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# Crestwood School

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ISBN 978-1-990397-28-8

Photography by Tobi Asmoucha for Our Kids Media

Written by Megan Easton

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

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## Preface

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

### **About Our Kids**

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

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16. Crestwood School
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22. Hudson College
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30. Metropolitan Preparatory Academy
31. Miss Edgar's & Miss Cramp's School
32. Niagara Christian Collegiate
33. Northstar Montessori Private School
34. Pickering College
35. Prestige School
36. Ridley College
37. Robert Land Academy
38. Rosseau Lake College
39. Royal Crown School
40. Royal St. George's College
41. St. Clement's School
42. St. John's-Kilmarnock School
43. St. Mildred's-Lightbourn School
44. Sunnybrook School
45. The Bishop Strachan School
46. The Clover School
47. The Country Day School
48. The Mabin School
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## **Details: Crestwood School**

**Balance. Community. Inclusion.**

**Location:** Toronto, Ontario

**Grades:** Junior Kindergarten to Grade 6

**Gender:** Coed

**Language of Instruction:** English

**Living Arrangements:** Day

**Enrolment:** 450

**Founded:** 1980

**Curriculum:** Traditional

**Academic Culture:** Supportive



## Introduction

Crestwood School is a haven for students in two senses: it's tucked away in a lush, forested valley in Toronto, and it provides a welcoming educational environment customized to different learning styles. The school nurtures and celebrates children's individuality, both their academic abilities and extracurricular interests and talents.

Balance defines Crestwood's approach inside and outside the classroom. There's a strong emphasis on tried-and-true teaching methods, but also an openness to pedagogical innovation. And while intellectual development is paramount, there's equal consideration given to cultivating students' creative, social, and emotional growth. This approach tends to attract parents who value academic achievement, yet not at the expense of strong character, overall well-being, and broad-based skills.

"Many of our students come to us because their needs haven't been met elsewhere," says Founder and Head of School Dalia Eisen. "We've built a place where every child feels accepted and valued by their teachers and peers. Our first priority is to foster confidence and self-esteem, so we make sure that every child shines in some area at school. If they're not at the top of the class, maybe they have their art displayed, they're on the soccer team, or have won the annual public speaking competition."

Students' framed artwork lines Crestwood's hallways, alongside framed pictures commemorating past theatrical productions

put on by Junior School (Grade 4 to 6) students. All of it looks surprisingly professional for an elementary school, and Eisen's pride is obvious. Several of the parents I spoke to mentioned that the extensive gallery of paintings and drawings reaffirmed their sense that the school honoured students' distinct gifts, not just their academic abilities.

"We chose Crestwood because we value developing our daughter as a whole person, and it was apparent from the artwork and the musicals that their strong academic program was balanced with the arts and other education," says one parent of a daughter in the Primary School (Junior Kindergarten to Grade 3). Another parent of a son in Grade 6 echoed this assessment: "We were looking for a coed private school within the city that was well-rounded, with opportunities for arts, sports, and academics."

A lot of private schools are known for excellence and investment in one area—STEM and robotics, for example, or athletics. That's not the case at Crestwood, as Junior School Principal Amy Fuller explains. "We don't have one 'thing.' We have many things for many types of students. If you're an arts kid, then Crestwood is an arts school. If you're a sports kid, then Crestwood is a sports school."

It's all part of Crestwood's commitment to ensuring every student not only feels included but embraced by the school community. "We provide a welcoming environment that embraces differences," says Interim Primary School Principal Katie Maalouf. "There are some unique and interesting students here. At Crestwood, their differences are their strengths."

Talk of inclusiveness and acceptance is the norm at schools today, but visitors don't always feel it. Nor do students always reinforce this assertion from the top. Based on my conversations with Crestwood students, though, the official message plays out on the ground. "This is a place where you can be yourself, like you can be you and have your own interests," says one Grade 5 student, summarizing the sentiment expressed by several of his peers. Says another, "We're kind of like a really, really, really big family."

While approximately 450 individuals would indeed make for a very large family, it's a relatively small number for an elementary school. And somehow Crestwood feels even smaller than that. There's no intimidating grand entrance, for example, but rather a smallish front reception where two receptionists—one of whom has been at the school since day one—knows every student and family member by name. There's also the quiet of the treed campus. But mostly it's the unfussy, laid-back atmosphere cultivated by everyone from the head of school on down.

One student teacher, who's also a graduate of Crestwood, shared his thoughts on what sets the school apart from the several other private schools where he's had placements. "It's more relaxed, and I've noticed that the students are less stressed," he says. "There's definitely what I would describe as an ease here. Both the students and teachers feel very comfortable, so it's a nice place to be."

The feel of a school—beyond its outward polish, public reputation, and measurable academic achievements—can play an outsized role in influencing students' and parents' decisions about where to enrol. Crestwood's feel is friendly and warm, something nearly everyone I interviewed mentioned.

"There's a warmth in the building that you can sense," says one parent of a daughter in Grade 4. "Mrs. Eisen has created a place where children are given amazing opportunities to shine, to take risks, and to rise to their full potential." When Eisen took the leap of founding her own school 40 years ago, she vowed to bring out the best in each of her students. That commitment has never waned. "Every child has a strength or talent," she says. "When we find it, we celebrate it."

## Basics

Crestwood School is a co-educational, non-denominational day school in North York offering a supportive yet challenging education for students in Junior Kindergarten through Grade 6. It belongs to the Conference of Independent Schools of Ontario, whose mission is to enhance excellence in member schools through exemplary student programs, professional learning, and collaborative initiatives.

Enrolment sits around 450 students, and there are no plans to grow. Mainstream classes run no larger than 18 to 20, with some below that, depending on the year's cohort. Classes for students requiring extra academic support sit at around 12. Most students come from nearby neighbourhoods, though a minority commute from further afield in the city. There's no school busing service.

