

A Well-Kept Secret

Flowervale Public School is Ontario's first publicly-funded traditional school.

By Elo Kuutan

My husband and I live in York Region, and we have a six-year-old daughter who has just completed grade one at Richmond Hill Montessori and Elementary Private School.

It has always been our intention to enrol our daughter in the public system, as our financial resources are not limitless. When we were researching the public system last year, however, we were appalled at what was available. The reading and math skills of the students in grade 2 were inferior to those of preschool children at our daughter's current school.

We first learned about Flowervale Public School when we read an article in the local newspaper reporting that Flowervale students had scored the highest in the board on the grade 3 provincial tests. As it happens, the school is located less than one kilometre from our house, although we are not in its catchment area. Our assigned school is more than five kilometres distant.

Further investigation revealed that, even though in 1995 the trustees affirmed their commitment to providing a range of school choices and alternative programs, Flowervale is the only alternative school in our board.

Several years ago, the school was experiencing dropping enrolment numbers and, in an attempt to attract new students, in September 1997 it opened its doors as an alternative public school based on a traditional program.

Reviewing the situation earlier this year, we came across the school's Internet site and were very encouraged by its structured and focused approach. Accordingly, we attended an information night held in early February. Despite the fact that the meeting was not highly publicized, every street in the vicinity was crammed with cars and every seat in the gym was filled with eager parents.

The presentation by the principal and her staff was impressive. Teachers at Flowervale use a direct instruction approach to teaching and learning, concentrating on the fundamentals and demanding a high level of academic achievement. Their approach is supplemented by a stringent homework policy and a positively focused Code of Behaviour. Values, such as respect and concern for each other, accountability for one's own actions, and the setting of goals are also basic to the school's philosophy and create a positive and enthusiastic learning environment.

As we were most interested in the grade 2 program, we spent a good deal of time with that teacher, a credible and dedicated professional. We thoroughly reviewed the work his students had done and were simply overwhelmed. With the exception of mathematics (where the school follows the Ontario curriculum), the methods, expectations and results were comparable to our daughter's current school, a school that had been extremely carefully chosen.

The overall package was so positive that we were willing to compromise on the math. We thought we had hit the jackpot! Consequently, we were one of the first in a long line-up at 7:30 a.m. the next morning with an enthusiastically filled out application supported by all the required documentation.

When a few weeks had passed, I called the school to check on the status of our application and was advised that they did not now anticipate any 'outside' openings for grade 2. The delay in getting back to us, they explained, had been caused by an unexpected deluge of applications.

What is surprising is the fact that Flowervale remains the best-kept secret in town. When I mention it to neighbours, each and every one with children, they all express keen interest and actual disbelief that this type of program is available in a publicly-funded school. But while it is nominally available to the public, the small size of the school means that only a select few can actually benefit from it.

Clearly, there is a huge unanswered demand for this type of school and program. Now that we are aware that this type of education is possible in York Region, we have every intention of vigorously pursuing it. If enough parents were to express interest, perhaps trustees could be convinced to open more schools of this nature.

(Ms Kuutan is the human resources co-ordinator for a base-metal mining company located in Toronto.)