

Grade advice: Top B.C. high-school grads share secrets to success

Here's what these Class of 2018 standouts had to say.

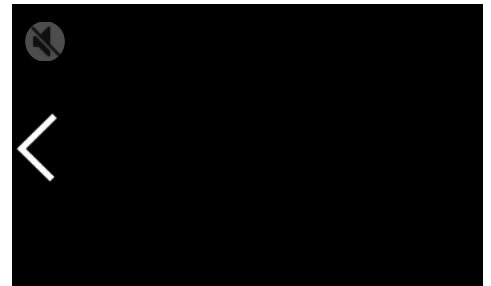
NICK ENGLAND

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Former St. Michaels University School student Aysha Emmerson is photographed at home with her study posters and will be starting her freshman year at Harvard this fall. C H A D P / H N I G P

F E A T U R E D A



Braid: Linking rainbow flag to swastika a dark, ugly :



We turned to some of B.C.'s top high school students to share their tried and true approaches to maintaining great grades. Here's what these Class of 2018 standouts had to say:

A y s h a E m m e r s o n

17, St. Michael's University School in Victoria, Harvard University

In recent years, neighbours came to the Emmerson family home to gawk at the kitchen walls, which Aysha had plastered with advanced-placement biology study posters.

That course alone was incredibly demanding so in order to realize her Ivy League dream, Aysha came up with an intrusive but creative way to study for exams she calls the "physical manifestation" of her "mind palace" (think Sherlock Holmes).

"I'm a really visual learner but I also learn by writing things down, so I took extensive notes in class and would use the handouts my teacher gave me to create question-and-answer style notes," she said.

Aysha would pace around her home quizzing herself until she had a good grasp of her notes, then use coloured felt markers to jot everything down, including diagrams, onto hulking sheets of chart paper which she taped all over the kitchen.

"Because they were colour-coded, I found that if I stared at them long enough, I would be able to almost refer to the image of the sheet during a test," she said. "The technique

worked like magic.”



Former St. Michaels University School student Aysha Emmerson is photographed at home as she packs her bag as she'll be starting her freshman year at Harvard this fall. C H A D P/H N I G P O

For memory-heavy social science courses, like French and psychology, Aysha used the popular study app Quizlet to create her own flashcards for review. For math, she completed extra supplementary questions for each unit but also turned to the Khan Academy's YouTube tutorials when she needed a little help.

Between being head girl at St. Michael's, vocal jazz, two soccer teams, co-heading her school's WE Club and running her Self.I.E. camps for young girls, Aysha had a busy schedule to juggle. By Grade 12 she found the solution in Apple's calendar app.

"I honestly don't think I could have gone through the year without it because it allowed me to map out my life and courses, invite other people to meetings and it would also notify me before an event," she said.

She also made an online "homework table" with Google Docs, which she used to budget several hours of coursework each evening before she crashed by midnight.

In order to prevent burnout, Aysha needed downtime and found running to be meditative. When she felt overwhelmed, taking five minutes to chat with a friend would put her at ease.

Aysha believes it's important that students strive for success while in high school, but warns them not to be too hard on themselves.

"Don't focus on a specific outcome, and enjoy the learning process," she said.

"I think it's so easy to get caught up in our grades or our dream school that we lose sight of the learning itself, and school is such an incredible opportunity to expand your understanding, challenge yourself and find out what fascinates you so you can pursue it."

M O S T R E A D

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Nikolas Papakyriakopoulos played soccer for the Vancouver Whitecaps FC Residency Program and is attending Western Michigan University this fall on an academic and athletic scholarship. *S U B M K O S T A S P A P / P N A G K Y R I A K O P O U*

N i k o l a s P a p a k y r i a k o p o u l o s

18, University Hill Secondary, Western Michigan University

Niko played soccer for the Vancouver Whitecaps FC Residency Program throughout high school. While his focus was competing at a level that would give him his pick of NCAA schools, he knew he'd have an edge if he earned the grades to match.

In Grade 12, Niko would wake up at 6:30 a.m. each day to catch the SkyTrain in New Westminster before a gruelling day of class and practice. Getting adequate nutrition and sleep were key to keeping his body strong and his mind sharp.

The Whitecaps gave Niko and his teammates "nutrition talks" but he mostly credits his parents for raising him on a Mediterranean diet packed with fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes and nuts, lean meats like fish and chicken, and healthy fats such as olive oil.

"I tried to get all the protein, all the carbs in to perform well," he said. "Minimize the junk food."

After an early dinner, Niko would head to his bedroom, set his phone down far away from his desk and turn on some music, usually hip hop and rap. He'd study alone, heavily reviewing detailed notes he took in class and notes taken by classmates, which they'd photograph and send to him when he missed school for away games.

Niko said that because of his busy schedule and frequent travel to California with the team, he'd never leave homework to the last minute.

"I'd try to break it up as well as I could," he said. "But the night before I would often cram just to get enough info in before the test."