Crestwood isn't one of those schools that Toronto drivers regularly pass on their daily commutes. It's only accessible off the tail end of Lawrence Avenue East, which ends a short distance from the school. Driving down a hill bordered by forest on both sides, it feels like you're entering a secret enclave of the city. "Few people know there's a school here, and they're often surprised," says Eisen. The affluent Bridle Path neighbourhood lies just northeast, with York University's lush Glendon Campus to the south.

"We've been in this location for 34 years, and I still I look around in awe," says Eisen. "It feels like you're up north somewhere,

and you're pretty much in the middle of the city. When it's all green it's unbelievably beautiful. Then the fall colours are amazing. Even in the winter, when the snow is thick on the branches and the sun is shining, it's spectacular."

Parents can't say enough about the school's 3.5-acre natural setting, and it's a big part of Crestwood's appeal. "My son has commented many times about how lucky he is to be surrounded by a forest," says one parent of a current student and a graduate. "We joke that it's almost like Hogwarts. Our kids have definitely appreciated it, coming from a school where the playground was literally a parking lot with a fence. And we know that being in nature is good for your mental health, which impacts your academic success." Several other parents used the word "oasis" to describe the Crestwood campus, with good cause based on my assessment.

All the students I met had something positive to say about their outdoor environment. "I remember when we were learning about habitats our teacher took us on a hike," says one Grade 6 student. "It was really nice." A few talked about sitting under the shade of favourite trees in the yard. "We see caterpillars on the trunk, and it really helps us connect with nature," says a Grade 5 student.

Teachers capitalize on the outdoor classroom in all seasons: sketching nature, practising drama scenes in the open air, studying flora and fauna—not to mention taking sports and phys-ed classes out of the gym. "One tradition is going for a walk to see the salmon spawning in the Don River," says Junior School teacher Lindsay Pembridge. "But you can also look up during any given recess and see about three hawks circling."

Jen Krashinsky, a Grade 6 English teacher who has been at Crestwood for 18 years, says, "There are always birds outside the classroom window. It's such a natural environment for the kids. When you come down the hill and into the valley, it kind of feels like you're shedding the city."

When they're not exploring the valley, students can play on two age-appropriate playgrounds and a good-sized turf field. One



parent expressed a wish that the field was larger, but I didn't hear that from any of the students.

Given how much the community values the campus grounds, it's no surprise that the school takes conservation seriously. Crestwood is a Gold Certified Eco School through the Ontario Eco Schools program, and a large and dedicated Eco Team of Junior School students leads campaigns to further green the school.

The indoor facilities comprise two main buildings. The smaller one is for the Primary School, designed to accommodate students from Junior Kindergarten through Grade 2. It features a communal indoor courtyard surrounded by classrooms; ideal for assemblies and performances by the younger students. The classrooms are large and bright with natural light.

The Junior School building sits across from the Primary School building, a larger, more modern building that's undergone a number of renovations and additions over the years, including a whole second floor and a full-sized gym "that could host the Raptors," says Eisen. Other features include an art studio, two music rooms, a STEM lab, and smart boards in every classroom. The library, curated by longtime Crestwood Teacher-Librarian Lara Bafaro is popular with students and teachers alike. Bafaro stocks the shelves with the latest in-demand reads for all ages along with classics, curriculum-themed collections, and books celebrating equity and diversity.

"The facilities at Crestwood are perfect for the size of the school," says one Primary School parent. "The smaller building for the younger years helps to integrate them into the school community, but at the same time isn't overwhelming for them. Once in Grade 3, the students then go into the larger building, which makes them feel older and more confident in themselves."

Overall, the school buildings are modern, bright, and comfortable. The only showy thing about Crestwood is its gorgeous setting. As one Junior School parent put it, "Crestwood focuses on education and individual child needs and is less concerned with the large,

shiny, or grand campuses that other private schools may provide."

The facilities reflect Crestwood's unpretentious culture, which is also evident in student uniforms. While the ensembles are smart and neat in shades of navy and grey, there are no blazers. Instead, the children wear crested polos, varsity cardigans, or sweaters with dress pants or shorts. Only in Grade 4 and up do the students wear shirts and ties for full dress days.

While I visited on Earth Day, when students and teachers were dressed as their favourite animals, several community members mentioned the relatively relaxed dress code compared with other private schools. "They're not super strict about the uniforms," says one parent of a daughter in Grade 6. "They don't have to be perfectly buttoned up. The balance between Crestwood's structured, formal expectations and more casual, open-minded approach is reflected in the uniforms."

There's also flexibility in Crestwood's fee-based before- and after-care program, which is essentially pay-as-you-go. Another option for parents is a free after-school homework club for older students. "There's a teacher there to supervise, but it's not a tutoring service," says one parent of a Junior School student. "It's just a quiet space with supervision to do their homework. So, personally, that's been very helpful for us because we both work and it gives us an extra hour and a half of childcare."

After graduation, the majority of Crestwood graduates – about 70 per cent – go on to attend Crestwood Preparatory College, which is less than a 15-minute drive away and offers Grade 7 to Grade 12.



## Background and leadership

Dalia Eisen founded Crestwood in 1980 with the conviction that she could use her decade of teaching in the public and private systems to build a better educational experience for students. Her vision was to create a warm, inviting school where teachers would truly know and value students' strengths and challenges, and tailor their instruction accordingly.

From a modest beginning with seven students in an 800-square-foot office space, the school grew quickly through word-of-mouth, because the parents were grateful that their children had found a place where they could thrive. "At first, I focused on students with learning challenges, and I provided language arts and math instruction in the mornings and after school," she says. "But parents wanted more, and soon I had inquiries from families whose children had no learning difficulties but were seeking a more personalized learning experience. I shifted to become a mainstream school, but one that maintained its dedication to meeting students wherever they were in their academic abilities with individualized teaching."

After just five years, Eisen's school moved into a Victorian house near Toronto's Yorkville neighbourhood with 70 students. Shortly after that, enrolment was quickly ticking upward, and she knew Crestwood needed a larger space. A Crestwood parent offered to partner with her, and in 1989 Harold Perry, Chairman and CEO of Mandrake Consultants, bought the current property. Since then,

he's been the owner while Eisen has been head of school. Perry is also the owner of Crestwood Preparatory College (which opened in 2001) and Crestwood Valley Day Camp.

