want to be.

“Back in my day, you were told, ‘Oh, girls aren't good at math, girls don't do math,’ that kind of thing,” remarks Mary Lue Emmerson, the director of educational pathways and partnerships. “Even me. When I was a young girl, I was sat at the back of the class and told that, too.”

Remnants of that mindset still simmer and perpetuate today. On a social level, there's still a prejudice that's present, even if now it may be less overt.

For the individuals who have gone through St. Margaret's doors in all the years since, that kind of misogyny has had an opposite, positive effect because of the hard work and deliberate decisions of SMS educators to help liberate the girls from it.

Liberation being the operative word.

The liberation that students at St. Margaret's have enjoyed for years is social as well as specific, general as well as acute. The freedom they gain is from loud voices in society, the media, history, and family, and from quieter voices inside their head.

“The girls get to be themselves and be silly,” says Cheryl Major, an SMS parent who for years has been studying the benefits of all-girls education, as well as seeing them first-hand herself.

“Girls take more risks in an all-girls environment. They challenge themselves more. They play harder and they play longer as they grow up. They play and they play exuberantly, too.”

The research, she says, supports this.

“The competition for attention of boys starts really early, even

if it's unconscious, and when you have an all-girls environment — that doesn't exist."

Lisamarie Blackwolf is a St. Margaret's alum who was a teen there in the early '80s, before a remarkable career of her own in the STEM field of military weapons and communications systems.

She started off as a young tradeswoman in the Esquimalt naval yard, and, in her words, went through four generations of technology — "from tube theory to solid state, to microprocessing, and now to digital and fully software-driven" — in a career that started in a computer science lab at SMS, back when computer science labs were fairly new.

But equally remarkable is the fact that she got to grow up in a school that even back then believed that girls belonged in computer labs, or that felt it was worthwhile to supply them with cathode ray tubes. To have teachers who organized for her to have internships with B.C. Hydro and supervised her through their own one-person industrial science course.

"Back in the day, science and stuff was quite new to the girls' schools," says Blackwolf.

"I was really, really fortunate, because St. Margaret's has always — from as far back as I can remember — supported their students in whatever they are interested in. They will support them 100%."

Full credit here where full credit is due: to generations of SMS educators, who, being women themselves, were up against the myriad collective social challenges women faced in their days — itself taking many forms through the many days that St. Margaret's has seen in its 115-year history.

But even before all of that, the experience that SMS students receive today, or the experience that young Lisamarie enjoyed in hers, none of it would be possible without that original liberation.

"There was very much a family comfort that allowed you to be different, and for that to be accepted," says Blackwolf.

"It's a girls' school, of course, so we didn't have that competition, or I don't know what to call it — we didn't have to worry about

boys. We didn't have to play helpless. We didn't have to pretend that we didn't know math."

The fact that St. Margaret's School is a girl-centred school is an essential part of what makes an SMS education so impactful. Nonetheless, single-gender education still carries misconceptions for those who haven't experienced it first-hand.

"A lot of my friends and family will ask, 'All girls? Really? Is that still a thing?'" says Principal of Academics and Deputy Head of School Megan Hedderick.

There's a misconception, she says, that girl-centred education is "old fashioned." In reality, the fact that St. Margaret's is a girl-centred school creates an environment that's both liberating and uplifting.

It's an environment with more opportunities available. With sports and clubs that are accessible and inclusive. Where there's no inequality in which team gets prime time in the gym and no lack of representation and role models. Where the top athlete, the top math student, the top robotics student, and every student leader is always a girl.

"Our graduates will often say, after they go to university, that they can't get over how much 'space' the boys take up in class," says Emmerson.

In the classroom, students never have to play dumb or pretend they can't do math. When they go off into the "coed world," they're socially well-equipped, because they've had the time and space to discover—and be confident in—who they know themselves to be.

## Academics

The academic program offered at SMS is both rigorous and balanced. It incorporates an interdisciplinary approach along with a strong focus on the STEM fields. Meanwhile the school also gives due attention to the humanities, liberal arts, music, athletics, and other subjects that are essential ingredients in a well-balanced, “whole-student” education.

