

## What's Old Is New Again

Students and parents seek out discipline from newly relocated independent school

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Nicholas Placido barely flinches as he focuses on completing his multiplication tables, ignoring the ABBA blaring from the portable stereo at the head of the class, interrupted only by the occasional numbers spoken aloud or the high-pitched buzz from a novelty item on the first day of school at the newly re-located St. Peter's College School. He didn't always have this focus, as he was like the other first-year students, reactive to the distractions. Now he not only focuses, but is the first to finish the pressure quiz.



It's one of many different methods employed by the recently relocated school, which moved from its Maple, Ont., location to the Pinestone Resort location in Haliburton.

This not only produces good students, but also well-rounded boys, its founder and headmaster Peter Thyrring said.

The independent school offers academics, athletics and an emphasis on "old school" education, which reverts to the kind of discipline and manners taught by public schools in past generations.

It's this back-to-basics kind of teaching that includes everything from no excuses for unfinished homework to the focus on hygiene, which attracted Nicholas' parents: Cynthia, who quit her job, and her retired husband, Tony Placido, both who moved from Richmond Hill.

She wants her Grade 7 son to be the best person he can be and believes in the school's approach towards empowering its students by thinking differently to face up to the rigours of life.

"I like how he is thinking outside the box. If they have a problem they're supposed to try and work it out. It's not that they won't help them," she said, adding the students must think of solutions before asking for help. "I want him to be totally self-sufficient ... I want him to be life prepared."

The most significant change she noticed in her son since he has attended the school has been how he approaches challenges and accepts responsibility with every aspect of his life.

She also acknowledges the benefits of the small class size and the single gender has helped her son tremendously. This year's school size has recently grown to 17 students, three billeted and 14 day students. Nicholas was first enrolled in St. Peter's College School last year.

### **Responsibility**

"The biggest thing was responsibility. Before he expected us to do everything for him," she said, adding parents are not allowed to help with homework. "You're not supposed to do anything for them ... He went from being a kid who wanted us to do everything for him to being totally self-sufficient."

Started in 1990 by Thyrring, the school is an independent, Catholic school for boys from Grades 1 to 8. The school readily accepts boys of all dominations, but does have students stand for the national anthem and the morning prayer (except it does not force anyone to recite it). There is a theology class that everyone takes, but it is limited to just two hours a week.

The college has always prided itself on producing students who not only strive for academic excellence, but who have character through emphasizing accountability and social decorum such as standing and greeting adults.

Although she has always stressed manners in raising Nicholas, her son and the entire school are taught the kind of manners she had been taught.

### **Striving for the whole**

"When you go to a classroom there you'll notice all the kids stand up and say, 'Good afternoon.' That's the way we were brought up, but most schools, I don't know, they don't care about manners anymore," Cynthia said. "I want him to be an all-around person. I want him to be polite to people. I want him to be as good at school as he can be, but I also want him to do sports for his health so I'm getting everything I want at this school," she said.

Anna Marrone had her third youngest son, Alessandro Marrone attend the school for four years from when it first opened in 1990. She said it was not only the best thing for her son academically, which resulted in him going from a special education student to winning a physics award for the highest grade in high school, but gave him discipline.

She adds the school has since become more lenient than when it started. The mother of four wished all her children could have gone there, but cost was a factor and made possible by a scholarship. Anna particularly liked the regular communication with Thyrring to stay current with her son's progress, which is not a possibility, she said, with public school.

Contrary to public perception, the school is not a hockey school and puts academics first, refusing to bring students to sporting events if homework or assignments are not completed. This is something all the parents interviewed for this article appreciate.

On a search for summer camp for her son, Cynthia found the school's website and it led to a two-day visit, which resulted in his enrollment that year. These kind of visits are encouraged by the school.

Her son's experience at the publicly funded school was less than stimulating for him academically and rules such as no snowballs restricted who he is ... a boy, she added.

When her son failed Grade 5 math she respected Thyrring's reasoning behind the decision.

"If you don't get the basics how can you move someone on? And that's what I liked. Everyone learns at their own pace, but they move them on when they are ready," she said, adding her son is now excelling in all subjects.

The school is divided into two age groups. Every student has homework and lessons catered to their skills and knowledge enabling everyone to work at their own pace.

According to the website for the school, the price for tuition starts at \$12,000. It offers bursaries, scholarships, and sibling discounts.

Even local parents are taking advantage of the new offering and have been satisfied with what has happened in the past several weeks.

Grade 6 student Andre Dulong's parents Michelle and Phil Dulong didn't even think about alternative education until they saw an advertisement in the Echo for St. Peter's last year. Being Catholic, the Dulong's had always wanted their son's education to include this important component and when this option availed itself they immediately inquired about a tour.

"We feel it will better prepare him for high school. That this will be a good stepping stone for him and again, mostly for the academics and the personal relations that will be developed," Michelle Dulong said.

The athletics offering such as tennis, hockey and swimming to name a few activities has improved his skills and has given her son confidence in sport.

### **Public perception**

The school has a uniform policy and restrictions, including hair length, which are all in place to reinforce the importance of image; how one is treated is directly related to how you look despite political correctness.