Crestwood's current location on Lawrence Avenue East was the old site of Bayview Glen private school. Perry and Eisen oversaw major renovations before the new location officially opened in 1990. Over the decades there have been other refurbishments and additions, most significantly building a second floor in 2017.

Based on my conversations across the Crestwood community of staff, parents, and students, I found consensus in the belief that Dalia's original vision remains central, despite the school's growth. "She built this school up to be one of the best in the city with her dedication to children and her drive to instill a lifelong love of learning," says one parent of a daughter in Grade 6. "Some Crestwood students have differences or struggles, and they just receive love and support here. As a result, they start to love school."

Despite her formidable success with Crestwood, Eisen is unfailingly matter-of-fact and averse to taking credit. She sings the praises of her teachers, yet is reluctant to talk about herself. And while she's known as a straight-shooter, it's apparent that she also wears her heart on her sleeve with students. Her deep care for the children is obvious in the way she speaks to, and about, them.

"Dalia has shaped a warm and inviting atmosphere that's also no-nonsense," says one parent. "There's a firm but fair element to the school, which I really like. And she's cultivated a positive environment for both students and staff. Walk through the school and you'll see the kids are really happy. They're given the chance to be themselves. But they also know that they have responsibilities."

This concept of balance came up over and over again in parents' assessment of Eisen's leadership, both in relation to her personality (practical but compassionate) and her educational philosophy (tradition-based but student-centred). "Her understanding approach to children who learn differently is amazing," says one Junior School parent. "She made a point at our first meeting of telling us that

Crestwood would make sure that every single child believes that they're the best at something."

Eisen speaks fondly of her early years as a primary school teacher, and of how she misses the classroom. This passion for teaching has evolved into a broader passion for cultivating not just children's learning, but their well-being and confidence. "When I see kids arrive at Crestwood who, for whatever reason, haven't been happy at their old schools, then I see them start to thrive, it gives me so much satisfaction."

## Academics

Crestwood School has managed to strike that elusive balance between traditional teaching methods and newer, more progressive approaches. Crestwood teachers are committed to ensuring that students have a firm grasp of the fundamentals in core subjects, while still offering opportunities to explore in the arts, physical education, and technology.

"Our students leave here with solid, basic skills under their belt," says Eisen. "Parents will often ask me, 'If I have a certain amount of money to devote to private education, should I do it at the beginning or in high school?' My answer is always that if you do it in the early years, you don't need it in high school."

While there will always be critics of a traditional approach to education, Eisen is unbothered—likely because she's been proven right in recent years as the pendulum swings back to the essentials that Crestwood has always maintained.

"We never stopped teaching phonics, cursive writing, or the times tables," she says, noting that it's possible to do this while following the Ontario curriculum. "We also never jumped onto the private school trend of having students do math a year ahead of grade level. I believe the grade-appropriate math curriculum is difficult enough for most kids." If a student is particularly strong in math, they'll receive enrichment.

For parents who worry that the curriculum might be too

easy for their child in certain areas, there's no need for concern at Crestwood. There are enrichment opportunities in every subject, just as there are various mechanisms of academic support (see Academic Support below).

“What I think is unique to Crestwood is the ability to blend the modern technology and forward ways of thinking about education with older, established philosophies—all while supporting children who have varying learning needs,” says one parent of two Crestwood students. “She’s a smart leader and feels that kids should be taught foundational skills.”

Junior School teacher Lindsay Pembridge says she and her colleagues are united in their aim of laying the foundation for learning in every subject. “If you come to Crestwood, you’re going to learn to read and write well, and you’re going to be really confident with your math abilities. We make sure that they have the basics.”

This isn’t to say that students don’t have ample opportunities to pursue independent or group projects on topics of their choice. “We try to offer a lot of choice to students whenever there’s potential for that,” says Grade 6 English teacher Jen Krashinsky, noting that, in addition to choosing the topic, students can sometimes choose the final form of assignments (such as essays, videos, podcasts, or newspaper articles). “Children do well when they have those opportunities to hook into their areas of expertise or interest.”

Parents spoke of the benefits of this individualized approach. “We love how the academic program at Crestwood is tailored to each individual student,” says one parent of a Grade 2 student. “The staff work with each of the student’s strengths. Our daughter feels supported in the classroom and has become much more confident in her skills and abilities.”

Academic expectations are high, but always geared to students’ unique aptitudes. “We talk a lot about equity versus equality here,” says Junior School Principal Amy Fuller. “We want the kids to understand that not everybody has the same academic accommodations or enrichment. Instead, everyone gets what they need to be

successful.” With this in mind, every grade level at Crestwood has two or three mainstream classes and one smaller class for children who need more intensive practice and guidance.

When it comes to Crestwood’s academic mission, the aim is to build up each student’s sense of competence. “We celebrate individual successes—no matter how big or small,” says Fuller. “Some of the kids that come to Crestwood don’t have the confidence to take risks and really engage in their learning, so we work hard to recognize their efforts and accomplishments.” The resulting academic culture is one that encourages students to monitor their progress and set realistic goals for improvement, not compete with their classmates for grades.

Within this supportive, non-competitive environment, however, Crestwood has highly structured academic programs and clear expectations for students. In math, mainstream classes use My Math Path, an approach based on the Singapore Math framework that requires students to gain mastery of a limited number of concepts at a time. Developing positive attitudes toward math is also integral to the program, as it is in the JUMP Math program used in Crestwood’s smaller classes.

In Language Arts, Crestwood uses the Step Up to Writing program. It takes a highly systematic approach to developing students’ writing abilities and is adaptable enough to be effective with children at all levels. “We’ve been using it for years because it works so well with every student, no matter where they are with their reading and writing,” says Interim Primary School Principal Katie Maalouf. “For the younger students, it’s very hands-on and multi-modal, guiding them through the construction of a sentence. Later on, the program transitions to modelling how to write a beautiful five-paragraph essay.” Krashinsky agrees. “It’s a very logical, strategic program that’s applicable across subjects and learning styles.”

