

The Merit Award Bursary Program

2024-25 Year in Review



Funding

Mentorship

Networking

**Creating Opportunity for Post
Secondary Education and Beyond.**



October 2025

**“Thank you for
this life changing
opportunity.
This award
will allow me
to pursue my education
with full focus”**

Merit recipient



In this Review

- Message from the President
- Mission and vision
- Brief history
- Awards evening
- Alumni program
- Volunteer support
- A Recipients journey
- Fundraising
- Donor support
- Action this Fall
- Strategic direction
- Thank you

Message from the President

We regularly conduct surveys of our Award recipients to assess the impact of our Program. Recently, we received the findings from our latest longitudinal survey of past Merit Award recipients, which once again highlights the significant motivational influence of our financial and non-financial support.

Consider the following:

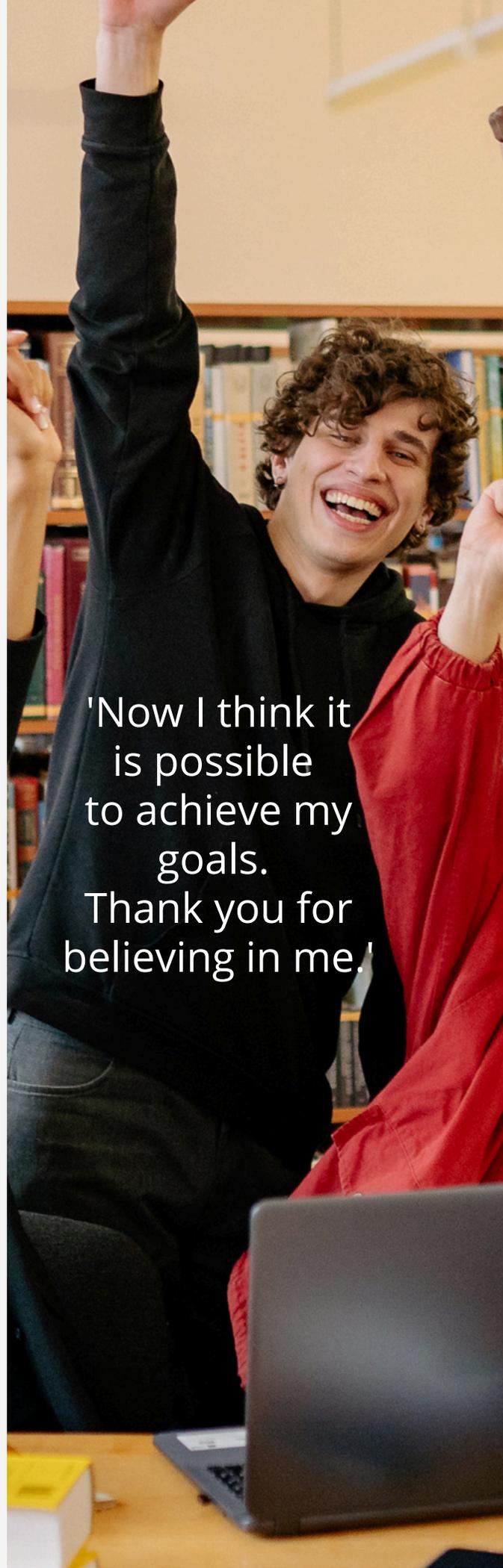
- **69%** of respondents indicated that the Merit Award was "very important" for their motivation to continue their post-secondary education, while an additional ****23%**** deemed it "somewhat important."
- **87%** of respondents who graduated from high school over six years ago, have obtained at least one post-secondary degree or diploma,
- **38%** achieved a Master's or professional degree.
- **30%** were born outside of Canada,
- **49%** had parents born outside of Canada.
- **90%** of recipients identified with an ethnicity other than "white."

These results reinforce that this Program really does help to equalize opportunities in a significant way. As one survey respondent put it, "Receiving the Merit Award Bursary was life-changing for me."

We couldn't achieve these results without the hundreds of volunteers and generous donors that help make it happen. In these pages, you'll learn more about what they have accomplished over the past year. We all know and experience the great rewards that come from this kind of volunteerism and philanthropy.