St. Margaret's is an International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme school. The program is offered to students in the final two years of high school. Meanwhile, inquiry-based learning is incorporated throughout its curriculum delivery, with the middle and junior years designed to prepare students to meet this challenge when the time comes.

### Experiential & inquiry-based learning

STEM-X is the mantra and the mission at St. Margaret's. It's a belief that learners can't truly learn about the world by book, or by rote, or by rigid instruction—they have to engage with it. In that sense, STEM-X is a new articulation of a spirit that, at St. Margaret's, is many decades old.

The X stands for “Experiential.” It's the defining idea in the instructional approach at St. Margaret's, adopted in recent years. With its focus on hands-on, inquiry-based learning, St. Margaret's dedication to STEM-X puts the school at the cutting-edge of pedagogy, while at the same time staying true to its roots.

“STEM-X is about having students think critically, collaboratively, and creatively, to apply their learning to be problem solvers, and tackle some real-world problems,” says Michael Jones.

In bringing the STEM-X framework to life, the educators at St. Margaret's have worked to question old assumptions in education and dismantle the silos so many of us were brought up with.

“There's so much art in math and science—and there's so much

math and science in art,” says Jones.

The middle years program at SMS is designed on an interdisciplinary model, with math and science merged together—and often going even further than that.

For teachers and students alike, the results have been exciting, energizing, and sometimes surprising.

Jennifer Nicholson, director of personalized learning, enrichment, and wellness, says the STEM-X framework offers an inquiry-based approach that allows teachers to introduce a broad range of real-world issues while also meeting the diverse needs of each individual student.

“With STEM-X, you're drawing inspiration from all over the place, making connections and working with real-world issues,” says Nicholson.

“Instead of giving students a ‘Yes or No’ question, we give them a problem and explore ways to solve it — and if you're a neuro-atypical learner, such as a student with dyslexia, this experimental, inquiry-based approach provides a flexible framework that works for you too.”

William FitzGerald is a Grade 11 senior years STEM teacher whose subjects include physics and math. He also coaches the school's robotics team. He came to SMS from academic science, working as a chemistry researcher in a lab.

Experiential learning, he says, is often interpreted as taking the students out of the classroom settings, on field trips or outdoor excursions, and finding teachable moments out in nature. But the scientific process, he says, is inherently experiential. “Experiential education comes down to having students make choices,” says FitzGerald.

When scientists design experiments, there are decisions to make at every step of the way — decisions about how to present information, how to act in the lab, how many trials or control groups to have, and determining the appropriate course of action.

Students can't truly follow the scientific method without

engaging with the realities at their fingertips, dealing with unique circumstances, and making decisions about what to do next.

It's the students who have to make those decisions, instead of having the steps prescribed to them, and that's what matters.

Whether it takes place in a chemistry lab or a coastal rainforest, he says, makes little difference. "I feel like that process is as experiential as anything else." That said, he adds, it's still always nice getting outside to see what nature has to teach us — and on the SMS campus, nature has quite a lot to offer.

## Mathematics

St. Margaret's School is a place of natural beauty, where students study the beauty of the natural world. And in a natural world full of both beauty and complexity — where everything is inherently connected — who needs a science quiz full of abstractions, or the contrived questions of a math exam?

"Math isn't some separate thing," says SMS numeracy specialist Saloni Dholakia. Like chemistry, biology, physics and all its STEM cousins, math is inherently interconnected and interwoven — both with those other fields and with the complex and pressing issues of today.

She remembers a recent class activity that she led alongside the schools' STEM-X coordinator, looking at one particular mathematical phenomenon that has been studied since antiquity, employed by figures like Michelangelo in great works of art, and frequently identified in the natural world.

"We ate pineapples, and we looked at artichokes, and we went flower picking, and it was all about the Fibonacci sequence and the 'Golden Ratio.' "

This outing, she says, is a prime example of the interdisciplinary approach at St. Margaret's, giving students a hands-on understanding of why mathematics is not a distant relative of their other fields of study — that, in fact, it's a member of the same tight-knit family.

While this recent outing was effectively a math class — with some students impressively managing to calculate the Fibonacci sequence up to its fortieth number — it was all about Earth Day.

For students who love biology, ecology, hiking, camping, or being in nature, this gave the lesson immediate relevance, says Dholakia, not to mention a breadth of connections students could make.

