

Catholic schools more often score better than public schools, new C.D. Howe report shows

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Louise Brown

They may be in political hot water over gay-straight alliances, but Ontario Catholic schools outshine public schools in straight-up achievement, suggests a report to be released Thursday by the [C.D. Howe Institute](#).

Of the top 29 schools in Ontario — based on a fancy formula that screens out family factors that give some schools an edge — 17, nearly two-thirds, are Catholic even though the public system is twice as large.

Across the GTA, nine of the top 20 schools are Catholic, according to Ontario's *Best Public Schools*, produced by the think tank every three years. The sweeping data bank compares Grade 3 and 6 test scores from Ontario's 4,000 public and Catholic schools, and adjusts for demographic factors known to give students a boost, from educated parents and having lived in Canada for more than three years to a high proportion of girls, who tend to do better at tests.

"Maybe they're more selective, or maybe Catholic schools just try harder because they know parents can always switch to the public system — but somehow, in some way, Catholic schools do seem to do better," mused economics professor [David Johnson](#) about the faith-based advantage he first spotted three years ago.

This time, figures also show Grade 6 students who attend middle schools are 5 per cent less likely to pass province-wide tests than their peers at schools with kindergarten to Grade 8.

"Students at that age have a lot of change going on in their lives, so it may be that adding one more transition — a move to a middle school — could make it harder," suggested Johnson, a professor at [Wilfrid Laurier University](#) in Waterloo.

The report does not rank schools by test scores alone, but compares how each school does given the demographic barriers faced by its students, such as the percentage of single-parent families, how many have parents dropped out of high school, how many students have moved in the past year, how many are aboriginal, how many don't live in detached homes, how many speak a language other than French or English at home.

"A school can't say it has low scores just because it has difficult kids, because we compare it with schools with the same type of kids," said Johnson.

St. Teresa Separate School in Etobicoke is ranked in the top five Toronto Catholic schools for beating its socio-economic odds. Based on the background of its students, its pass rate on test scores should have been nearly 5 points below the Ontario average, yet it was 22 points higher.

"We don't have a magic bullet, but it comes down to good teaching and lots of programs to help students who have trouble writing," said John Neralich, who was principal until earlier this year.

At [Hillmount Public School](#) in North York, one of the top five public schools in Toronto, principal Sandra Bauer said it helps to have teachers who reflect the cultural diversity of her students; many of them working class families from China living two to three families in a home. She has a "strong teaching staff," some of whom speak Mandarin.

"We've launched an intensive support program for students with learning disabilities and run a pilot project with Sick Kids (Hospital) on reading and writing." Mandarin doesn't have a past or present tense, she noted, so the writing gap can be a challenge.

[Toronto District School Board](#) Trustee Cathy Dandy has two schools in her east-end ward with very different ratings: [Pape Ave.](#) scored in the top 20 GTA schools, whereas [Blake St.](#) did not score well compared to others of similar background.

"Blake is a great school but it has had challenges with respect to poverty that we began to address intensively a year ago with extra resources," said Dandy, "and I think it's really on the move now, but it takes time and outreach to families."

Meanwhile Pape Ave. has an arts focus, which Dandy said teachers “weave throughout the curriculum, from history to English. You have to find some way to make the 3 Rs relevant to students.”

Top 20 GTA schools (alphabetical order)

Arbor Glen PS, North York

Cornell Jr. PS, Scarborough

Coronation PS, Oshawa

David Lewis PS, Scarborough

Discovery PS, Maple

E.A. Fairman PS, Whitby

Gulfstream PS, North York

Hillmount PS, North York

Holy Angels Sep S, Toronto

Humberwood Downs Jr. Middle Academy, Etobicoke

Pape Avenue Jr. PS, Toronto

Prince Albert PS, Prince Albert

Prince of Peace Catholic S, Scarborough

Rogers PS, Newmarket

St. Charles Garnier, Mississauga

St. Henry Catholic S, Scarborough

St. Michael's Choir S, Toronto

St. Padre Pio Catholic S, Woodbridge

St. Teresa Catholic S, Etobicoke

West Hill PS, Scarborough

Source: C.D. Howe Institute "Ontario's Best Public schools"