So, to those volunteers and donors I say, to echo another survey recipient, "The Merit Award Program helped me a lot. I will forever be grateful."

Brian Smeenk



'Now I think it
is possible
to achieve my
goals.
Thank you for
believing in me.'



Vision

To be a prominent contributor of recognition and financial awards to senior secondary students in GTA schools, offering:

- incentives for youth to pursue education
- encouragement for community contribution
- mentorship and networking opportunities
- a motivational tool for educators and parents.

Mission

Inspiring, providing financial support, and personal development opportunities for youth to pursue higher education and contribute to the community.

For 29 years

Merit has been breaking down barriers and creating opportunity for education.

Below are some of the the post secondary institutions attended by recipients.

Berklee College of Music

Brock University

Carleton University

Fanshawe College

George Brown College

Humber College

Harvard University

Laurentian University

McGill University

McMaster University

Schulich School of Business

Toronto Metropolitan University

University of Guelph

University of Toronto

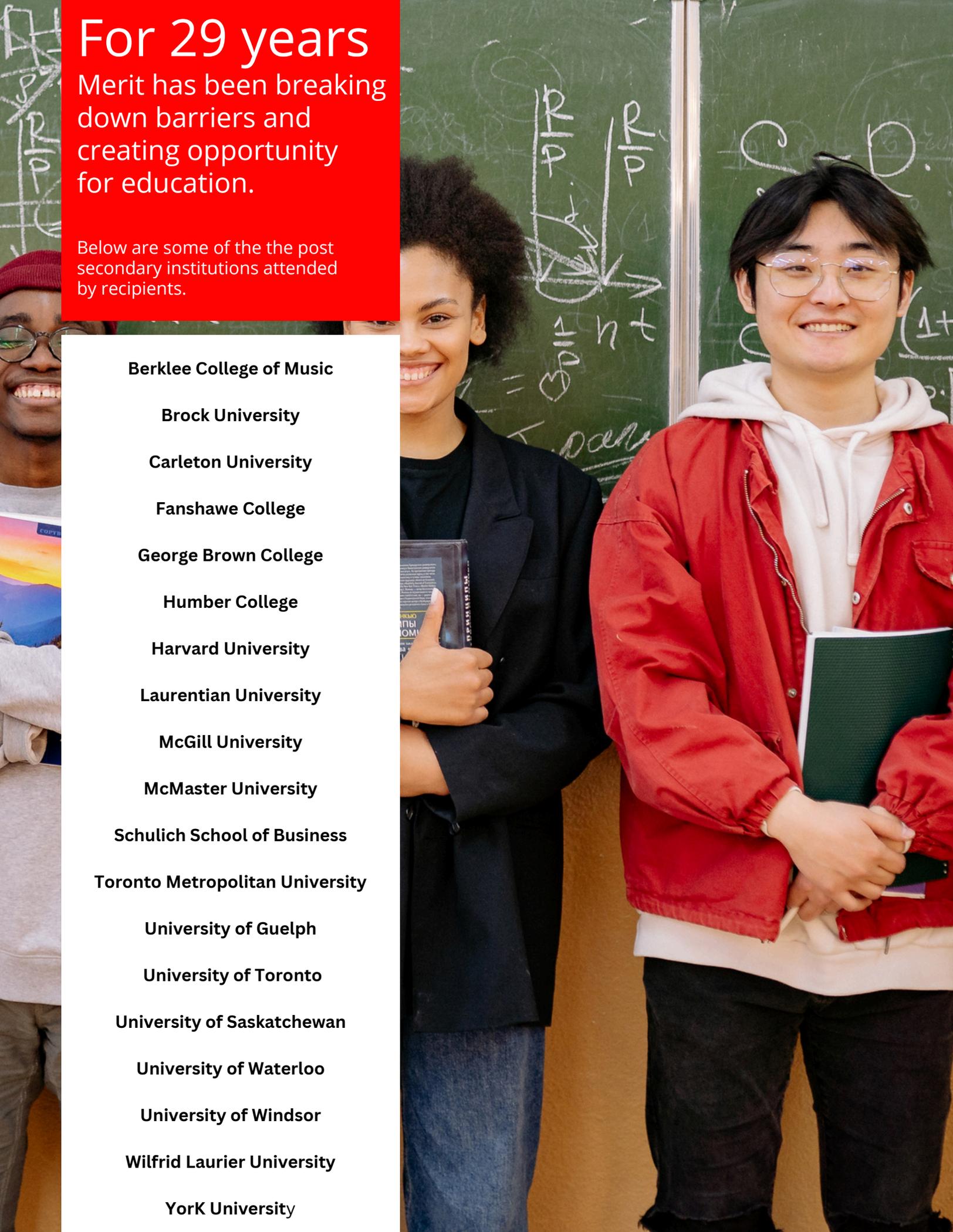
University of Saskatchewan

University of Waterloo

University of Windsor

Wilfrid Laurier University

YorK University



29 Years of continued Growth and Impact



12 Board
Members



12 Alumni Council
Members



130+ Selections
Volunteers



12,286
Applications



4,265
Recipients



\$3,530,250
Distributed



50+
Networking Events



200+
Mentor Participants



