

Preparation and partnerships contribute to smooth start to school year

Catherine Whitnall

All Tammy Rutter has to do is close her eyes and it's a typical first week of school.

"It was joyful noise," says the principal for St. John Paul II and St. Mary Catholic elementary schools of the first day school on Thursday (Sept. 10). "It just felt like a school community again."

While the Trillium Lakelands District School Board opted for a phased approach to the first week of elementary school — 25 per cent of students starting on each day from Sept. 8 to 11 — the Peterborough, Victoria, Northumberland and Clarington Catholic District School Board chose to divide elementary students by last name; A to K attending Thursday and L to Z on Friday (Sept. 11).

Roughly 75 per cent of St. John Paul II students have returned to school — approximately 145 students — almost every one of them excited to reunite with classmates, friends and staff to share stories, experiences and lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic during the last six months.

"If you only listened, without seeing the masks, you wouldn't have thought it was a much different school year than in the past," says Rutter, noting she actually prefers the staggered start and would like to see it done every year. "It just offered up such a great opportunity to chat with students, to share information and explain to them what is happening this year."

Although only students in grades 4 to 8 are required to wear masks, Rutter says many of the younger students also wore them and were especially excited to show them off. To mitigate mask fatigue, schools have scheduled breaks throughout the day and classes spend as much time outside as possible.

At St. John Paul II, the yard has been sectioned off and cohorts of students rotate through each area ensuring everyone has access to such things as the basketball nets and climbers. Students also take part in gym class three times each week in order to give custodial staff time to thoroughly clean and sanitize the area.

Efforts are being made to ensure students attending the board's virtual school operating out of St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Secondary School still feel included.

In addition to having their own principal and teacher, students remain connected to their own school through emails and newsletters. Rutter says the Catholic School Council, now running virtually, is working on ideas of how to help, such as sending birthday cards made by their peers.

"I think it shows we're still thinking about them," says Rutter.

Feedback regarding the first week has been positive. Even student and bus drop-offs

have gone relatively smoothly.

“I think everyone has risen to the challenge admirably,” she says. “Parents have been concerned, but supportive, and, I think, we’re all just happy to have the kids back.”