



GETTING READY: Prepskills owner Joanna Severino, right, helps Upper Canada College student Seyon Rajadurai, who sought her company's assistance when applying to his school, explore postsecondary scholarship options he can apply for south of the border. ERIC EMIN WOOD/TOWN CRIER

Prepping for the move up

Prepskills helps students prepare for private school entrance exams — although not all educators are avid fans

ERIC EMIN WOOD
Town Crier

When Seyon Rajadurai decided four years ago that a transfer from public school into the private school system offered a brighter future, he hedged his bet in two ways.

His first step in charting a new course was applying to three schools: University of Toronto Schools, Crescent School and Upper Canada College. His second was enrolling in two courses offered by Prepskills, a company that helps students prepare for the often-difficult admission tests that can be a barrier between them and their chosen school.

Rajadurai, now 15 and in Grade 10 at UCC, had been in private school up to Grade 3, then enrolled in the gifted pro-

gram at a neighbouring school closer to his Markham home. But after he “started to fall off track a bit” his family started looking at private schools again.

Enter Joanna Severino, a certified teacher who founded Prepskills 13 years ago following a battle with Hodgkin’s lymphoma, which had forced a change in direction of her own.

For \$1,800–2,500, Severino’s company sets out to prepare students for Canadian independent school admission tests, offers PrepEssentials classes that prepare students for U.S. college entrance exams and each September puts on a networking event, PrepConnect, that gives students and their families an opportunity to meet a group of private school admissions officers.

“I consider us dreammakers, in a

sense,” Severino says with a chuckle. “When a family calls us and indicates their interest in a particular private school, we really ask them to broaden their scope when they can.”

Rajadurai enrolled in both the SSAT preparation course and PrepEssentials. In the end, not only did all three of his chosen schools accept him, but each one offered him a scholarship as well.

After getting to pick among three respected schools, Rajadurai and his mother Kalaselvadurai had a 45-minute consultation with Severino, where he was urged to examine just what he hoped to gain from his new school.

He says he went with UCC for two main reasons: its athletic program (his mother admiringly notes that he’s become a soccer star) and its scholar-

ship, which continues to renew itself provided he keeps his grades up.

While not all educators are ready to apply the “dreammakers” label to the Prepskills model — UTS admissions director Garth Chalmers points to a lack of “empirical evidence” for or against — Andrea Camhi, now in Grade 12 at Toronto girls school Havergal College, says she would “definitely recommend it to other students.”

Camhi was offered Prepskills services through her former Montessori school, along with a group of other Grade 6 students who were applying for admission to middle school. Lessons in writing essays and taking tests, being taught to manage her test time by prioritizing answers and building her vocabulary

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Well-rounded students sought

using flash cards all served to support her application, she says.

Her older sister Rebeca had availed of Prepskills services before her.

Chalmers and other admission directors of local schools remained neutral about the benefits of prep courses. Chalmers emphasized that it's the school's policy to neither endorse nor advise families against enrolling their children in a course.

"We don't have any empirical evidence that any student who goes through a prep course of any kind does any better than they would do if they prepared on their own," Chalmers said.

"To be honest, I advise that parents get a

book, do some practice tests... and work between each practice test on whatever went right or wrong."

David McBride, UCC's vice-principal of enrolment management, said seeing "well-rounded students" and not just test scores are what private and independent schools take into consideration when accepting students.

"We want to see a couple years of consistently good grades," McBride said. "We want to see extracurricular involvement, and we place a lot of emphasis on the interview with both the boy and his family."

"We want to see well-rounded students."



TOPS: Sylvia Duckworth receives the 2014 Prime Minister's Award for Teaching Excellence from Stephen Harper.

PHOTO COURTESY THE PMO

Prize-winning teacher credits her IT team

ERIC EMIN WOOD
Town Crier

If you take Sylvia Duckworth at her word, being declared one of the top 10 educators in the country had nothing to do with her.

The Crescent School French teacher, one of 10 national recipients of this year's Prime Minister's Award for Teaching Excellence, credits her win to Accelerative Integrated Methodology, a system she uses to teach French to the midtown Toronto all-boys school's Grade 3-5 students, and its cutting-edge classroom aids.

"A lot of teachers don't use technology because they don't have the resources," says Duckworth, who began teaching at Crescent in 1996. "Whereas I have a great IT team that lets me pick up the phone and, five minutes later, they're in my classroom."

Duckworth received the award on Oct. 7 from Prime Minister Stephen Harper himself, and while events of the day limited his time with them his wife Lauren ably took over.

"She had us eating out of her hand," Duckworth says admiringly.

For their part, her students weren't

surprised by their teacher's honour: they trip over each other for a chance to declare how "amazing" she is.

"The stereotype is that boys don't like French, but that's not the case with my classroom," Duckworth says, the one moment pride enters her voice.

Conducting her class like a choir, she begins her lessons by speaking the most basic vocabulary with gestures, while the students respond in unison. Her Grade 3 students soon learn irregular verbs their public school counterparts won't hear until Grade 5 — and they don't start writing anything down until Christmas.

It's all part of the AIM program, which creator Wendy Maxwell designed by distilling the French language to its most commonly-used words, resulting in what Duckworth calls a "loud, energetic, rambunctious" class that appeals to the boys' sensibilities.

"My success in the French room has very little to do with me and much more to do with the program I use," Duckworth says, noting that Maxwell herself, a former teacher at Bishop Strachan School, won a Prime Minister's Certificate of Teaching Achievement in 1998. "I feel really humbled that I won this award years after her."

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School	Date	Time	Contact
Appleby College	Sat., Nov. 22, 2014	10am-2pm	905-845-4681
	Sat., Jan. 24, 2014	10am-2pm	www.appleby.on.ca
Arrowsmith School	Wed., Nov. 12, 2014	7pm	416-963-4962
	Wed., Dec. 17, 2014	7pm	www.arrowsmithschool.org
De La Salle College	Call for information		416-969-8771 www.delasalleoaklands.ca
Hawthorn School	Sat., Dec. 6, 2014	2pm	416-444-2900 www.hawthornschool.com
Holy Name of Mary College School	Sat., Nov. 15, 2014	10am-2pm	905-891-1890 www.hmcs.ca
	Tues., Nov. 25, 2014	6pm-8pm (Grade 9 information evening)	
Hudson College	Sat., Nov. 8, 2014	12noon-4pm	416-631-0082
	Sat., Nov. 22, 2014	12noon-4pm	www.hudsoncollege.ca
Newton's Grove School	Call for information		416-745-1328 info@newtonsgroveschool.com
Royal St. George's College	Wed., Nov. 19, 2014 Information evening	7pm	416-533-9481 www.rsgc.on.ca
St. Clement's School	Fri., Nov. 21, 2014	8:30am-11am	416-483-4414 www.scs.on.ca
The Linden School	Fri., Nov. 14, 2014	9am-11am	416-966-4406 www.lindenschool.ca