50+
Career Chats

*Faces of Merit Recipients

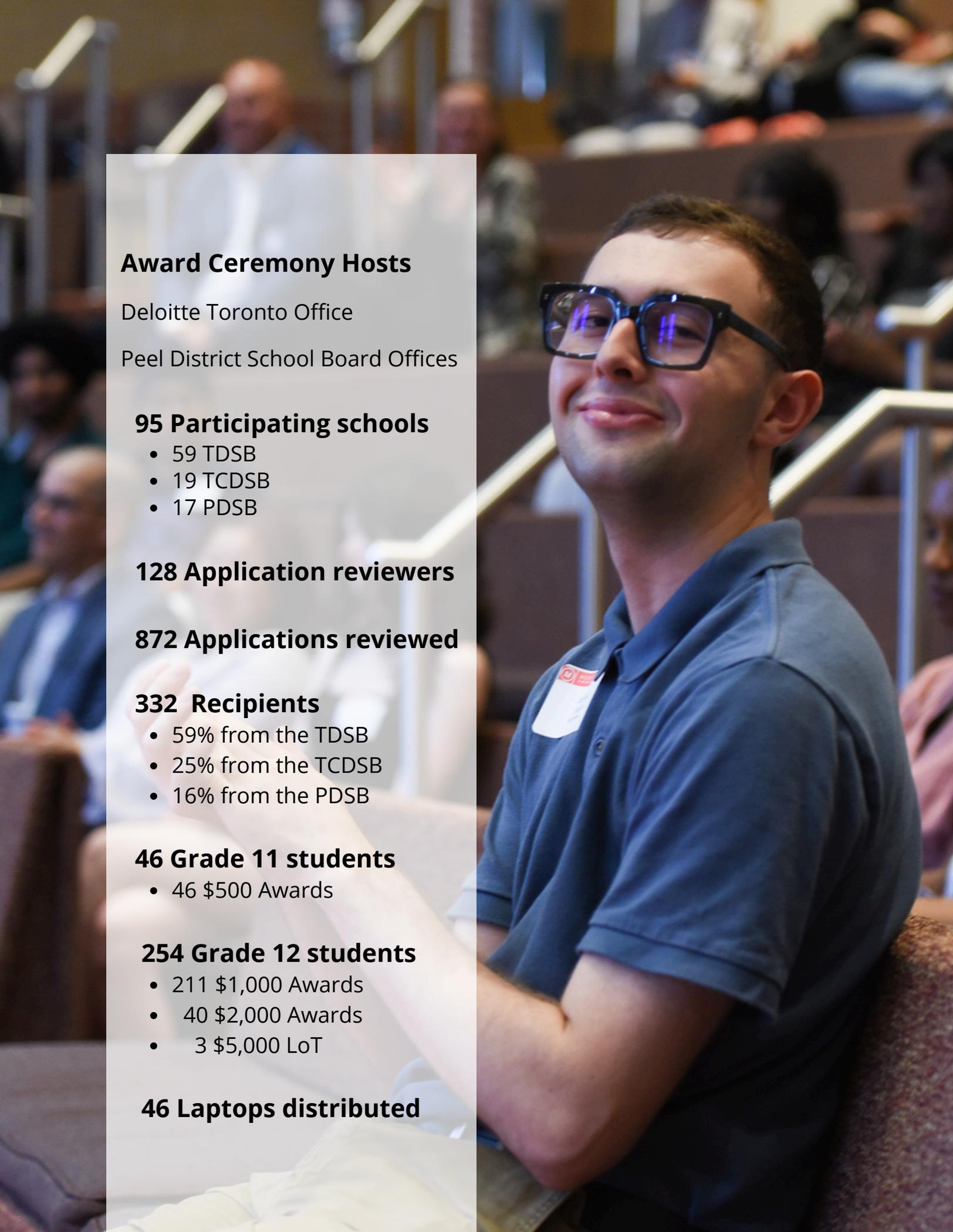
The Award Ceremonies

were celebratory drawing over 400 friends and family in Toronto & Peel.



A Family Affair

Alif was awarded the Merit Award in 2019, while his sister received the same honor at the most recent awards ceremony. Mrs. Munim is overjoyed.

A man with dark hair and glasses, wearing a blue polo shirt, is seated in an audience. He is looking upwards and to the right with a slight smile. The background is a blurred indoor setting with other people seated in rows, suggesting a large event or ceremony.

Award Ceremony Hosts

Deloitte Toronto Office

Peel District School Board Offices

95 Participating schools

- 59 TDSB
- 19 TCDSB
- 17 PDSB

128 Application reviewers

872 Applications reviewed

332 Recipients

- 59% from the TDSB
- 25% from the TCDSB
- 16% from the PDSB

46 Grade 11 students

- 46 \$500 Awards

254 Grade 12 students

- 211 \$1,000 Awards
- 40 \$2,000 Awards
- 3 \$5,000 LoT

46 Laptops distributed

Profiles of Leaders of Tomorrow Recipients

Darwin Ballesteros Padilla **St. Oscar Romero Catholic Secondary School:**

Did you ever stare up at the stars when you were a kid, wondering what was out there? Darwin did. But he couldn't stop staring. So, in September he will turn that wonder into action, beginning his career in aeronautical engineering at TMU, later turning to space.

Darwin's journey has entailed many traumatic events and hurdles, not all of which I will get into. Many of you will relate to one of them, though – his family's 17-year immigration trek to attain permanent resident status in Canada. Those years brought endless legal struggles, poverty, and the grinding fear of having to leave his new country.

Highly accomplished with outstanding involvement in his school and community, when asked about his greatest accomplishments Darwin didn't mention any accolade he'd won. Instead, he talked about his work fostering leadership and positivity in elementary students. He said that the enjoyment and gratitude expressed by the kids and the profound connections he made with them were, without a doubt, his greatest accomplishments. And that's exactly what we look for in an LoT. Someone who defines success not in terms of what they achieve but by the contributions they make to others.

James Zabarelos **Monsignor Fraser College:**

It isn't often we see a Grade 12 student who has references - and glowing ones at that - signed by researchers and professors at major US universities and hospitals – in James' case, UC Berkeley, Columbia University Medical Centre, the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, and Boston Children's Hospital. James has a keen interest in helping those born with various genetic conditions. For the past four years, he has been working specifically in the space of intersex individuals - those born with biological sex characteristics that don't fit typical male or female classifications. There are estimated to be millions of such individuals around the world.

Congratulations to Darwin, James and Stephnie, the 2025 Leaders of Tomorrow Award recipients. They are three remarkable young adults.

