

OUR KIDS

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PRIVATE SCHOOL REVIEWS

Metropolitan Preparatory Academy

The Our Kids Review

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

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Preface

“Until you learn how to deal with people compassionately and understand what diversity and equity truly mean, you can make all the money in the world, and it’s always going to fall short.”

—Joanna Johnson, teacher, Metropolitan Preparatory Academy

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

About Our Kids

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

1. Académie Ste-Cécile International School
2. Académie Westboro Academy
3. Albert College
4. Appleby College
5. Bayview Glen
6. Bond Academy
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10. Cambridge International Academy
11. Columbia International College
12. Crescent School
13. Crestwood Preparatory College
14. Elmwood School
15. Fieldstone School
16. Glenlyon Norfolk School
17. Havergal College
18. Holy Name of Mary College School
19. Hudson College
20. Kenneth Gordon Maplewood School
21. Kingsway College School
22. La Citadelle International Academy of Arts & Science
23. Lakefield College School
24. Lynn-Rose School
25. Meadowridge School
26. Merrick Preparatory School
27. Metropolitan Preparatory Academy
28. Miss Edgar's & Miss Cramp's School
29. Niagara Christian Collegiate
30. Pickering College
31. Prestige School
32. Ridley College
33. Robert Land Academy
34. Rosseau Lake College
35. Royal Crown School
36. Royal St. George's College
37. St. Clement's School
38. St. John's-Kilmarnock School
39. St. Mildred's-Lightbourn School
40. Sunnybrook School
41. The Bishop Strachan School
42. The Clover School
43. The Country Day School
44. The Mabin School
45. The York School
46. Toronto Prep School
47. Trinity College School
48. Upper Canada College
49. Whytecliff Agile Learning Centres
50. Woodland Christian High School

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Details: Metropolitan Preparatory Academy

Community. Academics. Success.

Founded: 1982

Enrolment: 250

Grades: 7 to 12

Gender: Coed

Living Arrangements: Day

Language Of Instruction: English

School Focus: Academic

Developmental Priorities: Intellectual, Balanced

Curriculum: Traditional

Curriculum Pace: Standard-enriched

Academic Culture: Rigorous



Introduction

The presentation of Metropolitan Preparatory Academy will confound families looking for ivy-covered walls, uniformed students gathering in the quad, and all the other stereotypes of private school. There are Houses, in the Harry Potter sense, and they are used to organize collegial competition throughout the school year, though the similarity with Hogwarts ends pretty much right there. Unlike some schools that were created to reflect an English ideal, Metro Prep was founded around a desire to do things differently: to provide a more natural interface between students and staff in a shared community focused on curiosity as much as preparation for future studies.

While the school is located near numerous residential areas, the building proper is in an area of other businesses and offices. Metro Prep operates entirely independently; the issues we associate with the monolith of Ontario public education—bickering, strikes, and never-ending debates on things from discovery math to after-school programs—were precisely those that Wayne McKelvey intended to be free of when he founded the school in 1982. It's his personality and vision that the school was created to reflect, and he remains a key element of the school today, both in terms of leadership and culture.

The outlines of the school serve instructional quality and agility: a small independent school has flexibility that public schools or larger independent schools simply don't. In all of that, Metro Prep

fulfills many of the tenets of the small schools movement, whether or not McKelvey was thinking of that particularly. It's likely that he wasn't, at least in name, but rather he was simply intending to enact what he saw as best practices. Nevertheless, it's a concept very much in evidence throughout the school. Small schools have fewer resources, such as athletic facilities or full-bore theatre environments, though they benefit in other, more significant ways such as higher levels of social cohesion within the student population and a heightened sense of participation within the school. Students each take on a wealth of roles—from acting in student productions to competing on athletics teams—as opposed to focusing on just one area of interest. There's a greater sense of inclusion, too, which brings a heightened responsibility: students know that if they are absent from class or band practice, they will be missed. And it's not just their presence that will be missed, but also their voice and the perspectives they bring to the room. With a student population of 250, this isn't a place where you can lurk unnoticed at the back of the class.

Proponents of small schools cite those things as integral to student success, and, certainly, those are the things that parents and students tend to talk about most when asked about their experience of Metro Prep and the strengths of the program. “There [have] always been opportunities to switch schools,” says one student, “but the reason I stayed is because of the people here. There's a Metro vibe, and it's not like anything I've felt anywhere else. It's such a unique feeling, and it's very hard to describe.... It's an accepting environment, and it doesn't feel like school when you're here. It feels more like a family, as cliché as that sounds. The relationships that you build here are unique.” We'd venture that's not by chance, but by design. Metro Prep students, in an intentionally smaller environment, have more latitude to engage with the facilities, peers, and faculty, and for many students and families, that is, rightly, the primary driver toward enrolment.

