

St. Joseph Catholic Elementary School

Niagara Catholic District School Board Niagara Falls, Ontario

CONTACT INFORMATION

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About the school ...

St. Joseph is a small but diverse school community in Niagara Falls, a city built beside the waterfalls on the Canadian/U.S. border. The school is located in the town, serving about 150 Junior Kindergarten to Grade 8 children, many of them new to the country and grappling with the challenges of transience and economic hardship. Yet, supported by their school community, this resilient student population wins awards and is involved in a dazzling range of programs and initiatives.

Staff, students, parents and volunteers contribute to the sense of excitement about learning and the energy for action that is evident throughout the school. Engagement – spiritual, social and intellectual – is the key to their community and to the students' academic success. One parent put it this way, "At this school, teachers have the ability to sneak learning in ... everywhere."

Ongoing improvement ...

Steady improvements in all Grade 3 and 6 assessments have led to high levels of student achievement. This is reflected in the most recent

Some Snapshots

Students ...

- write three winning proposals for the ministry's SPEAK UP student voice program
- participate in the annual Jump Rope for Heart and Hoops for Heart to raise funds for the Heart and Stroke Foundation
- act as "Stewards of the Earth" by picking up litter in the school yard and planning a Stewardship Garden
- create projects for the "Historica Fair" – winners represent St. Joseph at Brock University

Parents ...

- enjoy the open door policy supported by every staff member – from teachers and educational assistants to the principal, from the secretary and custodian to the crossing guard
- participate as classroom volunteers
- support learning through Literacy Nights, Snuggle Up and Read Evenings, Home Book Exchanges (bring a book, get a book)
- facilitate Family Movie/Literacy Night through the Catholic School Council

EQAO results. Over the last four years, Grade 3 assessments have increased by over 35 percentage points in reading, writing and mathematics. Between 71 and 81 per cent of the students are achieving at or above the provincial standard. As well, significant increases in the Grade 6 assessments over the last three years confirm the school's commitment to improved student learning and achievement.

Success after struggle ...

Some of the longer-serving staff at St. Joseph recall a time when they confronted low EQAO results. They were named a "Turnaround School," which helped staff shift the focus of their instruction to a balanced literacy approach. Staff who participated in the Turnaround program describe the first critical step as "letting go" of fears and excuses and concentrating on students and their needs. As one teacher said, "In order to be a good teacher you have to use best practice. If it's not working for kids, abandon it!" They point out that support for professional learning was – and remains – essential so that teachers can develop the skills and confidence they need to continue the implementation process.

Through the common focus of a “living” school improvement plan, administrators and staff new to the school are able to begin contributing immediately to the collective effort to improve student learning. The energy and the enthusiasm for learning is contagious, and staff appreciate being part of the professional collaboration. They describe how supported they feel as they plan, learn, share ideas and tackle problems together. “That’s what I love about this school,” said a teacher. “If I say I don’t know, someone here will know or we will find someone outside our school who can help us.” Most recently, this once-struggling school earned the Garfield Weston Award for Excellence in Education (First Runner Up) in the category of Improvement in Academics.



Teaching, learning and leading ...

School improvement planning. Through careful analysis of EQAO and literacy assessments, such as observation surveys, running records, Developmental Reading Assessments and classroom assessment, the staff develop and routinely review and modify the school improvement plan. The plan is reviewed at division, team and whole-staff meetings to ensure that it is an authentic working document and that it represents and supports growth and improvement for all teachers and all students.

Integrated approach. At St. Joseph, all the threads are deliberately and thoughtfully woven into a strong fabric that supports student learning and achievement. Strategies that enhance teaching/learning are embraced and implemented, not as individual approaches but as part of a whole network that supports students as they grow and learn. Instructional resources for both literacy and numeracy are selected to support student learning; they are congregated in the book/data room and well organized for ease of access and for addressing specific expectations and student needs.

Celebration of student work. The results of the implementation of this whole-school transformation are celebrated, highlighted and emphasized through informative displays of student work in the classrooms and hallways for all to see and share. The displays are accompanied by an explanation of the work and the ministry expectations that are the focus of the work. Parents, staff and students report that the abundance of displays provides an opportunity to learn about student progress and to motivate further improvement. The displays are a

visible representation of the consistency and continuity of instruction and expectations that the staff are determined to provide.

Leadership supports learning. Everyone at the school appreciates and supports the notion of instructional leadership that is articulated by senior board leaders. The principal, like his staff, takes full advantage of opportunities to extend his own learning by collaborating with the St. Joseph staff and by reaching out to share ideas with colleagues beyond the school. Sharing leadership comes naturally at St. Joseph. Staff members know about and respect one another’s talents and strengths and are able to easily make the transition between leader and learner roles. Each staff member has a specific area of responsibility within the school improvement plan and everyone contributes to the whole by describing their best practices within each area.

“Our kids know how to ask questions – it’s more than just learning to read and write.” *Parent*

“We communicate so frequently and so meaningfully that we truly have achieved continuity.” *Teacher*

“It is amazingly different – the process is so transparent here.” *Teacher (new to the school)*

“We model for kids. Take metacognition. We say to kids, ‘Think about your thinking’. We have to say to ourselves and each other ‘Think about your teaching’.” *Teacher*

Moving into the future

- ◆ continue to engage in teacher moderation with colleagues across divisions and with grade partners in other schools
- ◆ investigate strategies to sustain momentum, to engage new staff in the collaborative process
- ◆ learn more about how to best integrate and support level 1 and 2 learners within classrooms
- ◆ develop teaching-learning pathways based on the literacy/mathematics needs of the students
- ◆ extend understanding of the School Effectiveness Framework so staff can continue to develop as reflective practitioners