

St. John The Evangelist Catholic School

Toronto Catholic District School Board Toronto, Ontario

CONTACT INFORMATION

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About the school ...

St. John The Evangelist Catholic School has its roots in the old city of York, in Weston, in northwest Toronto. From its origins in the 1850s as a one-room schoolhouse in the church sacristy to a four-room "modern" schoolhouse built in the 1920s to its present-day building, the school has grown and adjusted over a century and a half. Today it serves over 500 Junior Kindergarten to Grade 8 students in an extremely diverse urban neighbourhood, many of them new Canadians and many facing socio-economic challenges.

Staff members deliberately take a holistic approach to the children in their care, stressing that growth in faith and social skills is as essential for child development as is academic learning. To foster social skills development, staff members first strive to create a school where all feel safe and welcomed, and then provide a wide array of student clubs and activities, school celebrations and initiatives, and events for the entire school and parent community. The Virtues program, together with extracurricular activities, whether in sports, the arts or volunteering, provides an authentic context for practising, reinforcing and consolidating academic skills. On this rich foundation, staff have more recently zeroed-in on a number of evidence-informed strategies to improve student learning and achievement.

Some Snapshots

Students ...

- "walk the talk" - help make their school a "Virtues Zone," take part in the board's "Earth Day Extravaganza," earned Eco School Gold certification
- enjoy a full range of sports activities from traditional team sports to a "road runners" group
- take part in Toronto Symphony's "Adopt-a-Player" program

Parents ...

- run a nutrition program for the school through their Catholic School Council
- act as interpreters for non-English-speaking parents, inviting them into the school and offering an avenue to communicate and participate in the education process
- participate in Family Math nights and Virtues celebrations

Ongoing improvement ...

The commitment of the staff to students achieving at higher levels is reflected in the most recent EQAO results. The Grade 6 assessment results have increased between 28 and 31 percentage points over the last four years. The Grade 3 assessments have also improved significantly over the past three years, resulting in 76 per cent of the students achieving at or above the provincial standard in reading, 72 per cent in writing and 74 per cent in mathematics - this while facing challenges.

Success after struggle ...

The journey of continuous improvement at St. John The Evangelist began with a look at school-based data. Staff examined student data from a variety of sources and identified and discussed student needs. The school was designated as an Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership school, making LNS and board resources available. The teachers describe how that support was instrumental in helping them to overcome their initial uncertainty and to begin to take steps to work together, to learn together and to build a mutually supportive team.

Early in the process, staff focused on goal setting at both the grade and division level. They planned assessment techniques that would ensure they could measure gains in student learning. This was a key component of the plan since it was the evidence of improved student learning that provided teachers with the motivation for continued effort and action. Seeing the difference they were making for students, staff committed to an ongoing cycle of setting goals, planning assessments, implementing evidence-based instructional strategies and monitoring student learning. As collaboration and confidence grew, the level of trust within the classroom and within the school allowed students and teachers to take risks, to ask reflective questions, to establish new directions, to share their strengths and to seek support from each other.

Teaching, leading and learning ...

Teaching-learning critical pathway. The teaching-learning pathway has provided the school with a framework for focusing on effective literacy instruction. It has helped teachers put in place a process for determining the areas of students' greatest needs, selecting instructional strategies, modelling for students, employing assessment techniques and monitoring progress. The use of exemplars, modelled writing and guided reading have all contributed to improved student learning. A literacy binder with key articles, instructions and explanations for explicit strategies PLUS student organizers and charts have facilitated implementation. By collaborating with other schools in the area, staff are able to share strategies that have worked and move forward as a self-reflective group and in turn to bring back strategies that will support ongoing success.

Peer and self-evaluation. Teaching students how to evaluate their own work and providing the tools to assess work by peers expands the sources of feedback for students. Students are encouraged to reflect on their own work and to consider how it might be improved. This helps them to become more courageous and confident learners. Learning to offer precise and effective feedback to each other has a positive effect on everyone's learning and contributes to a trusting and respectful atmosphere.

Gradual release of responsibility. The power of modelling is evident at every level, everywhere – modelling of positive attitudes, modelling of effective conflict resolution, modelling of teamwork, modelling of learning strategies. Teachers describe how demonstration by the principal or by board or LNS colleagues has been essential to their own learning and how they are trying to provide that same advantage to their students,



gradually transferring responsibility to each student as his or her skills and understanding increase. The impact is clear as students are able to articulate the focus of their learning, what strategy they are using and why and how they are being assessed, and explain their growing knowledge by using appropriate subject- and topic-specific language.

Leadership. There is an energy and excitement for learning at St. John The Evangelist that both teachers and parents attribute to the principal's very active and visible leadership. Together, the principal and vice principal lead by example and work with staff, students and parents to build an environment in which every individual, regardless of age, is supported as a learner. The commitment to collaboration is genuine, the willingness to share leadership obvious. Staff members are confident that their collective learning, shared goals, expectations and focused action will sustain continuous progress at St. John The Evangelist.

"The teachers and principal are working in partnership with us." *Parent*

"I've changed my program every year – I do that for the benefit of the kids." *Teacher*

"Our principal is an awesome leader. He delivers what he expects." *Teacher*

"I'm a huge believer in self-reflection as the key for learning." *Principal*

Moving into the future

- ◆ learn more about how to develop and apply "burning" questions, rigorous thinking, deeper understanding in instruction and how to involve students in that process
- ◆ build student confidence and skill in mathematics, effective use of manipulatives, problem-solving approaches
- ◆ share strategies to extend and expand student engagement, to encourage and motivate students to demonstrate their learning
- ◆ seek more ways to engage parents in their children's education and enable their participation and involvement