1 Basics

Metropolitan Preparatory Academy is a coed, non-denominational day school in Toronto, Ontario. There are international students, though no boarding program—international students either find their own accommodations or arrange a homestay through the school. Most students arrive via bus each day from throughout Toronto. Given that the school sits near the Don Valley Parkway, it's easily accessible by car and public transit. The school also compiles a carpool list, the only example of that we've yet seen.

The presentation of Metro Prep reflects the co-operative style of learning that the program is formed around. When looking for a school for her daughter, one parent says, “We wanted a school that was coed, small, but we didn't want uniforms and a school with that sort of stuffiness about it.... We were looking for a very inclusive community.” And that's what she found at Metro Prep. “It's not a school, it's a community.... The physical environment itself gives a lot of cues: the pictures on the walls, the fish tank, the open doors.... It's just very warm and welcoming.

In the school's new building, which opened in 2019, there are new spaces and resources that the older building didn't allow for. Though the school still doesn't have an auditorium, a well-equipped drama room has more than enough space for an intricate set (currently being built by the students) and an intimate audience. There's now a small playing field up the road for phys-ed classes, and a court for sports training alongside a workout gym with tons of





equipment on site. The school also rents space in a neighbourhood gym for their students to use.

There is a unique, DIY feel to many of the rooms, particularly the SMITH Program (School of Music, Integrated Arts, Theatre and Humanities) room, the music room, and a few classrooms that have been artfully furnished and decorated by the teachers themselves. The walls in these spaces are hung with posters and pictures reflecting aspects of pop culture. Pride of place in the SMITH room is a photo of the 1980s band, The Smiths. Books are everywhere, adding a richness to these spaces. The feel can be akin to drinking from a firehose, and that's intentional.

McKelvey's office continues in kind: it's a central space in the life of the school, and its presentation is as eclectic as the arts spaces. Books line the walls and sculptures and photos crowd the windowsills. There and elsewhere the spaces don't have the stark, clean lines of, say, The York School, though that's one of the reasons that the students who attend Metro find it so appealing. The furniture is chosen to be comfortable, inviting people to sit a while. And they do, perhaps most commonly in McKelvey's office. He has a habit of paging students to his office, even during meetings with staff or others—he did this when we were there, too—in order to commend them on anything from an athletic victory to a great performance to a well-earned test mark.

“Knowing Wayne over the years,” says parent Robert DeMaria, “it's like he is the icon of Metro Prep. He's the identity for us... I'm amazed how he knows so much about each student... I think that comes from the kids hanging out in his office soaking up his rhetoric, his mannerisms... You always used to think of going to the principal's office as, ‘Oh, geez, here we go.’ But ... you want to go there, and he invites it. It's an open door and when the kids come in, they want to actually sit and hang out in the room and soak up what he's got to say.” Every parent we spoke with, as well as every student, voiced a delight with this relationship and all those discussions in McKelvey's office. Their eyes literally light up at the

thought. No doubt they love it, and, in the time we spent in the office, we loved it, too.

“They gave me something that no other school can,” says one student, particularly in relation to one-on-one attention. Says another, “Every day I tell my mom I’m never leaving... I just love Metro. There’s nothing comparable.”

Leadership

“I’ve always been proud to work here and with these people, and it all starts with Wayne,” says vice-principal Ryan Seeley. He notes that McKelvey instills a positive work ethic and a sense of purpose. “He loves to work with people that are completely different than him. And if they love the students, then they have a job.”

Since he founded it in 1982, Metro Prep has been led primarily and indelibly through McKelvey’s vision, created in part by the frustrations of his prior experience. “I was just fed up. I had had enough,” he says of his break with the public system. “That’s why I decided to leave and to do my own thing.” There isn’t a board of governors, and whatever the school may lack in terms of top-end leadership, it gains with a staff that clearly understands that they have a real ownership of the programs and policies that form the basis of the institution. McKelvey sets the tone by hiring staff who share his vision of what a great school should be. He’s a political thinker, and many meetings in his office can veer to the politics of the day. He has strong opinions, to be sure, and the strongest of those centre around education. From day one, he led the school to be a model of best practices, first and foremost, and of creating a shared, supportive culture of learning. He has also worked to underscore the school’s independence, free from the things that bog down public institutions. “There’s no union as such,” he says. “If there was a union, this would be closed. And I wouldn’t argue about it. I would just say, ‘Guys, it was fun while it lasted, but it’s not going to last anymore, and if somebody else wants to do it, that’s great.’ ”

