

Well-Schooled

By Shelly Sanders-Greer

As principal of one of the most sought-after high schools in Toronto, Bev Ohashi has grown accustomed to seeing families in tears when they discover the house they bought is not in its catchment area. Earl Haig Secondary School, just north of Sheppard Avenue and east of Yonge Street, attracts people from as far away as Asia to its doors every year. But the school's full capacity and stringent boundaries leave many students "locked out", unable to become part of its successful population.

"A lot of parents don't have the right address so they try anything to get in here," says Ms Ohashi. "I had one family say they moved to the area because they wanted their kids to come to Earl Haig." Ms Ohashi told them they needed a notarized lease or purchase of sale to prove they lived in the area. A day later, a woman called Ms Ohashi and told her that a strange lady came to her house asking for a phone bill with the address on it. "We put the connection together and figured it was the family I had seen," recalls Ms Ohashi.

Earl Haig is one of many high-performing schools in the northeast quadrant of Toronto, drawing interest from all over the world as well as helping to increase resale home prices by 30%. Based on the 2005/2006 Fraser Report Card, an independent ranking of schools based on grades 3, 6, and 10 for standardized tests, Denlow Public School, Kennedy Public School, Seneca Hill Public School, Highland Junior High School, and Zion Heights Junior High school also perform consistently above the provincial average.

When Nira Rajaratnam and her husband Aravindhan began reviewing the annual Fraser Report Card a few years ago, they decided to move from their Scarborough home to North York because of the schools. Now their children, aged seven and four, will attend Cresthaven Public School and move on to Zion Heights Junior High and A.Y. Jackson Secondary School.

"We loved where we lived in Scarborough, except for the schools," says Ms Rajaratnam. "We ended up at Leslie and Finch and spent \$250,000 more than we spent on our Scarborough home, even though our new house is a bit smaller. But all three schools our children will attend are good, and we really like our new area."

Dennis Paradis, a sales representative with Re/Max Hallmark Realty Limited Brokerage, helped the Rajaratnams not only find a new home, but also guided them in their quest for a good school district. Mo-

tivated by the large number of clients with schools as a top priority, Mr. Paradis has researched the link between education and home prices and found U.S. data pointing to a 25% to 30% increase in resale values for homes in good school districts. Mr. Paradis decided to create his own set of school reports, which he says are “a *Reader’s Digest* version of the Fraser Report Card.” His charts show how schools perform over five years, where “sweet spots” with high-performing elementary, middle and high schools are found, and they’re grouped into real estate boundaries so that purchasers can see exactly how schools in a particular neighbourhood compare with other areas. Overall, Mr. Paradis says that one out of every ten neighbourhoods in the GTA has a sweet spot.

Mr. Paradis also discovered that North York has more sweet spots than other parts of the city, which explains the high demand from both families and builders. Harvey Frankel, a sales representative with The Real Estate Centre 2000 Inc., serving North York, says, “Prices have all gone up in the area and schools are a major reason. It costs at least \$600,000 or \$700,000 to get into a family home here, and a lot of builders are paying top dollar just for lots to build million-dollar homes.”

There is no question that the Fraser Report Card is garnering attention and influencing home-purchasing decisions. Approximately 330,000 copies of the Report Card were downloaded from the Institute’s web-site last year. While Peter Cowley, director of school performance studies at the Fraser Institute, says the Report Card brings objective information to parents, he cautions potential home-buyers from focusing solely on numbers when making a decision. “Don’t rely on any one source,” he says. “You should ask important questions, talk to the principal, students and parents to see if you get consistent information.”

A big irony in this whole school process, says Mr. Cowley, is that when a school is perceived as being good, all of a sudden it is closed to attendance from students out of the area. “In any other sector, a business wouldn’t turn customers away,” he says. “You wouldn’t see Whole Foods closing its doors to a long line-up.”

This is exactly what’s happened at Denlow Public School, south of the 401 and east of Leslie Street. Principal Terry McIsaac says this has always been a high-performing school but, once the Fraser Report Card was made public, the school became more crowded and has been closed to optional attendance (which allows non-area students to attend) for the last two years. “More often we say no to people who want to come here but don’t live in the district.”

Echoing this problem is Dale Clayden, principal of Highland Junior High School at Don Mills Road and Steeles Avenue. “We get calls from outside our boundary and overseas from people who have read the Fraser Report Card. A lot of families come here from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Korea, and they do their homework. They pick an area of the

city where they want their kids to go to school, so they move into the catchment area because that's the only way to gain access to this school."

This activity is taking place in other school districts as well. Brian Lumsden, a sales representative with Re/Max Hallmark Realty in the Beach, says that after the Fraser report was published last year, he received "tons of calls from people looking for homes in this school district". Two of the schools in demand are Balmy Beach Public School and Courcellette Public School.

The Beach, along with Leaside and Forest Hill, are interesting areas because their real estate values are among the highest in Toronto, with Leaside topping the city with an average resale price of \$1,028,000. Yet schools in these areas are not consistently among the top performers. They do well but are not standouts. In these areas, the location has more influence on home prices than anything else, and Mr. Paradis cautions buyers to realize that paying top dollar for a house does not guarantee the best schools.

"The Beach has, according to the Education Quality and Accountability test results, many schools on the low end," he says. "You can't buy a house in a great neighbourhood and expect great schools."

Since rankings from The Fraser Institute and the more recent C.D. Howe Institute's report offer the most objective and thorough information, it seems safe to conclude these findings will continue to guide parents in choosing schools. Schools such as Earl Haig are like magnets, attracting students from all over the world, helping to raise property values and drastically changing the demographics.

Ms Ohashi says that 15 to 20 years ago, Earl Haig did not have the stellar reputation it enjoys today, but now she sees real estate ads highlighting the fact that a home is in this school's district.

"I would say we're middle- to upper-middle class, with 95% of our population with university education," she says. "We even attract people who have left private schools to attend Earl Haig."

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