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PRIVATE SCHOOL REVIEWS

Delano Academy

The Our Kids Review

The 50-page review of Delano Academy, to be published as a book and available to read in full on OurKids.net, is part of our series of in-depth accounts of Canada's leading private schools. Insights were garnered by visiting the school and interviewing students, parents, faculty, and administrators.

EXCERPTS FROM THE BOOK

Delano Academy is a coed, non-denominational day school in Vaughan, Ontario, offering Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 12. It was founded in 2014 with the mandate of providing a very forward-looking approach to the early and elementary years. It is an International Baccalaureate candidate school, currently teaching to the IB curriculum throughout. Once it has completed the candidacy period in 2022, Delano will be **the only school in the region to offer the full IB continuum. The focus is on collaboration, 21st century**

literacies, and allowing students to grow into an international, empathetic understanding of the world and their place within it.

Sandy Palombo is the head of school. From day one, she says that the goal has been to provide "a safe place where faculty and students feel comfortable and empowered. Where we can all contribute, all of the stakeholders: the educators, the parents, and the students collectively. An environment where people

genuinely care and help make amazing things happen."

The school started off very small, with fewer than 20 students in its inaugural year. The desire was simply to offer something that wasn't being offered in the city prior. **Faculty wanted to create something different from other private schools, something more personal and more engaged with the school families.** "It's in alignment with a family that is looking for change," says Palombo. **"This isn't a place that you go to just for content and curriculum."**

There was also a desire to shine a light on student achievement, showcasing their work, what they are capable of doing, and what each of them bring into the learning environment. That remains true, including very literally, as student work is prominently displayed throughout the building. When you walk into the main office there are displays of projects that students have completed in their STEAM classes. There's a computer that's been disassembled, reassembled, and turned into an art piece. There are designated displays, projects on the go, that effectively transform the space into **a learning commons.** **"It's more than just shelves of books,"** says Calarco, "or more than



AT A GLANCE

Founded: 2014

Enrolment: 200

Grades: Preschool to 12

Gender: Coed

Living Arrangements: Day

Language of Instruction: English

School Focus: Academic

Developmental Priorities:

Balanced, intellectual

Curriculum: Traditional,

International Baccalaureate

Curriculum Pace: Accelerated

Academic Culture: Rigorous

Average Class Size: 12 to 18

Gifted Learner Support:

Dedicated gifted school

just an area for kids to read.” There’s a women’s empowerment area and an area dedicated to Indigenous studies. There are themed displays, as for Black History Month, that are then continued through into the classrooms themselves.

ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

The campus is the definition of crisp and clean, both inside and out. Should a school be looking for how to make each classroom distinct, Delano provides a compelling model. **The interior design is charming, with lots of delightful design elements and flourishes.** As students move through the school, and up through the grade levels, there is a sense of movement between learning spaces.

Since the fall semester of 2021, the school has been divided into two campuses. The North Maple Campus at 2600 Major Mackenzie Drive houses the Prep School, home to the Kindergarten to Grade 3 Primary Years Program. The property was first built in 1865, known for much of its life as Jacob Rupert House or the Round House, though it doesn’t readily show its age. It’s been so well maintained, it’s hard to believe that portions of the building predate Confederation. But it does. The property was first a home, then later served a number of uses, including educational. The building is designated a landmark heritage structure, unique in that it was constructed as an octagon. The shape, popular at the time, was used to maximize heating efficiency while also allowing the rooms to be filled with natural light. All of that works well for Delano. **The history of the building meshes well with the school: unique, bright, and stately.** The interior spaces are bright, modern, with lots of room for students to move about, engaging in active learning.

ON ACADEMICS

“We don’t go in there teaching just subjects,” says teacher Sarah Allibhai. **“We go in there teaching them all the life skills, the learner profiles, action, taking action in society.”** That’s reflective of the International Baccalaureate, though underscored doubly here. Students take on projects of their own and work toward

executing them. Teachers are very much the guides by their side. “The kids are learning how to learn, how to figure out the answers to the questions they have. You’re a facilitator, you’re there helping but you’re not standing in front of the class.” The teacher’s role is less about coming in with a detailed lesson plan, each step marked out, but to base lessons on inquiry topics.

Teaching is active, and students tend not to sit for long. They are up and about, moving between groups, writing on the white boards, and interacting, hands on, with manipulables and project materials. **Lessons are practical, based in real-world problems and positing real-world solutions.** Students are often working on several projects at a time, which keeps them engaged while also building project- and time-management skills.

