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Catholic schools get As

By Louise Brown
Education Reporter

He calls it the Catholic effect; that when you screen out the family differences that can give some schools an edge – which parents have more education, how long they have lived in Canada – Ontario's Catholic schools still come out on top.

Economics professor David Johnson, whose fancy demographic formula compares the test scores of Ontario schools in a more socially sensitive way than just ranking raw results, says his latest report spotlights this odd Catholic advantage.

"Of 11 schools in Ontario that performed better than all others in both Grade 3 and Grade 6 in their socio-economic range, 10 of them are Catholic – yet it's a much smaller school system," marvelled Johnson, a professor at Wilfrid Laurier University and author of the latest C.D. Howe report called "Ontario's Best Public Schools."

"It may be these schools are more motivated because of their spiritual focus, or it could be that Catholic families have a choice as to whether to send their kids to a separate or public school, so that puts pressure on Catholic schools to do better."

In three GTA regions Johnson studied after he finished his survey – York, Toronto and Peel – the Catholic school boards had a higher portion of schools outscoring their demographic peers province-wide.

Johnson made headlines last year with a deliberate comparison of Catholic and public schools that concluded Catholic schools do better. This latest report, released yesterday, has a broader focus.

By crunching 11 demographic factors to paint a social snapshot of every school, he compared the province-wide test scores of schools with similar social profiles, apples to apples – and still found a staggering range of marks.

"About half the difference in test scores between schools comes from the social and economic differences between students – but the other half comes from the school itself, and that's what we're measuring," said Johnson.

"If someone says their school doesn't do as well on tests because it has more immigrants, our survey has already controlled for that."

Tiny Mary St. School, in one of Oshawa's more needy neighbourhoods, outshone every other school in its income bracket on Ontario's Grade 6 tests, landing a "100 percentile" ranking in the report.

"I'm really proud of this school. We've worked really hard to strengthen our skills in a very transient neighbourhood," said principal Tracey Cant. At her school, half of the 160 students have moved at least once in the past five years, half live in single-parent families, 12 per cent have parents who are unemployed and the average household income is \$43,657 a year.

Superintendent of education Jeannine Joubert says Mary St. has tried everything from separating girls and boys for Grade 6 math and science to having the same male teacher for gym and library, "so you create an atmosphere where you can be a jock and also love to read."

Beate Planche, York Region school board's superintendent of curriculum, warns against ranking schools. "Good

schools, to parents, are those where their kids are doing well, feel safe and belong, and if the school is accessible to them. Rankings are one slice, and schools are far more complex than one slice."

With files from Kristin Rushowy

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