After done studying, Niko aimed to have his head hit the pillow by 10:30 or 11 p.m. for eight hours of sleep. He installed blackout curtains in his room to keep it dark at night and would either turn his phone off or put it in sleep mode.

"It was tough," he said. "Right when I finished my homework, I pretty much had to try to get to bed, get as much as sleep as I could, and get back at it the next morning."

Niko said the experience was a grind but all his hard work left him with an academic and athletic scholarship at WMU, as well as offers from UBC and schools in Buffalo and Philadelphia.

"There were guys on my team that didn't spend as much time studying," he said. "They missed out on scholarships, and different schools had different requirements for grades, so in the long run it definitely paid off to be a good student."

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Rebecca Lim, the recipient of a \$100,000 Schulich Scholarship and who is going into applied science at UBC, where she hopes to specialize in biomedical engineering getting ahead with some pre term studying at home in Surrey. N I C K P P N R G O C A Y L O

Rebecca Lim

18, Frank Hurt Secondary, University of B.C.

Along with post-secondary calculus courses at Simon Fraser University during her Grade 12 year, Rebecca balanced playing and coaching hockey, volunteering at a library, student council, and running the school's STEM Club, which she founded.

Though she had a "relaxed" schedule in Grade 12, Rebecca didn't waste any time, cramming as much studying and homework into her spare blocks as possible. For all her hard work, she landed a coveted \$100,000 Schulich Leadership scholarship.

Key to Rebecca's success was getting an early start, which on test and quiz days meant waking up as early as 5:30 a.m. to study and 6:45 a.m. most other days.

"I think best in the morning. I think that's when I'm most focused," she said. "That was when my brain was retaining the most information."

Rebecca was particular about her study space, which was at the dining room table at home. While she could handle a bit of ambient noise and chatter, she skipped music. The table was far enough away from the living room, she wouldn't get distracted by TV show's dialogue.

"I can't study in my room," she said. "If I'm all by myself and there's no stimulation, I'm just going to fall asleep or something like that, so I prefer where there's a little bit going on."

Her favourite study aids were "test preps" she made, condensed notes on letter-sized paper. She used a colour-coded system to highlight key concepts, reviewed the notes before exams and saved them to use again before finals.

"I can make them with my own shorthand, focusing on the topics that I struggled with throughout the unit," Rebecca said. "It's kind of in my language, that's why it helps me most."

Rebecca took an "always online" approach to studying. She kept her laptop across the table so that it wouldn't distract her but used it to quickly Google concepts she needed help understanding. She kept social media tabs closed.

"At least in school, I think, the internet gets a bad rap because not everyone uses it appropriately," Rebecca said. "But I really like to use it for studying."

Rebecca visited teachers' websites for review materials and YouTube videos, and watched online tutorials by Khan Academy and Crash Course. She used phone apps like TeamSnap to organize hockey commitments, and her school's own app, STING, to keep track of classes and homework.

She gave herself up to an hour each night to relax and watch some TV, and "do something mindless to decompress before bed."

Rebecca heeded her hockey coach's advice to "stay humble, stay hungry," which for her meant keeping her head down, staying disciplined and remembering what it took to succeed.

"I can't lie and say that school is fun all the time," Rebecca said.

"It obviously isn't and there are times where you are frustrated and it's going to be tedious, and you're just going to want to give up and go watch Netflix or hang out with your friends. But sometimes you've just got to buckle down and do the work in order to get the results. It pays off in the end."

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T i p s f o r f i r s t - y e a r s t u d e n t s

Celeste Leander, a professor and academic director of first-year experience at the University of B.C., says great university-level habits don't have to start in freshman year on campus. Here are four tips to give high-school students an edge:

Break up studying into short chunks: Even five or 10 minutes at a time. The tendency is to schedule like: 'I'm going to spend three hours tonight on physics.' What happens is you're not mentally engaged and it's hard, if you're reading textbooks, to get through that kind of volume of material. It really helps to break that up into small chunks.

Be your own best advocate: The minute you're feeling like you're struggling on something, or you're unsure about something, get help right away. Everybody wants you to succeed. Your professors want you to succeed, most universities have lots of resources for writing help and all sorts of stuff. A lot of times at UBC, we have such high-achieving students that come in and they start to feel insecure about themselves when they do reach that point where they would benefit from asking for help, so a lot of those resources are underutilized.


Join or create a community of learners right away: Good teachers know that and they'll specifically assign projects that are done in groups (for students) to meet people. But even for students who do study best by themselves, we know there's good evidence to show that students who form those close relationships early on really thrive.

Make sure to schedule downtime: Where you can just shut off. When you start university, some people, for the first time in their life, are in a situation where the work is never done. You can just study forever and you'll never know everything, and that's the way it goes. I think we set up habits really early on that carry on throughout our lives, and I think that's one that a lot of people miss – to consciously schedule downtime where you're not committed to stuff.



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