Were you to visit a classroom on a typical day (outside a pandemic), you’d see the students working together, sharing ideas in small groups, moving about the room. There are rolling chairs, and modular furniture used to accommodate a range of learning styles. One of the

things Allibhai loves about the smaller class sizes is the opportunity to really get personal and to build relationships. “That for me is important,” she says, “as opposed to being in a classroom with a lot of students.”

ON THE SCHOOL’S VALUES

The school culture is something that faculty and administration are very proud of, as well they should be. **The school community is small** (one parent commented to us that “the school is small, but it is not to be underestimated because its spirit is loud and big!”) **and a high value is placed on the relationships that students have with their teachers and peers.** The school maintains close communication with parents, who themselves feel welcome and included in the life of the school. **A parent told us “I can speak to them about anything.”**

One of the greatest questions you can ever ask an administrator or a member of faculty at school is “What does success mean to you?” and Kelly Ryckman gave one of the best answers we’ve



KEY INSIGHTS

- An emphasis on the full spectrum of learning, including social, physical, and academic development.
- A close, connected school community, and a faculty that knows the students from the time they enter the school until the time they graduate from it.



heard. **“To me a student is successful when they’re demonstrating their character.”** That includes a lot of components—confidence, passion, curiosity, resilience, being principled and open minded—though she sees those as contributing to something larger. “Success to us is when our students are confident and comfortable and able to collaborate and just show their character to one another. It’s much more than just a grade. It is who they are and the way that they are representing themselves. ... When they are confident in who they are, that’s when they’re showing success.”

ON WELLNESS

The wellness program is broad, including counsellors, though seen as a function of the entire school, not only the guidance suite. **“It’s important that students see that they have a village behind them,”** says Kelly Ryckman, co-leader of student health and wellness. “For us to show students how important collaboration is, it’s important that they see it first-hand from the faculty.” Ryckman’s hope for the program is that it emphasizes the benefits and pleasures of active living. “Teaching them the tools and coping mechanisms to live a healthy lifestyle all of the time.” During the pandemic, understandably, that was more difficult, given that all the students were learning remotely, though it helped in a sense to underscore what wellness is all about. “My goal for this program was **to make sure that our students knew how to be resilient. They knew how to cope**

through hard times. And that they were taking care of themselves and each other.”

There are weekly themes integrated in school assemblies, though also raised within classroom work and discussions. In addition, each day has its own theme: Mindfulness Monday, Trailblazing Tuesdays, Wellness Wednesdays, Throwback Thursdays, and Fun Fridays. They help students gain a sense of the various aspects of social and mental well-being, as well as a comfort with reflecting: **being mindful, considering their past decisions, interacting with others in constructive ways.** “Just taking a minute to check in on themselves. Where are they? How are they feeling? Do they have someone they can talk to?” As that suggests, wellness isn’t seen as a footnote to learning, but central to it.

ON THE ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

There are daily assemblies every morning, an opportunity for schoolwide engagement. Students connect with their house teams, their cohorts. Says Ryckman, **“We spend time just enjoying each other’s company.”** The theme days came out of that kind of school-wide experience. **“Just celebrating that they are kids.”** Fun Fridays can be anything: a period or multiple periods with the main goal of just getting everyone together, outside of their typical routine, and having a really fun time. “Because students learn through memorable moments, and we try to make sure that we’re providing

a wealth of opportunities for those moments and those memories to be built.” It could be as grand as a school-wide carnival, to something as simple as gathering outside to play a team building game. “We close the books and just let them enjoy being children and just have some fun.” The other theme days are fun, too, but again, it’s about opening up a variety of spaces and perspectives for understanding who they are. They may not use the terms with the students—it’s not “today we’re going to learn what it means to have a growth mindset”—but the activities are chosen and sequenced to hit those kinds of ideas. Topics in assemblies on Mondays can cover things like, ‘how do I feel when I don’t do so great on a test,’ sharing what they liked about the previous week, and teachers reflecting on what their goals are for the week. “It’s a way for us to help them grow as learners, but also just a chance to check in.”

The school is tech rich, and all the students have laptops, from Kindergarten up. Classes are paperless. Robotics are available for use in co-curriculars, though they are present in the math classrooms as well, and at times classes work out into the hallway in order to gain a bit more room to move.

Faculty are keen to innovate, and leadership gives them lots of latitude to do just that. One example are the Delano dollars, first begun as a rewards program, though it has evolved to become more than just that. Students are assigned a job each month and earn Delano dollars along the way. They use them to buy things, or to pay off the “mortgage” on their lockers. As such, they begin to gain the rudiments of financial literacy. Says a parent, “I love it because it teaches them the value of a dollar and how to budget their money.” Programs like that add spark to the delivery of the curriculum.

LEARN MORE

Read the full review for Delano Academy:

ourkids.net/p/reviews