"It's not just the perception for school itself. It's the perception for life really and although we've been taught to be accepting of all looks and everything else. The bottom line is that there is a perception by people," she said, adding her son has been reminding her the past three days he needs a haircut to abide by rules.

She wishes there was a similar option for her second eldest child, Monique, but expects to send their youngest, Xavier, for Grade 4.

"We feel it will prepare him academically, socially, and emotionally for high school," she said.

Regardless of how hard teachers work, she said, it's hard to deny the benefits of a smaller class and greater one-on-one opportunities for students.

"Certainly all the teachers we've had at JDH and Stuart Baker have all been fabulous and worked their best ... it's just that they are dealing with 20 kids that are at different levels and pretty much have to push them all through at the same pace where as here they spent the first [few weeks] testing the kids. They're all working at their own pace, individualized plans," she said.

She was impressed when she heard of how the entire student body worked with Thyrring to reach a resolution for a student in need of academic help. This concerted approach is applied towards establishing the following year's rules, laid out on a double-sided sheet and agreed to by the all the students to follow, which is then signed and co-signed by their parents or guardians.

She admits her son was less than thrilled about attending the school this autumn.

For most situations Michelle gives her children choice, but in this case it was far too important to leave it up to her son. However the transition was smoothed over with a conversation with his grandfather, who reminded Andre that his parent's motives were grounded in what was best for him.

"We signed up for something different and we're getting it," she said.

Run by the charismatic Thyrring, also known as "Ty" to students and friends, St. Peter's College started the school to fill a void that was left by publicly funded schools.

Just as he was taught.

Thyrring was raised with discipline and believes standards need to be raised for children, as they were when he was growing up.

"People say the sky's the limit. I say, no. It is not the limit. You can go further," he said. "The kids need to know they can do anything if they just want to."

He adds success starts with each student.

"Start doing what you need to do. The bar keeps getting lower and lower. I'm not used to that. It used be reversed for us before where the bar was raised and there is no reason why the bar can't be raised for the kids," he said.

"I want them to come away with this education that whatever challenges that are thrown at them in the future that they are able to handle and deal with them because life is tough," he said.

The school emphasizes being hands-on and interactive in subjects such as geography, mathematics and science. The small library is jammed with assorted books, historical artifacts, models, hats of various past periods and even a musket.

He wants his students to see the big picture instead of just seeing things in a national context, which he said will enable students here to be on the same footing as international students, who are not only well versed globally, but are fluent in multiple languages.

He moved his school to alleviate the stresses that are caused by the environment and travel challenges, citing traffic congestion and distance for him and his students. Cost is far less, particularly the use of facilities like hockey arenas. Although the school is happy to stay where it is at the Pinestone Resort, he is also considering building a new location just outside of Haliburton on Hwy. 118. In any case, he said, he is fully committed to Haliburton.

He acknowledges the Pinestone Resort, which enables direct access to trails, a golf course, two pools, tennis courts and proximity to the arena in Haliburton and Sir Sam's Ski Area, for its support in the move and said they want to help in any way they can to help the community, believing this is one way to do that.

At St. Peter's a pass is at minimum 65 per cent and is just one example of the higher standards for academics that mimics the reality Thyrring wants the students to understand.

"What job are you allowed to do 50 per cent and pass? It's not a reality," he said, referring to the type of standards set out for students at public schools.

Simon Sanderson has been a teacher for the past five years at the school and sees a lot of upside to his reaching experience in not only academics, but also reinforcing manners and social etiquette.

"I enjoy it a lot more because I have a lot more power ... especially with Ty as the principal. He's like: You know what? If you have a set lesson going on and it's supposed to be the end of that period. I don't mind if you keep going if it's a really interesting topic. He leaves it open that way and I find the students have more say. They also take on a lot more responsibility. It's really nice to see. It's something that is lacking... in general. We've taken a lot of responsibility away from certain kids when that's something that they need – to try and figure out is to be responsible and make those right decisions," Sanderson said.

He admits it took him a few months to adjust himself to adapt towards actively engaging the students in discussion about a subject right away instead of being restricted to a particular set of things to teach from curriculum.

"It's something you really like to get into. The kids seem to really work well with it. Their academics start to go up and everything seems to do well for them," he said.

Sanderson was a supply teacher in the York Region Board of Education and had work placements in classes within the Niagara region in U.S.

He adds because of the higher standards of behaviour and manners exhibited by his classes' field trips were enhanced and even made possible.

The type of private and independent schools varies as much as the students who attend them that includes day, boarding, all girls, all boys, co-educational and religious.

According to the website [www.ourkids.net/school](http://www.ourkids.net/school) there are more than 1,700 private and independent schools with more than 300,000 students in Canada.

In Ontario alone there was a reported 119,401 students in private schools according to the report completed by Jacques Marois, *La Situation de l'enseignement prive dans le dix provinces Canadiennes*, 2005.

Despite every private school registering with the province or territory government education ministry or department not all schools are formally inspected.

For more information on the school and its offering <http://achscanada.com/school/>.