Age-appropriate homework begins in Grade 1 with about 10 minutes per day and increases gradually. “I’m a big proponent of homework, but not where a kid’s going home and doing two hours

and it serves no purpose,” says Eisen. “Homework should be one of two things: something that hasn’t been completed in class, or the reinforcement of a new concept that’s just been taught.”

Pembridge says teachers understand that today’s children often have a lot of obligations after school, so they adjust accordingly. “I assign something that needs completing by Friday on Monday. This prompts them to start building those organizational skills, to know what their week looks like and plan ahead.”

Crestwood has a strict policy about student research: all of it must take place at school. “A long time ago we stopped sending projects home as homework because we knew that parents were getting very involved,” says Teacher-Librarian Lara Bafaro. “The teachers and I support students’ investigations in the library, and they can do artwork and finishing touches at home.”

Technology is, of course, embedded not just in student research, but in every aspect of students’ learning today. At Crestwood, Head of IT Luke Connors has been guiding teachers and students in the responsible use of tech in education for nearly 25 years. “Our philosophy is that digital tools are meant to enhance traditional learning, not replace it,” he says. “Every teacher uses their own discernment in how to do that, and my role is to support them and their students in finding and using the best platforms.” Kindergarten students have access to iPads, while every student from Grade 1 onward has a personal Chromebook.

Academic skill-building is a priority throughout Crestwood’s programs. Most schools today talk about “learning to learn,” but Crestwood puts it front and centre. It’s especially evident in the upper grades, where teachers are very intentional about preparing students for middle school. There’s regular coaching on time management and study habits, and in Grade 6 students’ schedules shift to the rotary model they’ll encounter in Grade 7.

Teachers also cultivate greater independence in older students by requiring them to communicate directly on academic matters, rather than through their parents. “I tell them that I can understand

they might need an extension, but I want to hear the reason from them, not their parents,” says Pembridge. “We take the training wheels off slowly.”

That support and preparation pays off when students leave Crestwood for higher grades.

I interviewed one parent of a current Grade 6 student who had recently received offers of admission from her top two choices of schools. “It can be very competitive, so I feel that Crestwood prepared her well academically and in terms of her confidence,” she says.



## The arts

It's apparent just from first impressions that the arts hold a special place at Crestwood. No matter where you are in the school, you'll find exhibits of students' paintings, drawings, and sculptures.

You'll also likely hear at least one of the following sounds: a spirited Primary School music class, a choir, a band practice, or a theatre rehearsal.

"The arts are a huge part of our programs," says Eisen, whose office is filled with students' visual art. "One of the things that I've always done is regularly ask students if I have permission to frame one of their artworks for hanging around the school. Not only are the pieces impressive in their own right, but it's another way that we increase students' sense of their strengths."

The visual arts studio is full of natural light and packed with tools and materials to fuel every imaginative project. Other proof of the arts' high status at Crestwood includes the Artist of the Month award, highlighted in the school's digital communications but also prominently displayed in a prime spot in the Junior School hallway.

Music, drama, and the marriage of both—musical theatre—are central to Crestwood's programming. In the Primary School, the focus is on fun and exploration. "We start to develop musical literacy with a lot of singing and dancing," says Amanda Birchard, the Primary School music teacher, noting that this is called the Orff Approach. "We begin introducing them to elements such as

beat, rhythm, dynamics, and tempo through a lot of kinesthetic approaches. Overall, my goal as a music teacher is to make music joyful, because if they're invested, then they can put in the time and the discipline for the heavy-duty stuff later on."

Grade 4 marks the beginning of a full instrumental music program, starting with recorders as a precursor to band instruments. Each grade in the Junior School plays in a band that performs at the Toronto Centre for the Arts in holiday and spring concerts. The Primary and Junior choirs also take the stage.

While these shows are a highlight for the Crestwood community, the annual Junior School musical is perhaps Crestwood's signature arts event. To lay the groundwork, Birchard leads every Primary School class in a musical theatre performance on a much smaller scale. I met several Grade 2 and 3 students who spoke animatedly about their parts in these one-act shows.

"I love seeing the younger students' creative licence to build something fun and incredible, but most of all seeing very shy, introverted kids do incredible things," says Birchard, who's also a long-time professional performer with extensive experience in musical theatre. "They start off scared and they just kind of like tiptoe in the water, but then they take risks and feel so good about themselves. We also get really passionate responses from the parents, who never imagined their children doing something like that."

For the Junior School musical, everything goes up to the next level, with a full-length production, professional costumes, and a performance at Toronto's Young People's Theatre. Still, though, the real goal is uplifting students' self-concept and pride.

The school encourages every Grade 4, 5, and 6 student to participate, though it's not mandatory. The year I visited, more than 60 students opted in, representing more than a third of Junior School enrolment. "If they want to be in it, they're in it," says Eisen, noting that the director writes in additional characters if the student to character ratio is too high. "They all have to audition, but we don't turn anybody away. If they have the courage to

stand up there in front of everyone and sing a song, we want them to be included."

Make no mistake, though: the musical is a serious endeavour at Crestwood. Nurturing budding talent, or bravery even without talent, is important, but so is instilling values such as hard work, collaboration, and responsibility. Students must learn their lines and attend every after-school rehearsal. Several of my interviews took place in a room where the costumes for the upcoming Little Mermaid production lined the walls, and the quality of these alone pointed to how seriously Crestwood takes this endeavour.

It's all worth it in the end, according to teachers, students, and parents alike. "The school staff cultivate a really beautiful relationship among the cast members," says one parent whose daughter has had a role for all three years of Junior School. "It makes them feel like they're part of something special. And the performance was really, really high-calibre. It brings out the best in every kid."