For students who carry sustainability and fighting climate change close to their heart, the lesson had extra impact, says Dholakia.

"Plus we got to eat pineapple afterwards, and the kids really enjoyed that," she laughs.

"Play" is an important word to describe the approach Dholakia takes in math education. In addition to supporting students and classes across all grades with math and numeracy, she runs the school's "Math Den."

The Math Den, she says, is a special place in the school, and a rarity among the other schools she has known. It's a space that serves all students, from JK to Grade 12 — a fact, she says, that creates endearing and enriching situations of its own, when students old and young cross paths.

It's part playroom, part library, and space where SMS's interdisciplinary, socially minded approach is put into action. One day it can be a setting for engaging with high-level mathematicians, and the next day a novel study of *Hidden Figures*, the true story of black female mathematicians at NASA.

In terms of enriched math offerings, Dholakia and another teacher run a program called Math Circles, aimed at promoting a love of mathematics for adolescent girls.

The program sees them bring in a new guest speaker every month to share their story with SMS students. These guest speakers tend to be high-achieving female mathematicians and professors, ranging from PhD candidates to Cambridge Fellows, each with a story to tell.

They provide the girls with living proof that women can and do succeed in this male-dominated STEM field. “If you never see a female mathematician, and people tell you girls can’t do math, you might start believing that’s true,” says Dholakia.

The Math Circles program is made possible by grant funding from the Mathematical Association of America. St. Margaret’s has the distinction of being the only Canadian school to receive support from this particular U.S.-based grant.

### **Whole-girl education**

The school’s motto is “Service with Love” and that speaks volumes about its values. St. Margaret’s students are expected to do more than engage with the world academically. They’re expected to put something good into the world.

“It’s that sense of being of service to others, the fact that we’re not just here as individuals, we’re here to support and aid each other as well,” says Hedderick.

The values embodied by “Service with Love” are ones, she says, that are fostered by the school deliberately, but organically. They’re not imposed from the top-down. Indeed, when it comes to putting those values into action, the students lead the way.

“I think that’s why the leadership of our students shines so beautifully—because everything they do is authentic,” says Hedderick.

Tapping the left side of her chest, she adds, “Everything they do comes from in here.”

St. Margaret’s is by no means a “STEM-only” school. Seeing students go off to be the next generation of scientists, engineers, and pure mathematics professors is a noble goal—and it happens—but it’s not the primary objective.

“My biggest goal is—look, not everybody’s going to be a mathematician, not everybody is going to study this for the rest of their life, but we can all appreciate it, and there’s no reason to fear it,” says Dholakia.

Whether due to bad experiences in past classrooms or other social influences, many students need to learn to think differently about math before they can be receptive to the math itself. At St. Margaret’s, the first step to address is attitude.

“There’s almost like this pride in being bad at math, especially with adolescents, but we notice it much earlier than that,” says Dholakia.

“Often you hear people say ‘Oh, I’m not a math person,’ such as if someone is new to our community—but once they’re in our community for a while, we don’t hear that anymore.”

With math, as with many things, much of what determines a student’s success in the subject comes down to how much confidence they have with it.

Dholakia says breaking through the anxiety that many students have around mathematics is her primary goal — showing them there’s no reason to fear it. “Math Fear” will compound over time if not addressed early: if a student is hesitant about it in their early years, that hesitancy will turn into a true handicap later on in their education.

Creating an environment where students feel safe enough to try new things in subjects that scare them — that doesn’t happen by accident.

Mary Lue Emmerson says the value of all-girls education is an essential part of what makes that possible.

“Going to school in an all-girls setting allows our students to really be who they want to be as a person, to try new things and develop new skills,” she says.

If the environment prevents them from feeling that safety — due to social dynamics, gender stereotypes, or self-imposed misperceptions — then the girls will miss out on those opportunities for growth.

“A lot of people will say, ‘Well, girls need to be in school with boys because they need to understand how it is to be alongside boys,’” says Emmerson.

“But what we see is that our students learn how it is to be themselves — developing that strength of character and strength of skill — so that when they get out into the world with the boys, they know how to be a strong, competent person, because they’ve never known anything different.”

She says this equips them to go into classrooms, university lecture halls, and workplaces alongside men and boys, equipped with confidence and the ability to stand up for themselves when needed.