“I’m very much into individualism among kids,” he says, while

providing unwavering encouragement. “There aren’t too many schools, private or public, [that] encourage young people to really question things, to encourage young people to think the impossible.” He has made a career of doing exactly that. Teacher Joanna Johnson tells a story that is as good a description of the culture of the school, and that questioning spirit, as you could hope to find. “When I got hired,” she says, “I sat down and the first 20 minutes was just a regular interview. And then Wayne found out where I went to school and where I did my master’s, and then we fought for about 45 minutes. And I walked out going, ‘What happened?’ I didn’t know how it went sideways so quickly. I’d always gotten all the jobs I’d applied for when I was a student, but this was my first career interview. And we fought.” He called her to offer her a job, and she’s now been at the school for 16 years. “That’s his passion. He likes to surround himself with intelligent, passionate people. And they don’t always have to fall in line with his beliefs. He appreciates diversity of thought and academic engagement, which to me speaks to what any academic institution should look like.... And I know he would do anything for these kids and for me.” She recalls having appendicitis in her second year at the school, and McKelvey showed up at the hospital and dove in trying to get her a better room. “What boss does that? He showed up before my mom showed up!”

All of that is as singular as McKelvey himself, and perhaps underscores why the staff and faculty have such a dedication to him and, by inference, the work of the school. He leads by example, quirks and all. “When he walks into your classroom, he’s not there to check in on you,” says Seeley. “He might get involved in the debate, and kids love it. But when he walks through the halls and the kids know that Wayne might be coming, there’s an energy.”

The teaching staff respond in kind with energy, dedication, and a belief in the power of encouragement to change a young person’s life. “I don’t come to work to teach a class, I just don’t. I come to teach students,” says Seeley, voicing something that is overtly shared throughout the faculty. There’s a clear collegiality among them,

which is key to the success of the delivery of the program, given the size of the school. Says one parent, “Wayne hires people [who] think differently. They think differently from each other, and think differently from him.” What they share is a belief in working to promote academics within the student body, as well as the need to grow a voice. Says Johnson, “every day I go to work and I look around at the staff that I get to work with, and I’m blown away. And I don’t know a lot of people who go to any job and look around at their colleagues and think, ‘Wow, like, I’m working with awesome here.’ ”

There is a feeling that the current staff—two instructors voiced this—is perhaps a high point in the life of the school. Says Seeley, “the underlying thing is communication. We talk to the students and we talk about the students, and in a lot of schools, that’s not how it works. In the staff room we discuss the students, and if we know one who is going through something, the staff knows ... it’s all about communication.... If you’re a teacher who doesn’t want to talk about the kids, who just wants to teach the class and go home, then you don’t last.”

The values at the core of the program aren’t perhaps listed in a sign on the wall, but they are apparent in other, more significant ways. Each member of the faculty that we spoke with talked about values, but often using different terms or expressions. “Until you learn how to deal with people compassionately and understand what diversity and equity truly mean,” says Johnson, “you can make all the money in the world, and it’s always going to fall short.... And to be passionate about what you do. ... find out what drives you, find out what you’re passionate about. Stop trying to get to an end game. ... Keep your options open, and experience as much as you can possibly experience, here and at university.” Again, all of that is, it seems, a reflection of the leadership that McKelvey has consistently brought to the school. “We’re far from perfect,” he says, “but if we can help one child a week, then we’ve met with success.” He’s being humble, though, even then. There’s a confidence that





is infectious—he actually knows that he helps at least one child a week. And if asked who he helped in any given week, no doubt he can tell you exactly who they are. He walks down the hall and compliments kids on their accomplishments, and he clearly knows all of the kids and what they're involved in.

Facilities

Even in its sleek new building, the school doesn't present as a typical private or independent school, and that's intentional. Located on Duncan Mill Road in the York Mills and Leslie neighbourhood of North York, Metro Prep is even more centrally located and accessible to its students than it was in its prior location. The one-storey building resembles a nondescript office space from the outside, but houses a series of purposefully designed classrooms; clean, modern work spaces; and cozy corners where students can gather and collaborate.

There's a very cool vibe in this new space, and it's easy to see why teenagers want to be here. "We're really proud of how this building turned out," says Sue Dhilion, the school's guidance counsellor. As we wander through the halls and take in a few of the learning spaces, it's apparent that a lot of thought has gone into making this school feel comfortable while promoting productivity. "Students spend a lot of time at school and we want them to feel like they're at home," Dhilion says.

Some of the classrooms are more traditional in nature, but definitely well-maintained. New furniture, clean walls, well-appointed artwork, and plenty of technology adorn these work spaces. Other classrooms, however, are so exquisite and intricately decorated that it's almost hard to believe they're classrooms at all. Inside the history classroom, Joanna Johnson is putting the final touches on student art projects. Her room is stunning, furnished with antique tables and chairs all mismatched but chosen purposefully. Stenciled dates are painted on the back wall of the room, and posters and collectables adorn every other free space. It's certainly not a traditional classroom,

but there's no question that students would find the space inspiring. Other classrooms display teachers' personal touches as well, from art and decor to book shelves crowded with tchotchkes and art.