Stephnie Perera Gunawardane
St. Patrick Catholic Secondary School:

While Stephnie stands way out as an orator, what she is most focused on is - listening. That was emphasized in the speech she gave for the Ontario Student Leadership Speaker Search. Stephnie talked about her little brother, who stopped speaking for many years at the age of two. The challenge of communicating with him showed Stephnie how critical it is for us all to just stop speaking and listen- to every person, no matter their challenges, background, gender or colour.

She's held Vice-Chair and Director positions with the TCDSB Student Senate, she was President of the Student Council, Captain of the Athletics Council, a Student Ambassador for diversity. She's taught young people how to manage money, and worked on programs to support vulnerable families. Using her speaking talent, one reference said, Stephnie gave a bone chilling speech on the nature of poverty in Toronto and what people who go through it actually experience, which helped them collect more donations than ever. And Stephnie clearly listens in school, as she attained an average of 95%. Looking to the future, Stephnie plans to become an immigration lawyer to relieve other families of the legal pressures hers experienced. In September she enters Criminology and Socio-Legal Studies at the University of Toronto.

Alumni Program

This year more than 470 alumni participated in the Merit Alumni programs.

Recipient Orientation

The **New Alumni** Event welcomed recipients to the alumni community in June. 84 recipients attended.

Summer Mentorship

The focus of the conversations was on the job search.

42 Mentor and mentees were paired.

6 Career Workshops

- Reflective Practice: Tapping into global leadership skills: A workshop with Mary Grogan.
- "In the Black" Financial Literacy workshop with Cassi-Ann Jones
- Mock Interviews workshop with TD Bank
- Career development workshop Series with Toronto King's Trust Canada
- Annual Networking Event

Leaders of Tomorrow

They meet once or twice a year under the guidance of a past board member to discuss school and career challenges.

Alumni Council

A14-member Alumni Council that offers guidance on Alumni Program events, actively engages in Merit Board subcommittees, and facilitates mentorship opportunities.

Monthly e-newsletter

A monthly newsletter keeping alumni connected to the Merit Program. The newsletter has a strong, minimum 53% open rate.

A photograph of a smiling man with a beard, wearing a red zip-up jacket and dark shorts, sitting on a concrete bench. He is looking to his left. The background shows a blurred outdoor setting with a building facade.

Volunteers

are the
life blood of Merit.
This year more than
235 volunteers
helped ensure the programs
ongoing success.

Board of Directors

- 10 members

Alumni Council

- 14 Members

Awards Selections Committees

- 138 volunteers helped with this year's selections process
- 28 Selections Committees

Guest speakers

- 30+ volunteers participated in more than 10 events

Mentors

- 42 volunteers met 1:1 with alumni

Committees

- 18 volunteers serve on Board Committees in addition to Board and Council members



What started as a bursary to support my education Merit has become a lifelong network of inspiration, connection, and growth

As someone who values education and is dedicated to personal and professional growth, receiving this bursary in 2021 was a great honour that has helped me to overcome financial barriers that would have otherwise hindered my progress.

As a high school student, I didn't expect for this bursary to be so much more than just financial support. Each year since graduating, I have returned to the Alumni Council to give back and amplify the opportunities available to future recipients. Over time, I've seen Merit grow to expand its impact and build a community that truly feels like home.

This program has introduced me to so many incredible people who share my passion for learning and making a positive impact. Their guidance, mentorship, and encouragement have helped me develop my skills, gain new perspectives, and move closer to my career goals.

Harmela Celestin
Recipient 2021

Seen here at her convocation ceremony at McMaster University, She plans to do post graduate work.

A Merit Recipients Journey

From the time of application to the Awards evening, through mentoring, networking events, to volunteering and potential selection to sit on the Alumni Council, a Merit recipient creates connections and opportunities they could never imagine.

