

Private lessons

While public school enrolment drops, private schools - including schools that receive public funding - do brisk business by wooing parents with smaller classes, customized curricula and stricter codes of conduct

Naoibh O'Connor

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A bare-footed Ridge Frank-White lumbers down the stairs of his two-storey home near the University of B.C. and plunks himself onto an oversized pillow in front of the fireplace. It's just past eight early one November morning and the 12-year-old with a mop of tousled brown hair, buries his face in a Simpsons comic in the art-filled home, while his mother, Erica Frank, fixes him a breakfast of hashbrowns and ketchup before school starts. Ridge's dark blue polo shirt, featuring a small, green apple with the letter M stitched on it, is the only clue the Grade 8 student is headed somewhere other than public school.

The M stands for Magnussen--a tiny independent school on the university grounds that opened in September 2006.

It has 34 students in grades one to nine, five teachers, two administrators and a hefty \$14,100 annual tuition. It doesn't get any government funding, but it's considering applying for status to qualify for some.

As public schools across the province face declining enrolment, I set out to discover why families such as the Frank-White's opt out of the public system in favour of costly private schools, most of which receive a degree of government funding.

It's a critical question considering provincial funding of public schools is



CREDIT: Jason Lang

Zamyla Morgan Chan, a Grade 12 student at York House.



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Twelve-year-old Ridge Frank-White attends Magnussen, a tiny independent school near UBC.



ted to registration numbers. Exactly why enrolment is falling is uncertain. Theories abound, from lack of confidence in public education to a desire for a religious-centred program. Others speculate parents are having fewer children, families are being priced out of Vancouver's housing market or private schools offer superior education. Many are so popular they can't meet demand.



CREDIT: Jason Lang

Vancouver School Board chair Patti Bacchus would "like to have a look at" public funding to private schools.

Getting parents to talk publicly about why they choose the private system isn't easy. Some fear being ridiculed or being regarded as elitist. The Courier appealed to parents to come forward. Those who talked cited various reasons, but their answers boiled down to doing what they feel is best for their children, even while acknowledging arguments in favour of public schools.



CREDIT: (photo by Dan Toulgoet)

Most York House students come from financially comfortable families.

"That's what all of this is about--a dedication to education... It's my number one financial priority," says Dr. Erica Frank, a UBC professor of preventative medicine. "I get it. It's not ideal when you have to split public and private systems. I don't know what to say more than that. But I don't think I feel any different than any other parent--that their children's education is important."

Erica Frank, her psychiatrist husband Randall White, and their son Ridge--short for Ethridge, a family name--moved to Vancouver from Georgia four years ago.

Ridge attended a private school with small class sizes in the U.S., but Frank, 47, assumed she'd register him in a neighbourhood public school in Canada.

She attended private school as a child, followed by a private college, and a private medical school. Frank completed her residency at Yale and her fellowship at Stanford--both pricey, private Ivy League schools.

"In the States, the best schools tend to be private--or at least the ones with the best reputations," explains Frank.

Frank calls Canada's public medical schools "fabulous" and prefers to teach at a public university. She's one of four elected city councillors for the University Neighbourhoods Association, which Frank said has worked hard to improve public education, including lobbying for new public elementary and high schools near UBC.

The family visited both public and private elementary schools in Vancouver. Frank's impulse was to enroll Ridge at University Hill. She met the principal twice and even brought a plant. "I wanted to make a good impression

because that's where I thought my son would go to school," she says.

Frank was troubled by large class sizes, especially since her son has attention deficit disorder. She learned there would be no IEP--an individualized education plan--for Ridge. "I think everyone needs a learning program that compliments their learning style and interests," she says. "How can you expect anyone to be motivated or successful with learning without a curriculum that responds to their needs and interests?"

Frank understands public school failings are out of individual schools' control--she says they're underfunded and in some cases over populated.

But those shortcomings convinced the family, which prefers a secular education, to check out West Point Grey and St. George's private schools, although they were too formal for their son, who isn't inclined to wear a tie.

They settled on Eaton Arrowsmith, a small, non-denominational school two blocks from their home. Established in 2005 for students with learning differences and disabilities, it wasn't a perfect fit, so when the principal announced the opening of a sister school in 2006 at the same site--Magnussen, an "all kinds of minds" school, Ridge enrolled.

Named after director and co-founder Kristin Harbut's mother, it offers a custom education and relaxed atmosphere. Students wear a casual uniform because classes are held in a university building and they need to be easily identifiable.