## Pedagogical approach

Head of School Dalia Eisen knew one thing for certain when she founded Crestwood: a school is only as good as its teachers. She'd learned from experience that, without teaching excellence, all the fancy facilities and prestigious programs mean very little to student outcomes.

This conviction makes her quite particular about who gets to join the Crestwood faculty. "There are two aspects, as far as I'm concerned, of being a great teacher," says Eisen. "The obvious one is, can you get your material across to students? But the second one, and it's just as important, is your rapport with students. What is your relationship with every child in your class?"

Research has proven just how pivotal the teacher-student bond is to students' academic success, something known as "relational learning" in education. Long before this became a catchphrase for school marketing, however, it was Eisen's personal belief. That's why, even if a teacher applicant is impressive on paper, they still have to convince her that they'll be able to connect with students.

"I take everybody's resume with a grain of salt," says Eisen. "I certainly consider their credentials, but what I really look at is their personality. I'm not saying they have to come in here and turn cartwheels for me, but they have to show me that there's a spark. Because on the first day of school, those kids aren't going to go home and love you because you taught the best math lesson in the

world. They're going to love you because of who you are and how you are with them."

Above all, Crestwood teachers know their students. Not just academically, but socially and emotionally. As one Grade 5 student told us, "My teacher knows what we're into, like she knows I love Harry Potter." It's the common thread running through the whole diverse faculty, says Junior School Principal Amy Fuller. "The people who work here don't just love their jobs, but their students. Our teachers are all so similar in their approach to getting to know the kids on a personal level, which then allows them to be better educators. They have a very good sense of who the kids are as individuals, but also as part of a family unit outside Crestwood."

Parents, the best judges (other than students) of whether teachers genuinely understand and appreciate their children, validate this claim. "All of the teachers are incredibly engaging," says one parent of a Grade 1 student. "Our daughter feels a personal connection with all of them." Another parent of a child in Grade 2 says, "Each student is seen and heard." Similarly, the parent of a son in Grade 6 says, "The student-teacher relationship is one of respect, where the teacher shows genuine interest in the 'whole' of the student, and not just the academic side."

Again, it goes back to the balance that Crestwood prizes: teachers are always working to expand students' academic abilities while never losing sight of how their individual passions, non-academic strengths, and personalities influence their learning. "The student voice is really valued here," says a Crestwood graduate and student teacher at the school when I visited. "That's been true since I started kindergarten and had some anxiety about school. My teacher got to know all my personal interests and hobbies outside of school and worked that into the curriculum. At Crestwood, teachers follow the curriculum, but in the context of each student's academic needs and particular interests."

The staff culture at any school also affects students' learning, and my interactions with Crestwood teachers revealed a strong

spirit of collegiality across the faculty. It helps that the school is moderately sized and separated between primary and junior grades, but teachers also pointed to something special in the Crestwood teacher community.

“There’s a real team approach to education here,” says Fuller. “At some schools, there’s a competitive feeling among teachers. Not here.” In a roundtable discussion with teachers from all levels, there was consensus on this point. “Being here for only two years, but having taught at several other private schools, I notice a lot of sharing of resources,” says Grade 5 teacher Robin Fitzgerald.

The contentment among faculty members also seem to come from the autonomy they have to adapt their teaching based on their style, experience, and the students in their class each year. “Our teachers appreciate that we’re not too prescriptive about the methods that they use,” says Fuller. “We ensure there’s cohesiveness among the classes and grades, but we assign value to teachers’ experiences and taking the student’s lead.”

Interim Primary School Principal Katie Maalouf echoes this, saying, “Teachers’ styles change each year depending on the makeup of the class. So while we have specified math programs and we do like them to teach the Step up to Writing model, how they unfold in the classroom is very different.”

The school’s professional development program is flexible and responsive to teachers’ awareness of what they need to best serve their students. “Mrs. Eisen is very supportive of any course or conference that’s relevant and meaningful to our practice,” says Fuller. The school also brings in experts on subjects with broad relevance to the faculty, most recently covering ADHD and student resilience.

Crestwood teachers’ long tenures are evidence of their satisfaction, which naturally trickles down to the student experience. Only a handful of teachers have been at the school for less than 10 years, most have 15 years under their belts, and many have more than 20. A select few have been with Eisen since the very beginning. “Teachers who come to Crestwood stay at Crestwood,” says Head

of IT Luke Connors. “We like working here because we like the environment and the community that’s been built.”

Teacher-Librarian Lara Bafaro summarizes the big-picture impact of Crestwood’s teaching philosophy like this: “Because we can trust each other and we’re trusted by the administration to do our job, we can really focus all our effort on the kids.”



## Character education

Prosocial values underpin the school's academic programs, both in structured social and emotional learning programming and in the overarching Crestwood culture. "We don't do character education at a specified time each week or month," says Eisen. "It's just part of every day. Our kids know what values we promote because we model them and set clear expectations. We want students to be kind, respectful, and helpful to each other."

The school recently adopted Second Step Elementary, a research-based curriculum that helps students build the skills to manage emotions, meet goals, and sustain positive friendships. Rather than having a less familiar staff member come in to deliver the program, students' classroom teachers provide Second Step lessons.

"We find it's more valuable for the homeroom teachers to implement the program because these issues infiltrate everything they do, and they have cues throughout the week of how to reinforce the ideas that they're targeting," says Fuller. "They can observe challenges that happen during group work, or recess, or lunchtime, then focus on the skills that might need learning or reinforcing, such as positive communication or mindfulness."

When I asked students whether their teachers talk about what it means to be a good person, apart from being good at school, a few older students may have rolled their eyes (in the most good-natured way). "Every day," says one Grade 6 student, who then corrected

himself, “No, every hour.” Others were more diplomatic, but equally validated the importance of character education throughout Crestwood programs. “We learn gratitude on a daily basis, like how to appreciate nature and people’s different ways,” says a Grade 5 student.