Shared spaces within the building are plentiful. There's the "fish tank," an open-concept media lab with a row of shiny new MacBook computers, large windows, and a nearby fish tank; the cafeteria, which is clean and spacious and which has student art on display advertising the school's House teams and an upcoming trip to Ireland; the gym and workout facilities; and other cozy corners for chilling out and working quietly.

On first impression, the facilities suggest an arts-specific environment, and in particular a performing arts environment. The first posters that you see are ones promoting musical events, and the signature spaces—the SMITH room prime among them—continue the impression. In truth, there is a focus on performing arts, though, while it's less apparent, it's not the only focus.

The learning spaces—and the SMITH room is a prime example of this—were designed and built by the faculty themselves to serve their needs and the needs of the students they teach. The music room is unlike any you'll see at similarly sized schools in the city, and the students rejoice in it. It includes professional recording equipment, though there is also an approachability to that environment—and likewise for the studio theatre—that invites participation. These are spaces that students want to be in, to spend time in, and that's exactly what they do. The media labs follow in kind, and are equipped with professional media arts and computer science devices and software.

The spaces meet the students where they are both as learners and as people: teenagers. That close relation between the spaces and the student is a hallmark of the Metro Prep program. The building has been designed with that kind of participation in mind: to allow students to feel engaged, included, using professional tools. If the form is singular, well, it follows the function that is intended for it. In our experience, it all works exceptionally well.



2

Academics/Academic environment

All students graduate with the Ontario Secondary School Diploma, and all courses are taught to the Ontario curriculum. The size of the school, and the commensurate agility it allows, is seen as a benefit, even though it may, at times, mean more work for the faculty. For example, there is no substitute roster, so the faculty needs to fill in as needed. “If a teacher is away,” says Johnson, “I cover his class. And there’s a huge benefit to that. It’s not like a supply [teacher] comes in. I know [the students who are] supposed to be there, I know the expectations.... It’s a different vibe altogether.”

Instructors feel that they get to know the students, their backgrounds, and often their families. “This is an academic school, so we’re trying to get them ready to go to university. That’s the end game. And everybody has to overcome something. So, figuring out what that is, you have to know the person. There’s no template for that.” Some teachers teach at all the levels that the school offers, effectively following the students as they grow into an understanding of themselves and their strengths and weaknesses as learners.

“The key is being comfortable in your environment,” a student told us. “I think at Metro, this is the most comfortable I’ve ever been in front of a group of people ever.... [At other schools] you’ve got to play it cool, you’ve got to keep some things inside, or part of yourself at home. I think that here I can be myself. I’m one person; I don’t have dual personalities.... For example, if I have an idea ... in some schools I’d be afraid to talk about it, that I’d be shut down. Here I feel

I can say whatever I want, to talk about what I believe in.”

In some senses, the feel of the academic program is something akin to what you’d find in an International Baccalaureate environment: instruction is hands-on, and often formed around projects; there is overt attention to all the various domains of learning, including extracurricular programs, service learning, and educating students to understand their place in the wider world; there is an attention to transferrable skills and cross-disciplinary engagement; and there is both an overt and implied emphasis on inquiry, with students actively framing their learning and considering the core concepts through the lens of a global context. Instructors are free to follow their instincts, creating new programs or alternate forms of delivery, something they are delightfully keen to do. One day students may be involved in a Harkness discussion, though on another the lesson may follow a lecture format; in part this gives students first-hand experience with the various kinds of classroom skills they’ll need when they move on to university. Not only do they have the latitude to innovate and create, they seem to relish the opportunities that latitude provides, both in class and within extracurricular programs. Says Johnson, “we’re a relatively small school, and if Ryan and I decide to go to Ecuador, we go to Ecuador, and we have 18 kids that want to come along because they know that this is something that will be amazing.”

The students and parents alike are prone to comment on the variance in lesson format, something they feel is a plus of the Metro Prep experience. “They’re teachers, but you don’t really see them as teachers,” a student told us. “You see them as figures that you can look up to, and they’re just really great people. I’ve been here for a long time, so I’ve developed a relationship with a lot of the people at this school, and Joanna is one of them because she’s been teaching me history. And over time it’s more like a friendship than just ‘I’m the teacher, you’re the student.’ ... They know who I am, and they know what I need to learn, and where I need to improve.”

“It’s not a very traditional teaching style,” adds another student,

speaking particularly to her experience within Johnson's classes. "She's very honest, she makes the assignments really fun, current, and she doesn't hide from the truth," particularly around aspects of Canadian history that can be difficult to talk about. There is a shared sense of discovery, something the faculty works actively to encourage. "As a teacher, I try to learn as much as I can, through the kids," says geography teacher Jessica Oliveira. "One of the things I've learned is that sometimes I need to let go a bit, and give them the space to grow, the space to take leadership positions, ... to let them take the lead."

