

Magnets for Students

There are many public schools of choice in the GTA, and they are successful.

By Tess Kalinowski

Caitlin Rosenbaum has been dancing since she started taking private lessons around the age of 3. This fall, Caitlin made the leap to Ryerson University's dance program, which concentrates heavily on dance theory.

It's a whole new level of study, but the transition was eased by the preparation she received at Mayfield Secondary School in Brampton, one of two arts-focused high schools in the Peel District School Board.

Mayfield's arts focus is one of dozens of specialty programs proliferating in Toronto-area boards. These "magnet" schools attract students from outside their district for specialized programming in the arts, business, athletics, and science.

They're meeting the demands of parents who increasingly want choices for their children's education. And they're another way boards can compete with each other and independent schools for enrolment that means thousands of dollars in government funding per student.

Specialty programs are what parents and students want and, in some cases, need, say school officials. "If they're not happy with a school, or the programs we're offering, they walk. They walk to other schools, they walk to private schools," said Dominic DiFelice, executive superintendent of school services for the Toronto District School Board.

"(Parents) are looking for variety. They believe their children have special skills and special needs and they're looking to try to find programs that really engage kids and keep their interest so they will continue to go to school and enjoy that experience," said Janet McDougald, chair of the Peel District School Board.

But even those like McDougald, who support choice in public schooling, worry specialized programs aren't accessible to all students. Any student can audition or apply for magnet school programs, but there can be costs.

A Few of the Choices

- In **Peel**, an international business and technology program at Allan A. Martin Senior Public School and Gordon Graydon Memorial Secondary School in Mississauga will be expanded to Brampton next year.
- In recent years, the **York** Catholic and public boards have launched International Baccalaureate (IB) programs at St. Robert Catholic High School in Thornhill and Bayview Secondary School in Richmond Hill. The IB is a rigorous two-year academic curriculum that also requires grades 11 and 12 students to perform public service and learn a second language.
- The **Toronto** District School Board, which already has more than 35 specially designated schools with programs ranging from arts to IBs, has approved 20 new ones for next year if it can find the \$600,000 to fund the programs.

"We would love to be able to provide the funding that would create access to all students, but we can't at the moment. We believe creating choice is extremely important, but there is some inequity," said McDougald.

Many Mayfield parents, for example, pay about \$1,000 a year to bus their children from outside the school district because the board doesn't have the government funding for transportation. There's a \$140 late bus fee for students who want to participate in performances, sports and other activities. Arts students also are asked to submit a \$100 arts enhancement donation to pay for visiting artists and other program add-ons.

Despite the demand for specialized programs, the province doesn't give boards any extra money to offer them, but school officials try to make programs accessible to students from all backgrounds and most principals

will try to help if a student can't afford activities and fees.

Mayfield principal Bruce Par-rack flatly rejects perceptions of élit-ism. Most Mayfield arts students, who make up a little more than half of the school's 1,860 students, have had private lessons. But it is possible to get in with virtually no experience, he said.

Students in these specialized schools still take compulsory courses under the provincial curriculum and generally use up their optional credits such as dance, arts or music classes. Courses under IB programs differ in that they're at a level well above the normal curriculum.

The benefits of specialized programs can extend beyond the school, according to York public board chair and former Olympian Bill Crothers. "When we built Unionville as an arts school, it really promoted arts development in other schools," he said.

When York introduced an IB program at Bayview Secondary School two years ago, there was a concern that all the high academic achievers in the board would want to go there, but it hasn't happened, said Gerry Trefler, who co-ordinates the program.

About 75% of Bayview's IB students come from out-of-district and they are highly motivated academically. "It's a different kind of education. It's not for everybody. They have to take a second language and some kids don't want to do it."

Toronto doesn't charge students for IB programs, but York levies a \$1,500 fee in each year.

"The kids have a lot of fun because the teacher can deal with the subject in a lot of depth," said Trefler. "There's no discipline problem. The teacher doesn't have to waste time with the kid who hasn't done their homework."

(Adapted with permission from Tor-star Syndication Services, "A magnet for students", Toronto Star, Oct. 1, 2005)