The school promotes self-acceptance, or more accurately pride in self, through its commitment to finding every student’s “thing”—a talent, passion, or character trait—and highlighting it at every opportunity. “I had a group of Grade 6 kids who sometimes made a few comments that were self-deprecating, but I made sure that we had a conversation about how we’re all good at something,” says Bafaro. “We also talk about how we’re all kind of lousy at other things, and we all learn differently, and that we’re all here moving forward.”

As in all things at Crestwood, there’s a specific mindset in character education. Yes, the school nurtures students’ confidence and it upholds fairly strict standards of behaviour. “Without question, the teachers are incredibly engaged in the development of the child,” says a Primary School parent. “They do an incredible job of creating boundaries and correcting behaviour while maintaining trust and letting the students know that they care.”

A parent of a Grade 5 student says she immediately noticed Crestwood students’ manners on visiting the school. “The staff make an effort to really teach the children respect for those around you,” she says.

Whether in these small but impactful details or in larger, program-based ways, values-based education is embedded everywhere at Crestwood. One Junior School parent was especially impressed by the fact that her child’s group science project grade depended not just on the quality of research and presentation, but on the quality of cooperation, teamwork, listening, and other social skills.

In Grade 4, students take part in the year-long Project Give Back program. There are many other community service projects that run throughout the year, but this one is significant. As Fuller

says, “It’s definitely a hallmark of the Crestwood experience.” Every student chooses a charity that’s meaningful to them or their families, researches it, then presents what they’ve learned to their classmates. Along the way, teachers deliver the specialized Project Give Back curriculum, which is designed to foster empathy and promote good citizenship.

Eisen’s description of one special prize given out at the annual awards ceremony says everything about how she feels about cultivating good humans at Crestwood. “There’s one award named after an ex-principal that has nothing to do with academics and everything to do with honesty, compassion, and kindness,” she says. “I always tell parents, as far as I’m concerned, this is the most important award. It doesn’t matter if you’re an A student. If you aren’t all those things, it doesn’t matter.”

## Academic support

When Dalia Eisen founded Crestwood more than 40 years ago, she designed it specifically for students with learning differences. Within a few years, the school expanded the program to include students without academic challenges. Yet the school never lost its dedication to—and expertise in—supporting students who require extra academic support.

Crestwood’s Roots Program offers students in Grades 3 to 6 a smaller class size, which enables teachers to provide more intensive and individualized attention. Typically, each grade has three mainstream classes (which are still small, ranging from 18–20 students) and one or two Roots classes (averaging around 12 students).

“We don’t have the Roots classes prior to grade three because often you don’t know if there really is an issue or if it’s just a developmental thing, and a child is simply taking longer to grasp the concepts we’re teaching,” says Eisen.

If students are struggling before Grade 3, there are comprehensive academic supports available to them within and outside their classes. Specialized resource teachers lead small groups focused on boosting children’s capacities in key areas of the curriculum, for example, and the Reading Strategies support teacher helps students who might not be keeping pace with language learning in the classroom.

“Most of the students in the Roots Program tend to have difficulties around reading and writing skills, and to a lesser extent

with math,” says Katie Maalouf, director of student support and interim Primary School principal. “In addition to students with a formal diagnosis such as a learning disability, we’re also seeing a lot of students with learning gaps due to the pandemic and increasing class sizes in the public system. The Roots Program allows us to slow things down in the classroom and target specific skills with direct instruction so we can fill in those gaps.”

Some students move between the mainstream and Roots classes for certain subjects. Even if students are at a stage where they need to stay in the Roots class for all their core learning, teachers create opportunities to merge the classes within each grade for gym or drama, for example, to create a sense of unity and belonging.

There’s also a concerted effort among Crestwood staff to normalize the idea that students need different things at different times to support their best learning. Judging by my conversations with students from Grade 3 to 6, there was no discernable stigma attached to the Roots Program. The parents I spoke to agreed, saying that when their children did mention that friends were in the program, it was only to report a neutral fact.

“Crestwood students accept that students do what they need to do to learn, and they themselves do what they need to do, and nobody really cares,” says Grade 5 teacher Robin Fitzgerald. “Sometimes families who are new to the school are worried that other kids are going to notice that their child is in Roots, or they’re concerned that their child might feel different. Very quickly, they realize that Roots is a revolving door in many senses, and students don’t really pay much attention, or if they do, they’re very accepting.”

Grade 5 teacher Lindsay Pembridge has been at Crestwood for eight years, and says she’s never witnessed any students saying negative things about Roots. Our impression is that the program runs quietly under the radar, with even some Crestwood parents unaware of its existence until their child’s teacher suggests the program would be beneficial for them.



At the same time, there's no attempt at Crestwood to hide students' learning differences, whether they're in the Roots Program or not. Especially among the older students I met, there was an ease around discussing these issues. "I've had children ask if we have any books on dyslexia, for example, because they have it and want to do their speech on it," says Bafaro.

I spoke to one parent whose child has dyslexia and who attended Crestwood from Grade 1 through Grade 6, and is now in high school. She told us that after speaking to many private school principals around Toronto, they all suggested Crestwood. "My daughter has a high IQ and a learning disability, which is one of the hardest combinations to accommodate," she says. "But whatever support she needed was available to her at the school. Some were part of the curriculum and some we paid extra for. It was all done during the school day in a way that didn't interfere with the rest of her schedule."

This parent couldn't say enough about the transformative impact of her daughter's Crestwood education. "The school changed my daughter's life by seeing her as more than just a learning disability, seeing her potential, and surrounding her with the support she needed," she says. "Today she's at the top of her class in high school."

This student's support team included a speech-language pathologist, an occupational therapist, and a teacher who provided Orton-Gillingham, a science-based approach to literacy instruction for people with learning disabilities. It's not uncommon for Crestwood students to have this kind of circle of care when they need it. Director of Student Support Katie Maalouf coordinates the various experts in partnership with parents, helping them secure government funding for covered services and arrange private practitioners—all within school hours, a significant benefit for busy families. "These professionals work as part of the team at Crestwood, sharing knowledge and strategies with teachers," says Maalouf.

