

Peterborough parent questions decision to send child to school

Catherine Whitnall

Karen Starr has registered her son for school but the longer she thinks about it, the more she second-guesses her decision.

Starr is not alone and thousands of families throughout the area have opted to keep their children home for the first part of the school year; roughly 1,500 in the Peterborough, Victoria, Northumberland and Clarington District School Board, more than 2,000 in Trillium Lakelands and close to 5,200 for Kawartha Pine Ridge.

“Everybody’s in jeopardy. It’s like they have blinders on; that everything will be fine if we just do this and that,” said Starr noting the efforts currently in place are insufficient especially given the potential for a second wave and the arrival of cold and influenza season.

“I don’t think this pandemic has even reached its peak yet.”

Notwithstanding the fact her eight-year-old son has asthma and allergies - granted, he’s a real trooper when it comes to wearing his mask, washing his hands and physical distancing - but he also has learning disabilities.

When schools closed, Starr hired a tutor to help her deliver online lessons. Between school strikes, the pandemic and school breaks, her son has been out of school for six months and she is concerned about how he will adjust to the changes made at his school.

“When I asked him about going back to school he said he was scared,” said Starr, who worries about resources for her son. “He needs one-on-one support. It’s going to be confusing for a lot of students. And for those who have anxieties, it’s going to be a nightmare. Putting all these kids in a classroom is not a wise idea.”

The PVNC recently ran a summer transition program in two schools in each of its four regions for kindergarten to Grade 12 students with learning challenges, autism and heightened anxiety, said program principal Lisa Gemmiti-Folz.

The eight-day camp-style program ran for 90 minutes each day providing an opportunity for students to gradually adjust to such safety protocols as mask wearing, hand washing, physical distancing, playing in groups, interacting with teachers and navigating school buildings.

Gemmiti-Folz added staff have also been trained to deliver the program in September but fully empathizes with parental concerns.

“These are challenging times, but it’s up to parents to make the best decision for their children, and we will support whatever one they make, every step of the way.”

Kawartha Pine Ridge superintendent of education Anne Marie Duncan said the board

is likewise working to address as many concerns as possible, noting each family has its own unique circumstances so there's no one, single solution. She said the board is communicating regularly with teachers, administration, public health, social services, unions and school committees.

The board has already set aside professional development days for staff training and earmarked Aug. 31 and Sept. 1 as 'transition days' for high needs students, particularly those with an Individual Education Plan (IEP). These days afford parents and students an opportunity to meet with their school principal and teacher to share the changes that are happening.

Trillium Lakelands released specific details to its return to school plan that includes efforts to ensure that plans are in place for a successful transition back to school for students with special needs. Whether the parent/ guardian has selected in school or at-home remote learning, programming will be adapted and considered. Individualized programming documented in the student's individual education plan (IEP) will be supported in all school programming.

At times, staff will need to be in close contact with students. This is particularly true for staff supporting students with special needs, where the nature of the student's disability requires IEP programming and accommodations involving close proximity. Where close proximity is necessary, staff will be wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) which may include a gown, gloves, a face-covering/ mask, and face shield.