In the STEM fields that SMS focuses on — which are still male-dominated in many ways — making sure that graduates are able to defend themselves against these social dynamics is all the more important.

“That way, later when they’re around men, they have already figured out how to stop and go, ‘Wait a minute, what are you saying that I shouldn’t be able to do this? Of course I can do this,’” says Emmerson.

## Athletics & extracurriculars

SMS provides a comprehensive offering in athletics and extracurriculars. Physical education is a mandatory class until students reach Grade 11, when it is offered as an elective. Additionally, SMS students can take part in a wide range of sports outside of school hours, including intramurals, house challenges, and competitive athletic teams.

Students can take part in a number of sports, depending on the season: basketball, soccer, rugby, badminton, track & field, swimming, volleyball, rowing, cross-country running, and triathlon. They can enjoy the challenge of competition at both the regional and provincial level, thanks to the variety of leagues that SMS belongs to, including the Victoria Independent Schools Athletic Association (VISAA), the Independent Schools Association (ISA), the Independent Schools Elementary Association (ISEA), and B.C. School Sports (BCSS).

Introducing students to a variety of different sports allows them to find activities they love to do, helping them stay healthy and fit for the rest of their lives. Exploring these athletic opportunities in the all-girls environment of SMS has the added benefit of giving students a safe space to try new experiences, and to do so in a setting where female athletes are second to none.

“My background is in phys-ed, and I know there’s so many disparities in sports,” says head of school Sharon Klein.

“What we don’t have here is situations like where the boys’ teams are given the prime-time use of the gym. You think that doesn’t happen? It certainly does — but here, there’s no question: you are the number one, and you’re getting the prime-time opportunity.”

In terms of extracurriculars, SMS has extensive opportunities available, and clubs of all kinds on offer. The Model UN Club is one that often gets mentioned for the strength of its program. Art, Photography, Debating, Drama, Glee Club, Green Club, and Peer

Tutoring are others that help students explore their passions and form connections together. Students in the middle and senior years can take part in the DEI Club and the Gender Sexuality Alliance Club to support important social causes.

Robotics is offered as Lego Robotics for younger students, while Grade 12 students can take part in the First Tech Challenge, a robotics competition that challenges them to design the machines and develop the coding necessary to complete robotics challenges and compete against other schools.

This team had an exciting year at the time of writing, qualifying to compete at the provincial level. William FitzGerald, the teacher who coaches that senior robotics team, recalls how, after two flawless rounds, their robot tipped over and had its claws sheared off, disabling it. The students had to rebuild and improvise until they had a working robot again, eking out a victory against a tough opponent to advance to the next round — when the robot broke again. FitzGerald says it was an exciting lesson in resilience and teamwork for the students, as well as a new high-water mark for the FTC Robotics Club.

Outdoor education is also an important part of the SMS's extra-curricular offerings. In addition to outings and field trips throughout the year, students take part in Outweek at the start of the school year. The week-long trip is offered thanks to a 30-year partnership with Strathcona Park Lodge, located at a provincial park in the interior of Vancouver Island. Outweek creates an opportunity for students to form interpersonal bonds and try new outdoor and wilderness activities, like kayaking and rock climbing, while setting the cultural tone for the rest of the year.

Students in the senior years can take their outdoor education to the next level by taking part in SMS's Duke of Edinburgh Club, working toward the world-renowned youth achievement award.

## School community

Roughly 285 students call St. Margaret's "home" — and for many of them, it really is a second home.

Michael Jones says, for many staff members and teachers like himself, it feels like a second home for the grown-ups too. "People here really do care, and that's why 'community' really stands out for me," says Jones. "This is a place where people are happy to be, and where they feel a sense of belonging."

Earlier that day, Jones took part in the Staff versus Students basketball game that has been a highlight on the SMS calendar. The gym, he says, was packed with students and full of energy as his team of teachers and staff took on their younger adversaries.

It points to the fact that, at the heart of this happy academic community, there is a happy staff community supporting it. It also shows how, at SMS, the bonds of care and consideration don't just flow from staff to students — in fact, it goes both ways.

"I think people care for each other here — whether it's students caring for students, or teachers caring for students, or students caring for teachers," says Jones.