"Ridge has an individualized curriculum that responds to his needs," Frank says. "We have substantive long-term relationships with teachers. It's like home-school, but someone helps with it."

Ridge takes standard academic courses, along with photography and computer programming as extracurricular activities. He's almost certainly university bound--the family has checked out Yale, Princeton and Stanford.

Ridge is beefing up his resume for a better chance at acceptance. A study that started as a science fair project last year, about students' preference for regular soda versus diet soda, has evolved into a research paper, co-authored by Ridge and his mother. It's in review for a peer-reviewed scientific journal.

One reason the couple decided to have one child, says Frank, was so they could afford to invest all their resources into his education. She doesn't believe enrolling Ridge into the public system would solve its problems.

"Adding another demanding child to an over-sized class at UHill is not necessarily the way to make the system better," she says.

Patti Bacchus, Vancouver School Board chair, welcomes the public-private school debate, especially as the district's budget gets squeezed. Bacchus maintains there hasn't been enough discussion about the subject, which she likens to the one-tier versus two-tier health care controversy. The Vision Vancouver trustee would prefer to see public money remain in the public system to ensure it's well funded.

"I'm not prepared to say stop [all private funding] now, but I'd like to have a look at it," she said. "We need to have that discussion particularly as resources get tighter and tighter."

Bacchus attended Southlands elementary until Grade 6, Crofton House--a private school--for Grade 7 and 8, and Point Grey secondary from grades 9 through 12. Her children have always attended public school.

She understands why some parents choose private schools, but questions why they get any public funding, especially those that screen prospective students through applications, exams and interviews and then charge high tuition fees.

"In public schools we can't even charge fees, so there's an equity of access issue. If I set up a private hospital and said I'm going to take some public funding, but I'm going to choose who I pick as a patient and screen out ones who maybe have a bad history or smoke, there would need to be a public discussion on that. I'm not sure we've had that with private schools," she said.

Bacchus fears people who could have been strong advocates for public schools, and who have political influence, have left the system. "We've seen it in other parts of the world. We see it in American cities where more and more of the middle class have left the public system and there's less political pressure to adequately fund it," she said.

Bacchus concedes that while the goal of public schools is to meet all students' educational needs, that's not always the case. "There's no question we're not getting there with every student. We compare internationally very well, but there are kids who fall through the cracks. Obviously we still have about 20 per cent of students who don't graduate. Half of our aboriginal students don't graduate. There's still a gap there, but each year [the provincial government] keeps cutting and cutting different programs and supports and often that affects non-enrolling positions that could provide that support."

Uniformed elementary students file out of classes at Stratford Hall's Italian Centre site in East Vancouver after school one cloudy November afternoon. Michael Rowley is here to meet his wife and son Max. The couple's six-year-old is enrolled in kindergarten at the independent, non-denominational school--the first school in western Canada authorized to teach the IB primary years program. It's one of two schools in Canada that exclusively offer IB from kindergarten to Grade 12.

Opened in September 2000 with 40 students from kindergarten to Grade 6, it's since expanded to Grade 12 and grown its enrolment to 375 students. In November, the Italian Cultural Centre housed the primary program, while the remaining classes were held in a building on Commercial Drive. A second building has since been opened nearby, so the entire student body is now on Commercial Drive.

Rowley, 42, attended a West Side public school, as did his wife. The pair settled on private school for their only son at great financial sacrifice. The middle class family isn't wealthy--they live in a modest East Side home on one income and own one car.

"[My wife's] analysis was it was cheaper to come [to Stratford] than buy a house in a different neighbourhood. That was the tipping point for me," he says. "We can't really afford this. We're in debt and we're not getting out of debt quickly. But the trend I see here is people having fewer kids and making more of an investment in them."

His wife's niece, who attended a West Vancouver private school, suggested they send Max to one. They thought private schools were for the elite and they weren't confident they could afford tuition or even if it would be a good fit. But when a friend's son enrolled at an international baccalaureate program in North Vancouver, they considered that option, which led them to Stratford Hall. The university preparatory school offers a "global-minded" education at an \$11,000 to \$13,000 annual price tag. It gets 35 per cent of the government funding allotted to public school students.

The couple considered enrolling Max at their neighbourhood public school in Renfrew-Collingwood, but worried about class sizes, the number of ESL students and the amount of attention their child would get from over-worked teachers.

"A smart kid who's advanced--what happens to them in a large classroom without much attention?" wonders Rowley who was equally concerned about bad influences from drugs and petty crime in the neighbourhood.