Faculty, in our experience, are prone to speaking frankly, particularly about the need for the students to try new things, to take some calculated risks—they'll encourage an athletic student, for example, to try out for a prominent role in a play or a musical event—and to make the most of their time at the school just trying things out. "A lot of kids, and a lot of adults, just don't do what they don't think they're good at," says Johnson. "I do art all the time, and I'm not an artist. As an adult I really wanted to do art, and as a kid I was always really frustrated because I sucked. So, as a kid I just didn't do it. As an adult, I love it, I love all the parts of it. And I finally figured out how to just be okay sucking for a while. And just be okay with that, because you still get so much. And you get better. And you still glean so much from exposing yourself to all those different avenues [of thought and engagement.]"

You don't often hear educators speaking like that, though, in speaking with Johnson, you find yourself wondering why. They should, and it's refreshing that she does. In any case, while she's very clear that the job of the school is to prepare students academically for university, she feels that's just the baseline, and that it's also the job of the school to think beyond education and to help kids grow not just into post-secondary life, but into life itself.

We asked McKelvey what he hopes to send graduates out into the world with, and he answered "the ability to say what you believe, that you know that you're not a number, that you have feelings. I

try to encourage young people not to hurt others with comments, but to let them know if you believe in something, let them know what you believe in. So many people are afraid of saying what they believe ... or they'll say something because it pleases the person they're talking to, not because it's what they believe. And I can't stand that." He feels that knowledge is important, of course, but that's just the beginning. Success depends on an ability to comport oneself in the world with empathy and a listening ear, and to have confidence in who you are, what you believe, and the talents that you can bring to both personal and professional environments. To speak with care and intelligence.



3

Student population

There are 250 students enrolled year-to-year, which isn't tiny, though small enough to really give the students a sense of community, or, as students are prone to describe it, a sense of family. The student body is divided into nine House teams, all named after Irish clans. ("Ryan's an Irish guy," says one student, "and a big U2 fan.") Students are assigned to a House when they arrive, and remain within it until they graduate. The Houses provide opportunities to mix the students from different grades, to provide a basis for school events and challenges, and to give students a sense of participation.

There is a striking diversity among the students, one that goes beyond the obvious, such as cultural and economic indicators. There's a diversity of interests, too, which many students clearly revel in. In our round-table discussions, many students talked about the freedom they felt when they entered the Metro Prep environment, at times exhibiting significant emotion. It includes not just an ability to try new things, but also to fail, and to otherwise simply be themselves. One student, who graduated in January and went on to study at the University of Toronto, regularly visits, and indeed was visiting on the day we were touring the school. She talked of her time at the school with palpable emotion, both for what the environment and the program allowed her to do then, as well as for how it enabled the academic success that she continues to have. She credits the freedom encouraged at Metro Prep, including a

lack of judgment and a true culture of support, which made a key difference for her. Walking through the school you have a sense of being surrounded by a wealth of personalities, and, in fact, you are. Students at Metro Prep clearly feel less of a need to conform and are comfortable expressing who they are without any fear of reprisal. That should be true anywhere of course, though we all know that it's not. Otherness—having interests, perspectives, and traits that fall outside the norm—isn't something that high school environments are noted to be wildly accepting of. Metro Prep, in part due to the kinds of students that it attracts, really is—students will say it, but it's also evident, again, just from walking through the halls: they have no trouble just being themselves.

For some parents and students, this acceptance of individuality is the primary draw. “I think it comes to a point where your child won't go to school,” says Bettina Keyser, a parent of a recent graduate. Her daughter was anxious about school, something that was hampering her success. While enrolled in the public system, “she was having a hard time with the number of kids, and how big the school was,” and was feeling lost and apart. At Metro Prep, “everybody was an individual, everyone was special in their own ways.” That, together with the size of the school, was transformative. “She still had some anxiety, and, I mean it didn't happen in the first day. She still skipped [school] a little bit. But it didn't take her long.” When asked how she knew that her daughter was thriving, she answered simply “she went to school.” She became active in the school community, took part in a trip to Africa. Today she's enrolled in university which, admittedly, is bigger and different, but she's thriving there, too, something that Keyser accredits to the experience at Metro Prep.

“From a teacher's point of view,” says Johnson, “it's great to see the transformation and the growth that happens,” thanks to the support from both students and staff. “And seeing older students supporting the younger students. It can be something like learning a new language, or it can be something like a personal issue. Seeing





that transformation,” from mentored to mentor. “There’s always moments when we can support each other, bring each other back up, and there’s always opportunities that the school offers for that to take place.”

“When I first came to the school in Grade 7,” says a current student, “I was very [focused on] math, science—that was all I saw: right or wrong answers. English I was good in, but never really excelled. And I went from a 75 student to now I’m a 90 student.... I never thought I could ever excel in English, in writing and creative writing.” Again, it’s cliché to say that a school can open a student to new concepts, to encourage them to take risks, though the stories of Metro Prep confirm the real force of that. He continues, saying, “The biggest shock of all is that I hated performing. I went to a private school in New York City where they forced us to do student choir and student plays. I hated it. I’d lip sync the songs [rather than sing]. I came to Metro and by Grade 8 I was in a theatre production and I was playing a pretty significant role. I had quite a bit of lines; it was a three-hour play. I spent five months memorizing lines, practising every other day after school, and I finally went and did a theatre production! And I found something I really enjoyed.”