1 APPLICATION ALERT

Educators advise grade 10, 11 and 12 students to consider applying



2 INFORMATION GATHERING

Grade 11 and 12 students work on application-attend Merit Q and A's



3 SUBMIT APPLICATION

In March students submit application with references



4 SELECTION PROCESS

In May, 138 volunteers in 28 groups select recipients-executive team review



8 ALUMNI MENTORSHIP

Recipients are paired with career professionals over the summer



7 BURSARY AMOUNTS

\$500-Gr.11
\$1K/2K-Gr. 12
\$5K-Gr.12 Leaders
Disbursement pending proof of school enrolment



6 AWARDS EVENING

Mid-June 300+ students are celebrated in person



5 AWARD NOTIFICATION

In early June all applicants are notified of their success position



9 ALUMNI PEER COUNSELLING

Peers help recipients transition to undergrad



10 ALUMNI SKILLS CHATS

Conversations with job sector experts i.e. Law, Medicine, Finance



11 ALUMNI NETWORKING

Every August alumni and donors meet to discuss skills and opportunities



12 ALUMNI COUNCIL

An opportunity for selected alumni to work with and guide the board



Fundraising Action



Opportunity Road Ride *B i k i n g f o r B u r s a r i e s*

We have just completed the third annual Ride, in September.

We reached our goal raising more than \$60,000.

A very special thank you to our sponsors.

Presenting Sponsor

FASKEN

Own tomorrow

Additional Sponsors

FIRST NATIONAL

FINANCIAL LP



Manitou
Investment Management Ltd.

**Rae
Christen
Jeffries**^{LP}

MANAGEMENT LABOUR & EMPLOYMENT LAW

 **mindset**
CYCLING



Holiday Matching Campaign



The Matching Campaign in December 2024 successfully raised \$65,784.

This coming December, our goal is to raise \$100,000. Thanks to our generous anonymous donors, every contribution goes further with a dollar-for-dollar match. Every \$1 you give is doubled to \$2.



THE MERIT BOWL



BOWLING FOR BURSARIES

This past spring we raised over \$118,000.

A very special thank you to our sponsors, the team participants, the team supporters and all the volunteers.

We look forward to next year.

GOLD SPONSOR



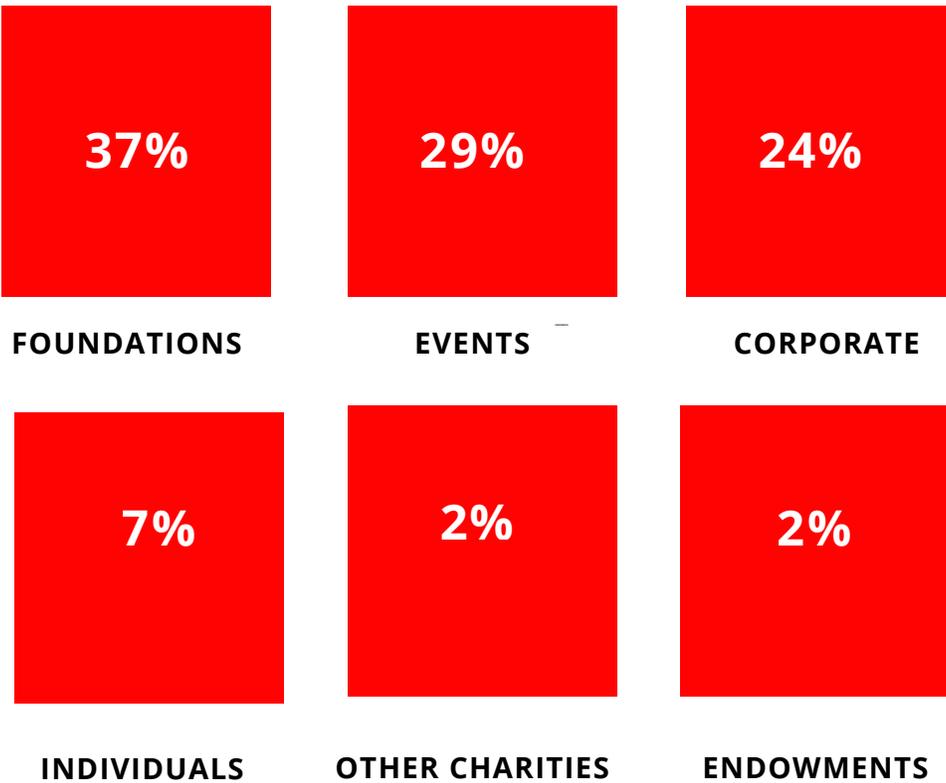
SILVER SPONSORS



TEAM SPONSORS



Our Donor Support
has been
Wonderful.



