

Barriers found at all eight Stouffville school yards

Suicide prompts call for accessible playgrounds

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Ontario children spend one quarter of their school day playing in the yard.

The playground is also where they learn to share, work collaboratively, be empathetic towards others and take responsibility for their actions. It also enables them to make friends in an informal setting, according to Anne Oakes.

Last year, the Stouffville resident completed a research paper on the inclusion of physically disabled children within school playgrounds. She studied Whitchurch-Stouffville's eight elementary schools. The town's new schools, Wendat Village and St. Brendan, were not included in the study.

Ms Oakes' research paper came about as a result of Mitchell Wilson's suicide in 2011.

Ms Oakes knew the family of the 11-year-old Pickering boy who was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy two years earlier and used a walker to protect him from being bumped into but also from falling.

"Mitchell constantly felt excluded, especially within the free play areas of his school," Ms Oakes wrote.

'Mitchell constantly felt excluded, especially within the free play areas of his school.'

What she discovered locally was that none of the playgrounds accommodated disabled students.

"I know how important play is for all children and when kids are excluded from play, it's not good for their self-esteem. How are they supposed to make friends?" Ms Oakes said.

Quality friendships are a protective factor against bullying, according to Ms Oakes' research paper.

Half of physically disabled children were bullied at least once during the school term versus 14 per cent of non-disabled children, according to Ms Oakes' research.

"It got me looking. I started looking every-

where and all I saw were barriers," Ms Oakes told The Sun-Tribune.

What she found at the eight school yards were wood or cement barriers surrounding the playground's perimeters that were literally too high for a disabled child to get his or her wheelchair over, according to the research paper.

"Wooden and cement barriers that surround the perimeters of the playground provide a visual message saying who belongs and who doesn't belong," Ms Oakes wrote.

She also discovered none of the schools had ground or elevated equipment accessible to the physically disabled child.

A lot of the focus is placed on getting the child into and around the school and "obviously play isn't a priority. It is, but is isn't," according to Ms Oakes.

"They forget about the outdoor space for the kids," she said.

Playgrounds in public elementary schools and all of their equipment are the responsibility of the individual schools, which includes fundraising for them, according to Margaret Roberts, superintendent of plant services for the York Region District School Board.

There are no school board or provincial regulations for what must be included in a school yard.

Ms Roberts said she sees more applications for naturalized playgrounds versus traditional ones with monkey bars and swings.

This also matches the school board's priorities in terms of environmental awareness, adding naturalized playgrounds are less expensive and easier to fundraise for.

"In my personal experience, as a principal, you try to build something all kids can access," Ms Roberts said. "You have to find a way to carve out areas for everybody and balance that out with the funds you have."

There are 3,291 students enrolled in Whitchurch-Stouffville's elementary schools, nine of whom are physically disabled, according to Christina Choo-Hum, public affairs and communications for the York Region District School Board.

The York Catholic school board did not respond to interview requests submitted by The Sun-Tribune.



STAFF PHOTO/SUSIE KOCKERSCHIEDT

Heather Andrews of the town's accessibility committee prefers integrated parks not accessible parks. "It's about being integrated, not separated," she said.

School playgrounds are not the only areas lacking accessibility for children. So, too, are town parks. Water parks, however, are accessible.

Rather than spend money on smaller, accessible structures for all of the town's 31 parks and parkettes, the plan is to install larger structures in Memorial Park, according to Rob Raycroft, director of community and leisure services for the town.

"It would be a destination park," he told The Sun-Tribune.

"We're going to spend a whole lot of money... Because it's expensive, we plan to do one and do it very well," he said, noting the equipment alone will be in the six figures.

Also expected to be in the plans is a rubberized or fall-resistant ground covering.

The town's parks and parkettes currently utilize pea gravel as their ground surface. Mr. Raycroft is not sure if that will change.

"Because the structure is not accessible, we're not sure there's value in changing them all out," he said.

Plans for Memorial Park are still in the design phase. The park is expected to be completed by 2021.

"All these kids today will be adults before it's done," said Heather Andrews, current member and former chairperson of the town's accessibility advisory committee.

Ms Andrews also noted she does not want the town to create an accessible park, but instead one that is integrated so "they can be there with their peer group. That's what it's all about."

She suggested installing climbing appa-

ratus with ramps instead of stairs, not just in Memorial Park, but also in the other town parks, because "kids will run up a ramp as much as they'll run up stairs".

The one good thing the town has done to increase accessibility in parks, according to Ms Andrews, is install picnic tables that enable wheelchair access on the ends.

"It's about being integrated, not separated," she said.

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Ms Oakes refers back to the inspiration for her paper.

"Mitchell told his family how many times he was kept in during recess and lunch times while the other children played in the school yard. School officials told the family that Mitchell was kept inside for his own safety — they feared he could be knocked down and injured," Ms Oakes wrote.

She said Mitchell tried to play basketball with the other kids but they wouldn't let him.

"When stigmatized or marginalized by society, kids pick up on it... Everybody should be treated equally," Ms Oakes said.

"Kids are our community... Whether they're in a wheelchair or not in a wheelchair, they're important to society," she said.

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