

PRIVATE SCHOOLS

'EACH SCHOOL HAS ITS OWN PERSONALITY'

Like Cinderella's slipper the right school will provide a perfect fit for your child and your family

CHOOSING THE RIGHT PRIVATE SCHOOL FOR YOUR CHILD IS A DAUNTING TASK:

After all, the community, the peers, the teachers and the experiences at that school will help to shape your child's life, goals and memories. No pressure there. Some data are easy to compare: Everything from class size and student-teacher ratio, to teaching style and philosophy, to gender balance, to location, to what proportion of graduates gain admission to the university of their choice, can all be found with a Google search. The school's focus – whether it emphasizes athletics or arts programming, for instance, or whether it offers religious or language instruction – can also be readily discerned.

But the crux of the decision is all about feel and fit, says Toronto-based educational consultant Elaine Danson. "Parents need to keep in mind that they have to feel comfortable when they walk into a school, and their child needs to feel comfortable. There is not a formula. Every child is unique. And each school has its own personality."

Danson has been in the educational field since the 1970s,

and holds a masters degree in special education. She has taught in public, private and not-for-profit independent schools, and served as principal of Toronto's Montcrest School for 15 years, from 1991 to 2006. As an independent consultant for the past 11 years, she helps families to choose the schools that are best suited to their individual children. "Universally, what I hear from parents is that they want their child to reach their potential, and not to fall through the cracks."

To start with, she reviews the child's academic history and educational assessments, and talks to the parents about their child and what they are looking for in a school. Then she discusses the "intangibles," she says. "We talk about the personalities and reputations of each school, and the niches they have in the educational community. She

recommends that parents figure out what their priorities are – an International Baccalaureate (IB) program to prepare their kids for university, for instance, or a hockey team, or opportunities for parental involvement – each family's list is different, and then rank those priorities so they can compare their options side



Grade 1 students at Toronto French School spend a day studying in the Don Valley ravine, part of the school's campus. PHOTO: AMYLA GERRITHS

by side. "A firm list keeps you from being distracted from what you have agreed is most important."

But boots on the ground are the real test: "Open houses, private tours, spending a day shadowing a student, asking questions in person – that is where you get a sense of fit for your family and your child,"

Danson says. "School is a community you join together."

That said, every school community is made up of individuals. "No school has ever had kids that are all the same," says Helen Pereira-Raso, head of school at Holy Trinity School in Richmond Hill, Ont. The school's Christian ethos is centred on the Anglican faith, but remains dedicated to the spiritual growth of students from many religious backgrounds, including Muslim, Jewish, Hindu and Buddhist.

The question Pereira-Raso says she most appreciates from prospective parents is: "How are your alumni thriving in the world?" What parents are looking for when they send their child to an independent school, when they make that long-term investment in their education, she says, is a commitment to their child. And to the family. "Our

community requires that parents be involved. It is a whole-family affair," she says. A big intangible at Holy Trinity School is community service. "That starts with parents being involved. It helps us model stewardship and build a sense of community and a culture of giving back." She adds that the school's stated values – respect, integrity, leadership and confidence – are reinforced through a tradition and practice of service.

"There has to be an alignment of values," says Claudette Landry, principal of the Mississauga campus of the Toronto French School. While the main campus has a population of

1,400 and goes from pre-kindergarten to Grade 12, the west-end satellite

has just 170 students up to Grade 6 (when virtually all students continue on at the downtown location). "The school model is based around the concept of citizenship," she says, and the motto is "Individuals who reflect, citizens who act."

Landry says the goal of the Toronto French School is to raise an adult, and to let them fall and learn to get back up, based on the "growth mindset" work of Stanford educational psychologist Carol Dweck. "In a trusting and supportive environment, you find each child's instructional level and then go a bit beyond." Then, once a skill or task is mastered, you "go a little bit harder."

The school provides a great example of how parents can choose a priority – in this case French-language immersion and an IB curriculum – and be a part of the community even when they don't speak French themselves. "Really, only 5 to 10 per cent of our parents speak French," says Landry, which doesn't hamper family participation, since all of the school's events accommodate English-only speakers.

When faced with a tough decision, choosing between the wealth of fine schools available in the region is a great problem to have. So take Elaine Danson's advice and make a list of priorities, prepare questions for your tours, and then get ready to become involved in your child's new community.

HOW TO CHOOSE AN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL

- Sit down as a family and make a list of your priorities, then rank them in terms of importance, the way you would when buying a house or a car. Adding some rigour to the process early on helps bring discipline to the seemingly overwhelming task of choosing a school. Academic factors to consider could include curriculum, teaching styles and philosophy, and what proportion of students get into university and where, either in Canada and abroad.
- Narrow down your open house and tour list further based on factors such as location, class size, available technology, gender balance, religious or language focus, and the reputation of the athletics or arts programs if these are important to your child.

- Once your short list checks the boxes for these tangible priorities, it is time to visit and get a feel for the place. This is where the "aha moment" will most certainly happen, says educational consultant Elaine Danson. "There has to be an excitement, and a sense of fit, for not just the child, but the parents as well."

- Have your child spend the day shadowing another student at their top school choices. This will provide answers to questions you hadn't even thought to ask.



WE DELIVER
Academic Excellence
REAL WORLD
LEARNING
Global Citizenship
Designed for Girls.

We believe courageous girls can challenge and change the world.

She's a Millie.



Visit our Winter Open Houses to discover how your daughter will benefit from an SMLS education:

Saturday, February 3, 10am - 2pm
Tuesday, February 6, 9am - 11am

ST. MILDRED'S-LIGHTBOURN SCHOOL

A Premier School for Girls Preschool to Grade 12

www.smls.on.ca