Thanks to the generosity of our donors we raised more than \$625,000 dollars and donated 46 laptops this past year.

Merit is 100% donor funded.

80% of the funds go to support the bursaries and alumni program.

The
Bickle-
Wilder
Foundation

CF Cadillac
Fairview

The Catherine and Maxwell
MEIGHEN FOUNDATION

Challenges & Opportunity

FOUNDATION

Deloitte.

FASKEN

Own tomorrow

FIRST NATIONAL

FINANCIAL LP



J.P. Bickell Foundation

Since 1953

Manitou
Investment Management Ltd.

metrix

Rae
Christen
Jeffries^{LLP}

MANAGEMENT LABOUR & EMPLOYMENT LAW

Rotary
Etobicoke



The
Rotary
Club of Toronto



THE TIPPET
FOUNDATION

The award of the bursary has profound effects on students that ripples through their careers, their families and their communities.



The story of Merit is more than just bursary dollars.

It is about creating opportunity for kids overcoming setbacks fueled by student grit, determination and character.

It is about a desire to build a better future for themselves and their communities through education, mentoring, networking, and volunteerism.

Action this Fall/Winter

Alumni Events

- February: Alumni networking event
- February: Interview Skills workshop

School Outreach

- October and beyond - Introduction and reintroduction of the Merit program to participating schools and staff and students
- December Application Alert
- Applications Open
- January Student Awareness
- Student and teacher tool kits updated and sent

Events

- **Holiday Matching Campaign -Nov-Dec.**





Strategic Direction

Two pillars

Bursaries

- grade 11 high school students
- grade 12 high school students

Alumni Support

- Mentorship
- Career support

Fundraising goals

- \$8 to \$10 million raised by 2032
- Funders include, corporations, foundations, other charities, individuals and legacy gifts

School partnerships

GTA School Boards

- Current - Toronto, Peel
- Future - Durham, Halton, York
- Target neediest schools
- Add one school/one board at a time as funds permit

Bursary values

- \$500 for grade 11 students
- \$1,000, \$2,000, \$5,000 for grade 12 students
- Amounts will remain constant in the near term to maximize the number distributed

Operational team

- 12+ board members
- Board led committees
- One executive director
- One alumni coordinator
- One administrative manager

The Merit Program created opportunities for post-secondary education for 332 high school students in the GTA this fall.

We look forward to awarding 332+ bursaries to deserving recipients in the spring of 2026

Please consider donating to help make this objective a reality.





INSPIRE

STUDENTS WHO STAY IN SCHOOL

RECOGNIZE

STUDENTS WHO OVERCOME CHALLENGES

REWARD

CONTRIBUTORS TO THE COMMUNITY

MENTOR

INDIVIDUAL GROWTH IN ALUMNI

Thank you.

"As someone who went through a couple of challenges myself and was worrying about finding my education, I am sincerely grateful to be in a better position now."

"Thank you for this wonderful life changing opportunity. This award will allow me to pursue my education with full focus."

"Thank you so much for awarding me. I am so excited to use this bursary to work in healthcare and give back to my community as a psychiatrist or anesthesiologist."

"From the bottom of my heart, thank you. You have eased my financial burden especially that of my sole income immigrant father."

"Thank you for making such an incredible impact on my life with the Merit Award scholarship. It is an amazing opportunity and I am eternally grateful."

"Thank you! The Merit Award will enable me to fulfill my dream of attending UTM to study forensic science".

"Thank you for awarding our students, the Merit Award. We are grateful to you and your organization." Guidance Specialist

"We are very appreciative of the Merit Award Bursary Program's support of our students." Guidance Head

"A big thanks to all of you who help support our students year after year." Guidance Counselor



Merit Award Bursary Program

CREATING OPPORTUNITY FOR EDUCATION

Find out more
www.MeritAward.ca