One teacher I spoke to provided the dual perspective of a staff member and parent of a child in the Roots Program. "I feel like it's a lesser-known fact about Crestwood that we have this wonderful

program available," says Junior School teacher Lindsay Pembridge. "I'm very biased because I brought my child here to be in Roots this year. I just got off the phone with her tutor, who a year ago told me she was three grade levels behind. Today she told me that she's at grade level. We often talk about the Crestwood magic—it really does exist."

There are few options for families with children who have learning differences but still want a "normal" school experience. Fuller says parents are often incredibly relieved once they find Crestwood. "For the majority of our students, they don't need any social accommodations," says Maalouf. "They don't want to be in a very small or specialized school. They want the sports, the socializing, and the arts."

Placement in the Roots Program is considered temporary, with the aim of transitioning back to mainstream classes as soon as students are ready. That's why, sometimes, Crestwood has to tell prospective parents that the school isn't equipped to meet their children's learning needs.

"Those are hard conversations, but the harder conversation would be accepting a student and feeling like we failed them," says Fuller. "We don't have a crystal ball, but we believe that with the right strategies, accommodations, and temporary modifications, every child will move on from the Roots Program, even if that journey looks different for every student."

The ultimate goal is to prepare Crestwood graduates for success in middle school, ideally without learning accommodations. "We gradually reduce the academic accommodations, little by little," says Fuller. For those students who might still need extra support, Crestwood Preparatory College offers the Roots Program in Grade 7 and 8.

Students in the mainstream classes can also access extra help or enrichment. As one Junior School parent put it, "Crestwood has proven that it can support children at any stage of their learning, whether they're ahead or behind or even in the middle." In the

Junior School, parents spoke about how their children feel comfortable requesting support and/or accepting it.

“My son likes that teachers are willing to jump in at the appropriate time to help when he’s struggling,” says one Grade 6 parent. “Teachers are very approachable, flexible, and responsive, with a strong willingness to assist.”

Students told us they can stay after school anytime to get their teacher’s help, or they can book time in the early morning, recess, or lunch. The school also has a full-time English Language Learning teacher for students whose first language isn’t English. “Everything we do here is about meeting kids where they are,” says Eisen.

## Wellness

Every school will say that student well-being is paramount, but sometimes the demand for academic excellence—and the stress it brings—can be a barrier. Crestwood undoubtedly values scholastic excellence, but never at the cost of children’s health and happiness.

“Every conversation we’ve had with the teaching staff at Crestwood has included a balanced review of our daughter’s physical, social, and emotional development, as well as her academic achievements,” says one parent of a Grade 2 student. “All aspects of her well-being and development are discussed and taken into consideration at all times.”

Principals Amy Fuller and Katie Maalouf manage the day-to-day guidance and counselling of students on social and emotional matters, but for more complex issues the school has a social worker and behavioural therapist on site a few times a week to work with select students. “They also provide teachers with guidance in challenging classroom situations and offer sessions for parents on strategies to promote their children’s growth at home,” says Maalouf.

Just like the external learning support professionals that work with Crestwood students (see Academic Support above), the social worker and behavioural therapist partner with teachers to coordinate efforts to improve student well-being. “Because their work is happening on site, they can sometimes use our curriculum materials as the vehicle through which they’re delivering their lesson,



whether it's social or emotional, and they can provide us with direct feedback," says Maalouf. If students have wellness needs that the school can't meet internally, Crestwood helps parents access the appropriate resources elsewhere.

Other sources of support include Teacher-Librarian Lara Bafaro's extensive collection of books that address mental health, well-being, and a growth mindset. "Teachers use them all the time, whether it's curriculum-based or to help students understand an upsetting incident, or a problematic social dynamic," says Bafaro. "There's a story for everything."

Students' physical health is in good hands with Crestwood's full-time nurse, Hannah Rillera. The school hired her to help with the post-lockdown move back to in-person learning in 2020, but found so much value in her presence that they decided to make it a permanent position.

"Nurse Hannah is very professional and uses the right amount of comfort and 'tough love' to help students go along with their day," says one parent. According to another, Rillera enhances Crestwood's nurturing culture: "The children have somewhere to go when they're hurt or unwell. It creates such a caring, validating, and supportive environment."

## Extracurriculars

In keeping with Crestwood's focus on students' holistic development, extracurricular activities are plentiful and wide-ranging. "We ensure there are lots of opportunities for those kids who may not necessarily always shine academically, and who may otherwise not feel the same engagement at school," says Junior School Principal Amy Fuller. "Clubs and sports are often where they find their people, gain new skills, and discover their talents."

Participation and inclusiveness are the guiding principles in Crestwood's extracurricular programs, something that appeals to parents whose children have faced tryouts and cuts at larger public or private schools. Even the youngest Primary School students have a chance to join clubs and play sports. Occasionally, the school hires external organizations to run special extracurricular programs such as yoga, taekwondo, and chess. "The children are exposed to so many enriching programs," says one parent of a student in Grade 1.

I spoke to students across the grades who were excited to talk about all their extracurriculars. One child in Grade 6 proudly shared that she helped launch a new school newspaper. Other students described how much they like the Kids' Lit Quiz club, which brings students together to train (meaning read a lot of books) for an annual children's literature quiz involving schools across Canada. No matter the particular activity, though, the students mostly talked

about how their after-school activities at Crestwood helped them make new friends.

From parents' perspective, the benefits of the school's varied and inclusive extracurricular programming go beyond peer friendships. "My daughter has taken advantage of many of these extracurricular opportunities and as a result has gained confidence, made new connections in different grades, and become more of a responsible student, having to balance her homework with her chosen activities at school and out of school," says one parent of a Grade 4 student. "The strong relationships she's had with her teachers and the larger staff group have given her confidence to try new things, such as speech writing and public speaking. She feels quite supported and confident to do things she wouldn't have done in her larger school when she felt much more like a number."

In practice, the Crestwood philosophy on extracurriculars involves simply expanding the size of clubs and teams, or creating additional teams, so they can welcome any student that's interested. "We have an Arts Committee and Community Service Club, for example, and our attitude is always the more the merrier," says Grade 5 teacher Robin Fitzgerald.

