

Opening classrooms to everybody

Despite shrinking funds, York boards welcome special-needs students

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Staff Writer

"That's my child in the wheelchair. But behind him are a whole line of people who care."

— Susan McKinnon

Taylor McKinnon is eight years old and in Grade 3. He's a bright, talkative little guy with a great sense of humour. He loves horse racing, computers and is forever laughing at the antics of his friends.

Taylor also has cerebral palsy and a mild form of autism. He's confined to a wheelchair and needs an education assistant to help him get around St. Monica Catholic School in Markham.

As Taylor approached school age his parents Susan and Michael, who live outside the school boundaries, requested a meeting with St. Monica principal Paul Game. This made sense, since Taylor was attending the daycare centre attached to the school — the first daycare willing to take him after 13 others said no.

"Mr. Game didn't blink," Susan recalled. "I went in ready to cry, I was very apprehensive. I needed before-and-after care and wanted Taylor to stay at the daycare where he was well-cared for. Mr. Game just looked at me and said, 'No problem'."

McKinnon's experience may not be typical. But she has nothing but praise for St. Monica staff and the York Catholic District School Board which, she says, offered unexpected support.

"I was not about to let Taylor fall through the cracks. But I never had to worry. Everyone has been amazing. And I know if I hadn't found this school and this daycare I wouldn't have the child I have now."

"It's not magic, it's just a lot of hard work," said principal Game. "Communication is critical. Over time we get to know the children



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Markham's Taylor McKinnon, front, feels welcome at St. Monica Catholic School despite having cerebral palsy and a mild form of autism.

and we all work as a team planning modifications for each child."

That team includes parents, teachers, special education teachers and assistants, principals, board staff and many others along the way.

It's a massive machine that is now running on low fuel as both York Region boards struggle with the ever-increasing numbers of special needs kids, coupled with the region's unchecked growth.

"In the past there were lots of

agencies and institutions for parents to access," explained Catholic superintendent of student services Lee Wilson. "Now there aren't many support services. That's the reality in York Region."

Wilson said schools are educating children with medical problems never seen in the system before.

"Five years ago we rarely saw autistic children, or children with significant needs. Next year, 55 little ones (with special needs) are enter-

ing JK, and among those who are visually or hearing impaired, 50 per cent are also autistic."

Educators often try to identify pre-schoolers with special needs, like Taylor, while in daycares or nursery schools. That way, when they enter Junior Kindergarten the school and teacher are prepared. McKinnon remembers that call.

"The teacher phoned me the summer before Taylor started JK, to learn more about him. She wanted to know not only about his physical needs, but his learning patterns, history and his personality."

Both boards strive to provide students with the support they need to succeed in class, while keeping them with their peers.

"Whenever possible, we provide service in the child's regular class, supported by a special ed teacher," explained Louise Moreau, co-ordinator of special education for the York Region District School Board. "That person could be an occupational therapist, a speech and language pathologist or teachers for the deaf and blind."

Students might attend their regular classes with part-time in-class support. Or they might attend regu-

lar class for about half the day, then change rooms for more intensive instruction in a smaller setting.

And both boards offer community classrooms — where students from four or five neighbourhood schools attend classes in one facility providing tailored programming.

But the growing complexity of student needs in an under-funded system is putting increasing stress on school boards, more so since the province implemented a new funding model in 1998-99.

"That year we had 100 per cent validation of our claims for about \$12 million," Wilson said. "The following year the criteria were more restrictive and the claims that are being denied increase every year."

"Special education is challenging and uniquely rewarding," said the public board's Moreau, adding funding is consistently greater than what is provided by the province.

For example, Ontario-wide approval rates went from 86.5 per cent in 1998 to 73.1 per cent last year.

"But we're all doing the best we can for these kids," Wilson said.

Taylor is proof. And his mom recognizes it's the people who make the difference.

HOW SPECIAL EDUCATION WORKS:

IEP — Students identified as exceptional will have an IEP prepared — individual education plan. This plan addresses the child's specific learning challenges as well as his/her disability; physical, intellectual, communicative, emotional, or behavioural. It's reviewed several times a year with full parental involvement.

SEPPA — Special education per pupil amount, based not on how many children need special education, but on total number of students. Funding is \$500 per pupil to Grade 3, \$300 to Grade 8 and \$200 for high school students.

ISA — Intensive support and assessment. There are three levels school boards can access: ISA 1 provides for equipment up to \$800 per child. This can include items like speech analyzers, print enlargers for students with low vision, specialized computer programs, or modified desks and worktables.

To secure ISA 2 (\$12,000 per claim) and ISA 3 (\$27,000 per claim) funding, students must meet seven criteria, including an assessment that demonstrates moderate-to-severe (level 2) or severe-to-profound

(level 3) disability. Students must require individual support or supervision because they are unable to work independently, or to ensure the health and safety of others.

FUNDING — The major challenge. Dollars have not increased in three years, despite a jump in enrolment due to growth. Sixty-one per cent of Ontario boards had more eligible students this year compared to last and 82 per cent of boards submitted more claims. But only 13 per cent of boards had a higher claim validation rate, meaning 88 per cent of boards had fewer claims approved than they did the year before, with more claims submitted.

YORK REGION PUBLIC BOARD

Total students: 89,732
Special education students through the Identification Placement and Review committee: 11,351.
Special education funding: \$50.5 million.

YORK REGION CATHOLIC BOARD

Total students: 79,727
Special education students: 15 to 20 per cent identified as exceptional, or about 13,500.
Special education funding: \$12 million.

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