"Obviously the desire is to limit his exposure until he's old enough to understand it. One bad influence can go a long way in getting another kid on the wrong path."

Not everyone supports their decision--Rowley's parents maintain public school is good enough. Even he's conflicted. "I've always had a degree of guilt about leaving the public system, but I want what's best for my kid. If we can afford it, we will continue. The public system has to fix itself somewhat and I don't have the answers about what needs to be done."

He's not alone in his thinking. The popularity of Stratford Hall is climbing. It turns applicants away despite having expanded its site. Rowley hopes sharing his reasons for choosing private school generates debate. "I would really like a public discussion on the state of public education--especially in East Vancouver."

Roughly 70 per cent of those who choose private education in B.C. enrol in religious schools. One East Side woman said her neighbourhood school has a bad reputation--drugs, fights and poor academics--convincing her to choose Catholic school for her children.

She likes the strict dress code, the code of conduct and parental involvement. "We are more than willing to pay the tuition for our children to attend the private school, which is ranked on top of any public school, instead of having to move to a more expensive neighbourhood with a good public school (which is usually on the expensive West Side)," she wrote in an email. "It is more strict at private schools, which we believe would be good for our children, as they need the discipline to become good citizens. We think a religious education would benefit our children. Children definitely need moral guidance in the early years, and unfortunately such moral guidance is not provided at public schools."

A public school supporter argued in another email to the Courier that many feel private schools should never get public funding, especially religious schools, stating, "...the quality of some of these religious schools should be much more closely scrutinized. Do some go beyond propaganda in what is taught? I fear not."

Taylor Green's future is promising. The polite, friendly Grade 12 student attends York House, a private all-girls school established in 1932 tucked away in prestigious Shaughnessy.

She's vice head girl and enrolled in three advanced placement courses in biology, European history and English language. The fresh-faced 18-year-old, with brown hair pulled into a ponytail, plays field hockey, skis, and sings in the concert and jazz choirs. She has a 4.0 GPA and is eyeing Princeton, Dartmouth, and Brown colleges in the United States, along with McGill, Queen's and Western universities in Canada--100 per cent of York House students go to university.

It's a future many Vancouver students can't even envision, but Taylor, who's from an upper middle class family, has attended private school since kindergarten. She's not certain how life would be different had she attended public school. "I don't know any different, but I do recognize I'm lucky to have so many opportunities. So that's why I try to take advantage of them. I value it all," she says.

Taylor's brothers paved the way for the teenager--both graduated from St. George's. One earned an undergraduate degree from Cambridge majoring in Classics; the other is enrolled at Princeton--their father's alma mater.

Cheryl Green, Taylor's mother, credits their academic success to private schools. She says her eldest son, who started in public school, wouldn't have been accepted to Cambridge in Classics without taking Latin, which isn't available at public schools. "We entered the private school system after the principal told us that the public school system did not have the resources to offer our son what he needed to succeed and be challenged. He was in Grade 1 at the time and we were told we were trying to fit a square peg into the circle. Once one child was out, the rest just followed."

York House is a junior kindergarten to Grade 12 university prep school. Its focus on academics includes science classes taught by a science specialist from Grade 2 on. Most of its senior classes are limited to 18 students and that can drop to as low as six in advanced placement courses, which allow girls to earn university credits based on marks.

Students must take band in grades 5, 6 and 7, they take part in student-led assemblies and must be involved in community service.

For the half-day junior kindergarten, which costs just under \$8,000 annually, there are 32 seats, but about three to four applications per spot. Full-day kindergarten costs \$14,000 plus, while senior school is priced at slightly more than \$15,000. York House students are funded at 35 per cent of what's allotted to public school students by the province. Most students come from financially comfortable families, although several scholarships are available for those who otherwise couldn't afford tuition.

It's been costly for the Green family to send three children to private school, but when Cheryl Green was recently discussing investments with her husband--Bruce Green, an intellectual property lawyer--and asked what he thought their best investment was, he didn't hesitate. "Without even thinking, he said our best investment has been our kids' education," recalls Green who graduated from Richmond high and studied Dietetics at UBC.

"I've had a really positive experience with the private school process and I want to get the point across that parents must find the best fit for their child, whether it's public school or private school, it's a choice a parent should make for their child."

Taylor acknowledges that choice is not available to all her peers, but she's grateful for the educational opportunities she's been afforded.

"Everybody here feels like they have so many possibilities open to them," she says. "We're just lucky we get the choice."

noconnor@vancourier.com

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