Athletics play an important role at Crestwood, and several teams are competitive within the Conference of Independent Schools Athletic Association (CISAA), but the welcoming philosophy prevails. "If you want to play, we want you to play, and there's a team for you," says Maalouf. Offerings include soccer, basketball, ball hockey, ice hockey, volleyball, baseball, badminton, track and field, and cross-country running.

Students and parents told us that teachers actively encourage children to leave their comfort zones and try sports they'd never considered. A parent of a Grade 6 student found this gentle nudging had positive effects on her child beyond the school: "My daughter didn't see herself as an athlete, but she joined the basketball team this year, and now she takes basketball on the weekends because she was inspired."

Just as in all facets of Crestwood's programs, character education is pervasive in athletics.

"While it's nice to score baskets and win races, we value athletes that demonstrate sportsmanship, camaraderie, and leadership," says Maalouf. "Also, students' conduct throughout the school day determines whether they're permitted to play on teams."

When the school year is over, Crestwood Valley Day Camp takes over campus. Founded in 1989, it's under the same ownership as Crestwood School and Crestwood Preparatory College. There are camp programs for children from ages 4 to 15. According to Eisen, only a small number of Crestwood students attend, those whose parents value the convenience of year-round programming; most others prefer to attend camp elsewhere for a change of scenery.



## Student body, diversity, & leadership

In my interactions with Crestwood students, I found them to be consistently kind, welcoming, polite, and genuinely happy at their school. At some private schools, the children come across as extraordinarily mature and polished, which is impressive, but can feel less authentic. Here, the children were entirely themselves, and entirely delightful.

As is common with students today, Crestwood kids have internalized their school's key messages, so they use words such as "inclusive" and "diversity" with ease. Yet, judging by the dynamic in mixed age groups and the feedback from parents, these concepts hold their meaning in the classroom and playground. "The kids here are just so kind, and they always include anyone, like if someone was sitting alone, they would come up and start conversations," says one Grade 5 student.

The themes of kindness and warmth came up often when I asked parents about the student body. (All of the interviews took place separately). "Our first impressions of Crestwood were how happy, confident, and caring the students are," says one Primary School parent. A parent of a Grade 6 student, whose child has entered the pre-teen stage where tricky relationships are part of the terrain, said this: "There's really just a lovely student body. They must push the

zero tolerance for bullying and lead by example, because I don't hear of the same social drama at Crestwood as I do at other schools."

Modelling from staff does appear to be crucial to the student culture. "The staff are kind, and kindness begets kindness," says another Junior School parent. "That's the feeling of the whole school. You'd be the odd man out if you didn't subscribe to that and practice those values."

Crestwood graduate and student teacher Jonathan Baum says, "There's a real sense of acceptance at the school, which is wonderful." One parent told us how her son was very unhappy at his old school, but is now running to be House Head at Crestwood. "Never in a million years would he have considered putting himself in that position before.

The friendly competition in the House System—with six tree-themed houses, fitting for Crestwood's green setting—is one way the school promotes community spirit. Older students practise their leadership skills as House Heads and Recess Buddies to younger students, and there are a growing number of organized activities where Crestwood Preparatory College students come to campus to coach, mentor, or simply play games with their younger counterparts.

Crestwood students' demographics have evolved since the school's founding to reflect the changing city. "We have a wide mix of backgrounds," says Eisen "and we mark all their holidays and traditions."

Parents often get involved in sharing their family's culture. "Since the students come from a variety of cultures, the school creates theme weeks that allow the children to learn about their classmates' cultures and experiences," says one Primary School parent. "I know that whoever my daughter encounters in the world, she will accept their culture and customs and be able to find common ground."

## Getting in

Head of School Dalia Eisen handles admissions, and her approach might be called the opposite of a hard sell. There isn't an ounce of pretention in her, which parents told us inspires trust. "What you see is what you get, with me and with Crestwood," says Eisen. "I don't like to push people. I just tell them and show them what we have to offer."

Given that about 90 percent of Crestwood applicants hear about the school through word-of-mouth, Eisen can comfortably rest on her school's reputation. "I remember Mrs. Eisen was knowledgeable and matter-of-fact when we met with her," says one parent of a Grade 6 student.

The application process involves an online application and parent interview followed by a student visit, which involves some kind of assessment. For students in Kindergarten and Grade 1, the visit is short and the evaluation is playful and informal. For those in Grade 2 and up, they spend a full day in a Crestwood classroom and complete a more formal assessment in reading, writing, and math. Admissions are rolling throughout the year, and families can expect an answer within a few weeks of their child's visit.

Tuition is comparable to private schools of similar size in the area, though students in the Roots Program and international students pay slightly more.

## Parents

Crestwood teachers take pride in truly knowing not only their students, but their students' families. It's part of the whole-child philosophy and integral to individualized teaching. As a result, parents appear to feel very much part of the Crestwood community.

Parents say that teachers and administrator are open and responsive to parent inquiries, while also being consistent and thorough in their outbound communications (emails, newsletters, online parent portal, student agendas, etc.). They also appreciated being invited to webinars and presentations by expert speakers on child development topics.

I spoke to parents who sit at various points on the spectrum of school involvement and volunteering, but they were unanimous in their praise of Crestwood families. "It's a really lovely, warm community of smart, kind parents," says one Junior School parent. "They're not pretentious. I was a little bit worried about that because you know there are different socio-economic aspects, and I always thought private schools would be a bit snooty. I never found that here."

There's a parent association that organizes fundraising and spirit-building events, but no pressure on families to join. "The parent community is great," says the parent of a Grade 1 student. "Our class has a group chat and the parents really support each other. There are opportunities for class playdates and it seems like if you ever needed help someone would step up to support you."

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“In our interactions with Crestwood students, we found them to be consistently kind, welcoming, polite, and genuinely happy at their school.”

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ISBN 978-1-990397-28-8



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