

Parents want more supplies, smaller classes for students

Parents represent one of the system's most concerned constituencies in the school system.

Nadia Municella is a special education teacher with a Durham board and has a seven-year-old in a Markham public school. Her child was tested for autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in her first year and continues to wait for evaluation.

The Markham mother believes more professional development in special education will be required.

"We're seeing more young kids with potential disorders and we're not seeing enough professional development for use in the classroom," she said. "A two-hour workshop is not enough to identify issues such as autism."

Based on her experiences as the former chairperson of the Unionville Public School council and mother of four school-age children, Iris Benson knows what's on her school-of-the-future wish list.

"We will need a smaller class environment," she said. "Class sizes are too big. They're too big for the students. Add to the mix special needs and behavioural students, who should be included, and it's too much for the teachers."

Future students and parents should be spared the seemingly constant threat of labour strife, she said.

FRUSTRATED BY STRIKES

"Disruptions and strikes frustrate everyone," Ms Benson said. "We've gone through one strike and a couple of work-to-rules. There's got to be a better way so parents and kids can stop wondering if their year will be in jeopardy."

While Ms Benson believes the system is fundamentally sound with "good and committed" teachers, administrators of the imminent future need to focus on preparing students earlier.

Her youngest daughter, 11, is the only member of the brood in a private school.

"We see the benefits and it has already paid off," she said. "She already knows how to prepare for and write an exam. The other children got their first exam in Grade 9. She's had French since pre-school. In the public system, my other kids didn't begin until Grade 4."

Shoestring school budgets both-

er Laura Defilippis.

"We don't seem to have enough supplies," said the mother of students at Aurora's Cardinal Carter



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

Iris Benson, former Unionville Public School council chairperson and mother of four school-age children, would like smaller class sizes and an end to strikes in the schools of the future.

High School and Our Lady of Annunciation Catholic School in Oak Ridges. "Parents are always being asked to fundraise for books, binders and gym equipment. I think parents are overwhelmed as it is."

Student trustee and Grade 12 Dr. G. W. Williams Secondary School student Amy Tipton, 17, believes the status quo is just fine.

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Nadia Municella
special education teacher and parent

"I like the character education system and how they've worked it into the curriculum," she said.

"It combines the best of both worlds. There's great diversity in programs. That should stay. There's also a definite shift in the direction of technology. There'll be more access to it."

With her sights set on a post-secondary theatre program, Ms Tipton is confident future schools will realize the benefits of more arts and language courses.

"There will probably be an expansion of arts-specific programs," she said. "Language and French immersion courses will likely grow. There will be a real need because bilingualism is a real asset."

A Thornhill mother of two children in French immersion echoes the sentiment.

"French immersion affords kids smaller classes and cultural experiences normally not available," said Renata Richardson, whose 17-year-old attends Langstaff Secondary School, while her 13-year-old is a student at Woodland Glen.

"French immersion is the closest thing to private school. My oldest boy has had many positive experiences and amazing teachers."

As other parents, Ms Richardson has issue with the quantity of extracurricular activities and threat of labour disruptions.

"Teachers are one of the primary influences in the life of a child," she said. "Strikes and working to rule shouldn't be an option in the future."

—Chris Traber

More money needed for high-tech schools of tomorrow

The past is history, the future's a mystery and today's the present. That's why it's a gift.

That prophetic dictum holds particularly true for public education in York Region.

It doesn't, however, stop our schools' array of stakeholders from prognosticating about the fortunes of an essential system administered by a relative few for a realistic many.

While books could deservedly be written about the future of education and what needs to be done to meet and defeat its many challenges, the common denominator is funding.

In York, as throughout Ontario, educators and administrators cry out, literally and figuratively, for a more "liberal" flow of cash.

The principles of funding equity and adequacy are not being met, they say, particularly in the areas of special education, technology in the classroom, energy costs, textbooks, growth and salaries.

With those realities, predictions about the schools of the near future are measured and pragmatic.

"What we'd like to do is provide more differentiated programming for our students," said York Catholic District School Board chairperson Elizabeth Crowe. "We'd like more variety in programming along with the expansion and integration of technology."

"We're looking to expand our co-op and apprenticeship programs. Gone are the days, for example, when you can afford to build a fully perfect auto shop. It's expensive and technology changes."

She cites successful partnerships with Seneca College and IBM as harbingers of how schools can optimize resources in the years to come.

Specialized computer programs for the regular learner and exceptional student will be the way of the board's world, foretells Catholic board spokesperson Chris Cable.

"The provincial thrust is success for all students," she said. "That's the future and a large part of it will be assistive technology for all learners."

Ms Cable points to a pilot lap top assistive technology program at St. Joan of Arc Catholic High

the state of
EDUCATION



Third of a three-part series by
Chris Traber.

School in Maple where students at all levels employ innovative software.

Those with learning disabilities are aided by computer programs designed to type the student's spoken word and speak it back.

"The statistics from the program are amazing," Ms Cable said. "Assistive technology will permeate many programs. It'll create more involved, independent learners."

While technology is the way of

Specialized computer programs for the regular learner and exceptional students will be the way of the board's world.

the future, administrators must not become romanced by it, warns York Region District School Board chairperson Bill Crothers.

"There will be more variety and students will learn more through online connections," he said. "We're doing that now. But, my belief is that we'll still see schools like this because of the socialization aspect. Education is more than learning the facts. A big part of learning how to be good citizen is through contact with other people."

"Educational components can be delivered online to accommodate learning but the kids themselves will still be socializing. There still will be classrooms. Ratios may be different and more plugged in, but interaction will be there."

Mr. Crothers calls for the possibility of a more subject-specific

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