Given the school's small size, those bonds between teacher and students aren't amorphous. In fact, they're quite personal.

"I have one kid in Grade 3 who is giving me a hard time for being an Oilers fan," he laughs. This is despite the fact that Jones doesn't teach Grade 3. "As teachers, we may not have a relationship with every student, but I do think most teachers know most of the students."

When asked what defines the essence of SMS, one of the most common answers from staff and students alike — along with STEM, experiential learning, and all-girls education — is "community."

Director of Boarding and Student Engagement Laura Kaiser has been an SMS staff member for nearly 20 years. She can think of dozens of different students who found exactly what they needed at SMS, for their self-discovery and transformation, thanks to the





connections they made with teachers and staff. “The essence of our community is that staff care,” says Kaiser. “No one gets left behind.”

Getting emotional at the thought of it, Kaiser says her favourite day of each year is Graduation Day. It’s the day she gets to celebrate all these students she knows personally — a typical size for an SMS graduating class is about 25 students — and reflect on the journeys of each of them.

Kaiser says her own journey at SMS started two decades ago as an auxiliary house parent, helping take care of a boarding family of four or five students.

The boarding program welcomes students from all over the world — with over a dozen countries currently represented — as well as local students who stay as boarders five days a week.

The boarding program is an important part of the SMS community, and it has been for years. Boarding students belong to one of four boarding houses — Barton, Fenwick, French, and Pearce — each named for important people in the school’s past.

One of many ways the boarding program builds bridges with the broader student community is through the boarding dinners it hosts throughout the years: student-run, themed events that are known as the “hottest ticket in town,” says Kaiser.

Beyond the boarding program, every student, teacher, and staff member at SMS belongs to one of four school houses: Canmore, Christian, Malcom, and Turgot. Within these teams, they foster inter-grade friendships and a strong sense of pride, taking part in house challenges to earn points and compete for a trophy at the end of the year.

Health and wellness is an important focus for the school in how it supports all students. In addition to fitness facilities and a school nurse, guidance counsellors advise SMS students on academic and career matters, and wellness counsellors are there to turn to when they need a trusted adult to talk to about stress, anxiety, mental health, and more.

The focus, in all respects, is on supporting and developing the whole child, and giving students everything they need to be in the best possible position upon graduation.

“It’s funny: some things here have changed a lot — because we’ve evolved with the times — but some things haven’t changed at all,” says Kaiser, looking back on all her years at SMS. “Our focus on empowering girls, making sure girls have every opportunity in this world, preparing them to be strong leaders when they go out into the world — that part hasn’t changed at all.”



## Getting in

Community comes first and foremost at SMS. For families, the experience of being embraced by the St. Margaret's community starts when they first apply to join the school.

The admissions process is both thorough and personal. Parents can begin by applying online, through the SMS website. From there, families can take advantage of connecting with the school community in person in a number of ways, including campus tours, direct phone and email communications, and open houses and information sessions that take place each fall.

St. Margaret's School has an 85 percent acceptance rate. Students are accepted into the boarding program from Grade 7 onwards; day students are accepted in any year, from Kindergarten to Grade 12. In addition to the natural starting points for joining St. Margaret's — such as JK or the beginning of the middle years and senior years programs — one age where SMS sees an uptick in new student applications is Grade 3.

“We tend to get a lot of applications in Grade 3, and that's generally because families have been in the public system for a few years, they've seen how certain skillsets have started to develop, and they're looking for additional supports,” says Emmerson.

SMS admissions staff will look at each child's report card, as well as requiring a personal interview, character reference, and an academic reference. An entrance exam and essay are required for most grade levels, but not SSATs. An average admissions year would see about 19 new students enrolling per grade.

More than anything, admission comes down to character. SMS loves to embrace students who demonstrate vision and spark, as well as reflecting the values of the community.

An SMS student is caring and genuine in their interactions and communicates with honesty and accountability. They are eager to take on challenges, learn from mistakes, and do what's right, while also taking responsibility for themselves and their communities.

They are students who have the potential to pursue goals and dreams and an openness to being encouraged to do so.

## Money matters

Tuition at St. Margaret's is on par with what one might expect from a school of this kind and of this calibre. Though it's no small investment they're making in their child's education, the unique social, environmental, and academic offerings at SMS allow families to feel that it's one that provides significant value and outsize return.