He laughs at the suggestion that the school took a math and science student and turned him into a theatre major. “I just think I’m more well-rounded.” It’s a sentiment that many students voiced to us: they feel that the school provides a safe environment in which to grow not only their core interests, but to develop new or ancillary ones.

The students that we spoke with all shared the values of the school, namely around trying new things and being open to new interests. “They really inspired me to be creative,” says a student, something that he admits he found surprising. He arrived in Canada from China, perhaps having a set plan for the arc that his academic career might take. The school, gently, challenged some of his assumptions, encouraging him to try new things, if only to confirm some of the decisions he had made about his future. “I’m planning

to go to film school, and I feel like that was one of the things that really surprised me.... Ryan and Joanna really inspired me to become an artist.”

“She still had some anxiety, and, I mean it didn’t happen in the first day. She still skipped [school] a little bit. But it didn’t take her long.” When asked how she knew that her daughter was thriving, she answered simply “she went to school.” She became active in the school community, took part in a trip to Africa. Today she’s enrolled in university which, admittedly, is bigger and different, but she’s thriving there, too, something that Keyser accredits to the experience at Metro Prep.

“From a teacher’s point of view,” says Johnson, “it’s great to see the transformation and the growth that happens” thanks to the support from both students and staff. “And seeing older students supporting the younger students. It can be something like learning a new language, or it can be something like a personal issue. Seeing that transformation,” from mentored to mentor. “There’s always moments when we can support each other, bring each other back up, and there’s always opportunities that the school offers for that to take place.”

“When I first came to the school in Grade 7,” says a current student, “I was very [focussed on] math, science—that was all I saw: right or wrong answers. English I was good in, but never really excelled. And I went from a 75 student to now I’m a 90 student.... I never thought I could ever excel in English, in writing and creative writing.” Again, it’s cliché to say that a school can open a student to new concepts, to encourage them to take risks, though the stories of Metro Prep confirm the real force of that. He continues saying that,

“the biggest shock of all is that I hated performing. I went to a private school in New York City, and they forced us to do student choir and student plays. I hated it. I’d lip sync the songs [rather than sing]. I came to Metro and by grade 8 I was in a theatre production and I was playing a pretty significant role. I had quite a bit of lines, it was a three-hour play. I spent five months memorizing lines,

practising every other day after school, and I finally went and did a theatre production! And I found something I really enjoyed.”

He laughs at the suggestion that the school took a math and science student and turned him into a theatre major. “I just think I’m more well-rounded,” and it’s a sentiment that many students voiced to us: they feel that the school provides a safe environment in which to grow not only their core interests, but to develop new or ancillary ones.

The students that we spoke with all shared the values of the school, namely around trying new things and being open to new interests. “They really inspired me to be creative,” says a student, something that he admits he found surprising. He arrived in Canada from China, perhaps having a set plan for the arc that his academic career might take. The school, gently, challenged some of his assumptions, encouraging him to try new things, if only to confirm some of the decisions he had made about his future. “I’m planning to go to film school, and I feel like that was one of the things that really surprised me.... Ryan and Joanna really inspired me to become an artist.”

Alumni

Metro Prep, as you’d expect, doesn’t have the kind of alumni network that some of the older, bigger, or boarding schools in the country have. That said, it probably has something better: the students never seem to really leave, but instead come back, seemingly as often as they can.

One student we spoke with had been on the basketball team, and while he’s now studying at the University of Toronto, he still visits the school to use the gym, talk with Sue Dhillon, the guidance counsellor, or just have a hang in McKelvey’s office. “Once you get to know them,” he says of the teachers, “it’s so personal. It goes beyond the classroom. After you graduate you feel like they’re your friends.” And, in many cases, they are. Further, there is a sense of belonging that remains long after graduation, which is evident from our discussions with former students.

4

Athletics

A casual visitor might wonder about the extent of the athletic program, given that the arts spaces pull focus on an initial walk-through. The main gym isn't large enough to house a full-length court, and the outdoor spaces on the property are limited. That said, the school makes exceptional use of local spaces, including a sports bubble just a short walk away where the varsity soccer team, in particular, practises throughout the winter months. In warmer weather, the school has access to local playing fields that meet all the standards that come to bear. "Any time it's not raining," said a student of the coach, "he'll take us outside." Basketball is a focus of the athletic program, and one for which students are actively recruited. The team is exceptionally active, and can travel to 60+ games in a season.

