

## **Celebrating Independent School Month**

### ***The value-added features of an independent education***

By Jane Whiting

November is “Independent School Month” in the nation’s capital and for the last five years, *Capital Parent* has celebrated the occasion with a focus on the many educational options offered by the wide selection of independent schools in the region.

Ottawa families are very fortunate to have the opportunity to choose a school with a specific mission, philosophy, or an approach to learning that fits their child’s needs and their own set of values. There are approximately 70 independent schools in the Ottawa-Carleton area that offer an excellent education in English or French and in a bilingual or third language environment. Collectively these schools provide: a single gender education; boarding or day school options; specialty academic and special needs programs, gifted and enriched arts curriculum; different educational philosophies such as Montessori and Waldorf; and a religious or faith-based education.

As the largest independent school in the area, Ashbury has more than 650 students overall, including 150 in the Junior School and 100 boarders from over 30 different countries. This enhances the school’s bilingual and very popular International Baccalaureate program, as well as creating a mini United Nations environment, says Mike King who teaches Junior School English, history and geography, and is the head of social studies for grades four to eight.

With 21 years of teaching experience at Ashbury, in addition to several years in the independent and public school system in Toronto, King has a good sense of what parents are looking for today. He lists the two main advantages of an independent education as being about small class sizes and value-added resources.

“There are fewer than 20 students in our Junior School classes and this allows us to go much further into depth with the curriculum. Because we are on a nine-day cycle with a higher number of periods in a week, and have a longer school day with four subjects in the morning and four again in the afternoon, we are able cover all of the ministry guidelines – and then some!”

King believes that students in smaller classes are often more motivated and eager to learn, which fosters a higher level of respect in the classroom. He thinks this may also be connected to the fact that students at independent schools typically have to pass an entrance requirement which enables the school to choose some of their students as well.

The value-added nature of an independent education is another big attraction factor. King describes these as being the availability of technology in the classroom and subject specialists, plus resources such as state-of-the-art computer and science labs, library and gym facilities, fully-equipped art and music studio, as well as school trips and exchanges.

“We have smart boards in every classroom in the Junior School. A smart board enables an interactive lesson with not only written notes, but also visuals or a video clip that can be imported during the class,” explains King. “Just like at university, this can then be uploaded onto the podium to post the day’s notes or projects online to make them more accessible for students who are away or sick.”

Balancing academics with daily physical activity is often a priority at independent schools. King says that most parents want their kids to exercise every day, and being a bigger school, Ashbury has competitive sports teams and athletes who participate at the local and provincial level against both independent and public schools.

For parents who want an individual learning experience for their child, the Montessori philosophy is a popular choice, confirms Carrie Whalen who has been the Vice-Principal at the Kanata Montessori School for five years.

She explains that the child-centred Montessori program is designed for children as young as age 18 months old who go into the Toddler Program. Kids aged three to six are enrolled in the Casa Program and many grade eight Montessori students have enjoyed the benefits of staying at the same school right up to high school.

“The big draw for parents is the Montessori program itself which meets the needs of each individual child and also instills a love of learning,” says Whalen. “The children are very motivated, self-directed, very confident learners.”

She adds that in addition to the unique learning approach, which works with children’s strengths, parents are also attracted to the low ratio of students to teachers. They like the small, friendly environment where Whalen know the name

of every child in the school. This also encourages greater parental involvement in their child's education and makes for better communication between home and school.

Although there are only 230 children at the school, Whalen notes that they are still large enough to have an active sports program and intramural activities. Strong academic skills are an important aspect of all independent schools and Whalen proudly reports that children at the Kantata Montessori School test one to two grade levels above the public school system.