Domestic day student tuition fees are above \$20,000 per year, and slightly more in the senior years. The day tuition fees cover the majority of what students need. This includes textbooks, school supplies, and transportation for athletic teams, music groups, and other clubs.

Families of boarding students can expect higher tuition fees, which provide for a wide range of wrap-around needs. This includes essential daily needs, such as meals, laundry, Internet, lodging, and access to the health centre.

In keeping with the school's values of community and care, St. Margaret's provides a variety of bursaries and financial support. For example, the Altitude Bursary is available to students in Grades 9-12 who prove academic excellence and engagement in climate action, sustainability, STEM-X, service, or leadership. By completing the application and telling a compelling story of how they intend to bring this level of engagement to the SMS community, students can receive a tuition reduction of up to 50 per cent.

Additional financial support is made available to families who send multiple siblings to be part of the SMS community. As well, there are a variety of merit-based scholarships that provide significant support.

"Scholarships are something I never knew you could do at a private school," says recent graduate Avani Quinn, who came to SMS from the public system starting in Grade 10. "It makes the opportunity that much more accessible. You just have to try — and if you try, you're often likely to get something."

SMS parent Cheryl Major says it's a school that quickly dispelled for her any misconceptions she held about independent schools, and the kind of families who can access it.

"One of the biggest things that we've learned, and that I would like people to know, is that independent school is probably more accessible than you think it is," says Major.

"If any family thinks it's the right fit for them, I would say they should explore things like financial aid, or bursaries or scholarships that might be offered at the school, especially if they're the kind of family that's willing to get involved or to contribute to the school in other ways."



## The takeaway

Spend enough time with the people in the St. Margaret's community, and you'll start to hear a common refrain. Spend some time on the campus, and you can feel it for yourself.

There is magic at St. Margaret's School, and it comes in many forms.

For parent Cheryl Major, it's the comfort and care her girls experience, and the knowledge she has that they're cared for, and safe. And not just the absence of danger—it's the safety for her girls to be themselves, to step out of their comfort zones, and to gain a new sense of confidence.

Mary Lue Emmerson sees this in action from a young age, and still finds it striking. "It's very hard to describe the magic that happens at the school," she says. "You see it when you come to assembly and you see every single child in our Junior School—from our youngest to Grade 6—is speaking into a microphone, in front of the whole school."

Alumna Lisamarie Blackwolf recalls how the confidence she gained as a student, athlete, and house captain at SMS some 40 years ago equipped her with the tools to take charge of a team, communicate effectively, and bring people together.

That, combined with the school's personalized support and enduring interest in innovation — giving her access to emerging technologies and individualized opportunities — paved the way to her breaking down barriers working as a systems engineer in the male-dominated defence industry.

Like many SMS students past and present, she developed a bond with the school that endures, and endures, and endures.

"When I would go back to the Old Girls luncheons, there would be ladies who graduated as far back as the 1920s, and it's as if they were young girls again," says Blackwolf.

That focus on science, technology, engineering, math — and empowerment — is a proud tradition at SMS, going back to the

days when the school provided a young Blackwolf with access to then-new cathode ray technology — and it continues today.

St. Margaret's School was the first all-girls STEM school in Canada, and it stands out as a leader in that field, with its central focus on the STEM-X framework.

Students are supported in every way imaginable, whatever their interests, and the school's ethos of care ensures they have the opportunities and support — from athletics to the arts, from mental health to career development — to help them go on to great things. Many of them do, and end up all over the world, in all kinds of different fields, with all kinds of different successes to their credit.

But wherever they go, many of them come back to visit, and countless more continue to feel connected to the St. Margaret's community.

For parent Cheryl Major, what she found when her daughter started at St. Margaret's was a private school that was more accessible than she expected, and a community that was more embracing than she ever thought possible. "I think it's more community-focused than other schools, more down-to-earth," says Major. "It's more authentic. Authentic is a really good word for it."

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“When asked what defines the essence of SMS, one of the most common answers from staff and students alike—along with STEM, experiential learning, and all-girls education— is ‘community.’”

“Health and wellness is an important focus for the school in how it supports all students.”

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