Activity is also a focus, and students are encouraged to take part for the experience and recreation. There is a training gym that is used within the physical education program for circuit training and sport-specific training.

The school competes within the Small Schools Athletic Federation (SSAF), something which further opens up opportunities for participation and competition. "When kids come to school, a lot of times they're scared of athletics," says Mark Kucharski, who has directed the athletic program for the past decade. "You don't have to be elite to play a sport," something that he has made a top-level priority of the program. "Every kid that walks through the doors,

if you like sports, you can play on a team here. It's not just for the elite athletes." As such, more than 50% of the student population is involved in a sport at some point during the year. That's an exceptionally high rate, given national averages, and largely testament to Kucharski's leadership, and that desire to make physical activity accessible and attractive to all.

Likewise, a majority of students engage in athletics throughout their high-school career, which is also largely atypical for students outside of varsity programs. "The good thing about our program, and the SSAF," he says, "is that there are quite a few one-day type tournaments. So, for example, we go to a bowling tournament, a ping-pong tournament, we go to ultimate frisbee, flag football. Sports that don't require a two- to three-month season, and don't suppose the same level of intensity that the more typical high school teams do. "It's more about coming out, learning the game, and just participating." The kids who are involved in athletics, says Kucharski, are better behaved, do better in school, and have lower rates of anxiety and social disruption.

The school, nevertheless, has a very well developed and high-level varsity program, particularly in basketball and soccer. Those teams compete in tournaments in Canada and the United States. Kucharski notes that many of the members of the basketball program intend to move on to basketball programs at college and university, and indeed many have over the years.

With respect to the training gym, Kucharski says, "I always make sure that I teach them enough skills such that they don't need to pay a trainer, but could walk into any gym in the world and know how to use the machines, the etiquette, the safety," as well as the benefits of maintaining a healthy lifestyle. For all students, says Kucharski, "I just want them to learn to love sports and physical activity. We play a lot of unconventional games; we really look into games in which everyone can be successful and have fun." That includes developing new games or adapting games to student interests or other things happening within the school. During the

Hunger Games craze, “we invented a dodgeball game that we called Dodge Games. It had shields and bases and different strategic-type things.” He recalls a recent bowling-type game with pylons and water bottles, where players all have to work together, rather than each scoring only for themselves. They’ve adapted games to the themes of Fortnite. Those kinds of things can seem gimmicky, at least superficially, though Kucharski sees it as a means of throwing a wider net, and attracting a larger, more diverse portion of the student body to physical programs and acquainting them with “the feel of playing sports.” It’s a means of blurring the lines between the social definitions—the jocks, the techies, the art students—that can get in the way of a broader range of participation across the disciplines. Clearly, given the annual rate of participation, it’s working. “Once I find the sports and the games that kids are interested in, we run with it.” His hope is to inspire them to be involved in physical activity at the post-secondary level and on into adulthood. Students are free to use the facilities outside of formal practices, and during a tour of the school, it’s apparent that they do. “It’s like we have a high-end academic school, but then also run a YMCA-type program.” And, indeed, that’s exactly how it feels. .

5

Pastoral care

The goal of the wellness program is the same as the goal of the school as a whole, namely, says McKelvey, “to let [students] know that somebody cares about them, that what they do is important. And that if you may feel you’re mediocre? You’re not mediocre, there’s a talent we haven’t found yet. And these other things you’re doing are fantastic, and it will happen. It may happen in first-year university, second-year university, in college, you don’t know.... But the problem is, so many kids nobody takes an interest in... You let the kids know they’re important, and you go from there.”

The leadership of the school is keenly aware that kids need that kind of attention—maybe they’re struggling, maybe they have some issues—and to feel comfortable in the environment. They believe that they have the resources to help them, every day. And while there may not be a staff of dozens driving the wellness program, it’s clear that students feel supported and that all the staff are invested in providing that support in a very natural way. “With teenagers, there’s a lot of emotion,” says Johnson, “and there’s a difference between emotionality and mental health issues;” one that, of course, may not always be obvious. “If something is going on at home or within their peer group and you can see that it’s negatively affecting them, I consider [it] my business to do what I can to make sure they’re okay. Not to make choices for them, not to make choices for their families, but just to make sure that they always know all of their options.”

A current student offered that “for me, academic counselling has been going to every single teacher and asking them ‘What do you see me doing at college? What do you see me doing as a career?’ And it has really helped me to see myself in a better light.... It has helped me narrow down a lot of things.”

The academic guidance offered at the school begins when a student enters, though that, too, reflects a culture of experience, experimentation, and growth. They are wary of students who arrive with too narrow a view of their future, formed too soon. “If a kid says she wants to be in business,” asks Johnson, “what does that mean?” She shares the perspective of the other faculty we spoke with that, when a student decides the arc of their success too early, there’s likely a range of other influences at play. “I say to the students that you’re going to change your mind 17 times,” says Johnson, “and when you do, don’t be panicked. Don’t be amazed that you can be interested and passionate and driven about that many things. It will make you that much of a better person.”

