

St. Gerald Catholic School

Toronto Catholic District School Board Toronto, Ontario

CONTACT INFORMATION

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Some Snapshots

Students ...

- “We are the change” – students challenge themselves to achieve in the classroom and to reach out beyond the school to help others
- run charitable events (e.g., candy cane sales to support a school in Tanzania, gifts and money to support a needy family)
- participate in house leagues, competitive sports, knowledge tournaments, language festivals, authors and artists in the school

Parents ...

- enjoy the respect that staff accord them as “first teachers”
- support the school’s targeted approach to improving student learning
- celebrate the school’s success in closing learning gaps

About the school ...

St. Gerald Catholic School offers a Kindergarten to Grade 8 program to a diverse student population in the northeast Toronto community of Willowdale. Presently about 240 students attend, drawn from both the local neighbourhood and beyond. Values of trust, compassion, peacemaking and justice are emphasized in the daily life of the school, as are high academic standards and a respect for learning and the value of education.

“We’re well-intentioned, nurturing and collaborative but we’re hard-nosed about what works,” says the principal. Through professional networking, at the school, family of schools and board-level, staff explore (and learn how to use) high-impact strategies that the evidence shows, both in research and in practice, work best for learners. They understand that improvement goes beyond the talents of individual teachers and requires shared understanding and action of the entire staff. They are determined to achieve the board’s equity agenda – to prove that all children can learn and achieve regardless of social or economic challenges.

Ongoing improvement ...

The commitment to improving student learning and achievement at St. Gerald Separate School is reflected in the school’s 2007–08 EQAO results. Despite challenges, there have been significant increases in results. Between 86 and 92 per cent of students achieved at or above the provincial standard in all six assessment areas. These results are well above both the board and provincial results.

Success after struggle ...

Professional curiosity and perseverance are powerful drivers at St. Gerald. Staff members are reflective and forthright as they ask themselves, “What is working for our learners and what do we need to change for this child or for these students?” The path between student data and strategic instruction is well worn as teachers constantly analyze, question and reflect on the impact that instruction is having on student learning.

Establishing learning blocks in literacy (100–120 minutes) and numeracy (60–75 minutes) enabled the school not only to focus more intensively on foundational skills for all children but also to enable Special Education

teachers to assist with meeting individual needs. Block timetabling also facilitated professional learning opportunities. As teachers learn more about what is required of students to meet specific expectations and to move their learning to the next performance level, they will be better able to assess student work and to customize feedback to students.

By providing appropriate and meaningful anchors and modelling explicit feedback in the classroom, teachers have helped students to improve their self-assessment skills and provide constructive feedback to one another.

Teaching, learning and leading ...

Co-operative planning to align classroom practices. Teachers work in both their divisions and the whole-school PLC to ensure consistency in approaches and to establish a common language for instruction across the grades. Meetings are used as an opportunity to share effective practices and to problem-solve concerns about individual students and student learning.

Teaching-learning critical pathway. The school-wide pathway addresses agreed-upon areas for literacy growth. Valued practices include establishing high expectations, using data (EQAO, CAT/3, Reaching Readers and teacher-generated assessments) to determine students' greatest challenges and instructional needs, providing frequent and precise feedback and collectively assessing student responses (pre- and post-assessment).

Capacity in mathematics teaching. Staff members are participating in a collaborative inquiry project to develop regional capacity and leadership in mathematics education, Kindergarten to Grade 6. This LNS-sponsored project aims to examine a professional learning design and implementation framework that engages a diverse community of learners (e.g., students, teachers, administrators and supervisory officers) in learning mathematics.

Explicit instruction of reading comprehension strategies. Through teacher modelling and small group work, students learn to understand the steps that good readers take when making sense of text. Questions that promote higher-order thinking challenge the students to make meaningful inferences about what they are reading, as well as thoughtful



connections to their own experiences, other texts and the world in general. The careful selection of rich classroom resources and engaging ideas supports students to make those connections.

Leadership in the school. Taking on leadership roles is encouraged among the teaching and support staff. Staff members rise admirably to all challenges, academic and extracurricular, with passion and obvious professionalism. Staff describe the principal's key role in providing the expectations, the opportunities and the support that have been fundamental to their school improvement process.

"It's not just a job for these teachers. It's difficult what they do, but they put their heart and their soul into it." *Parent*

"I know when they are talking about my child, not a generic Grade 5 child." *Parent*

"You have to promote risk-taking in writing. If all you worry about are the mechanics of what you're doing, you'll never be a great or even a good writer." *Teacher*

"Teacher feedback needs to be specific and clear and to elicit student involvement in the process." *Teacher*

"Involvement in the Schools on the Move will inspire us to do even more, to keep learning." *Teacher*

Moving into the future

- ◆ differentiate instruction with respect to content, processes and products, in order to meet individual student needs with greater precision
- ◆ focus on problem-solving strategies and communication in mathematics, in order to assist students with identifying the big ideas in the curriculum
- ◆ extend our focus on questioning, especially to elicit higher-order thinking and improve achievement across the curriculum
- ◆ find innovative ways to further engage parents and community