

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