Certainly, the students seem to be drinking all of that in. It’s about “being a better me,” says a current student. “It’s the encouragement of everyone in the class ... to become a new, better, more confident me.”

Discipline

There are rules, and the students are aware of them, but there’s also an awareness that, well, a) life is complicated, b) not everything is exactly as it might seem at first glance, and c) at the end of the day, school is about growth and should include opportunities to make amends, learn something, and move on. “They’re teaching you about life,” says a student, and that’s true throughout the school, not only in the classroom.

A parent noted that, in her experience, discipline was handled “extremely professionally” with respect for privacy and fairness, while also being firm. “There were things they were clearly not going to tolerate,” she says, but administration “never lost sight of

the fact that they had a lot of respect for the individual.”

There’s policy, but also flexibility in its application. “You’ve got to know what’s going on with the kid,” says Seeley, “and why they said that word, for example,” not just that they said it. “If you know why they said it, maybe sending them to the library and making them do work is better than sending them home.” So, while there are lines that can’t be crossed, the administration clearly has a keen desire to know the students first, before anything goes wrong, and to deal with any behavioural or interpersonal issues in the context of that knowledge.

“That goes back to Wayne,” says Seeley, “that’s his philosophy.” If a student is having trouble of any kind, “Wayne will call him into his office. And Wayne knows his story.... I don’t think you get that in the bigger schools, [where] there are a lot of policies, and a lot of hierarchy. He is so anti-policy; he’s case specific.” As at every school, there are some students who don’t ultimately find the right relationship with the school, says Seeley, “but it takes a lot for Wayne to shut that door.... And, in general, I think that’s what Metro is all about: don’t give up on the kid, don’t worry about the policies” without considering them in light of the personalities and issues that the students bring with them into the school each day. Parents clearly appreciate the approach, as do the students, something that they are prone to voice.

6 Getting in

“Some parents feel more comfortable going to the school that’s been around for a hundred years,” says Seeley, “and where there’s a big board, and when the kid applies they [first] have to write this test and that test.” Clearly, in saying that, he’s underscoring a distrust in those application processes, principally because “those tests don’t tell you anything about who a person is. They tell you if they’re strong in math, right now,” but not what their desires and aspirations are.

That distrust evolves from the kinds of students that can benefit most from the Metro Prep environment, ones that perhaps feel on the margins in other schools and who will thrive in a more personal and more personally oriented setting. As such, while all schools include an interview, the Metro Prep admission process begins there, with an interview at the school. As you might expect, it’s not templated, but handled very much as a discussion. Parents, students, and staff all participate with an open mind, and leave with a better sense of whether it’s the right environment for all. Also tellingly, there is no application fee—the first step is designed to be exactly what it is, namely a chance to get to know each other, without any commitments going in.

The interviews are followed by a typical admission process, including an admission fee and academic testing. As such, it’s a nice inversion of the more typical process that you’d find at a majority of private and independent schools.

7

Money matters

Fees are as you'd expect for a school of this size and focus, if not a bit less than the average. Parents report that the tuition is clearly outlined and that there aren't any surprises as students move through the school year. Additional costs are discretionary and associated with trips and extracurricular activities.

Recently some scholarships have been established, in addition to those already in place, with an eye to making the program accessible to everyone, and also to facilitate the diversity within the student body.

8

The takeaway

Metro Prep, in one sense at least, is very much what you might think a preparatory academy is for: the program is intended to prepare students for post-secondary education, particularly university. From there, however, all bets are off, and the school adopts none of the clichés or the stances that are hallmarks of the traditional, stereotypical prep school. The students don't wear uniforms, for one, the intention being to encourage individuality rather than conformity. Likewise, while the school intends student success, it's not defined in test scores, but by a creative engagement with the curricular content and the world. Confidence over bravado, critical thinking over rote learning—in so many ways, this isn't your grandfather's prep school.

The ideal student is one who can thrive in a very active, engaging student environment, and who intends to continue their studies at university. Beyond that, the school addresses itself to personal and interpersonal development, encouraging students to reach further, ask more of themselves, but also to give more of themselves than they might in more typical learning environments.

While not all who attend arrive because of struggles elsewhere, there is a portion who do, and they certainly find a home here as well. "I'm just happy I came here," an alumnus told us. "Here the bullying stopped, and the help [began]... The teachers would be here at seven in the morning to help the students." She adds, her voice breaking, "I'm so thankful for all the encouragement that teachers have given me, and all the support."





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"There's a diversity of interest which many students clearly revel in. In our round-table discussions, many students talked about the freedom they felt when they entered the Metro Prep environment."

"... the school addresses itself to personal and interpersonal development, encouraging students to reach further, asking more of themselves, but also giving more of themselves than they might in more typical learning environments."

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