

Schools For Autism: Why Parents Are Taking Education Into Their Own Hands

This September, two new schools designed especially for children with autism opened their doors in Ontario. The schools were created and funded by parents who felt the public education system couldn't meet the requirements of their children's special needs.

In Aurora, Serena Thompson started the Lighthouse Learning and Development Centre^[1] after a frustrating experience with the York region school board.

Her son, Daniel, diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, spent the first four months of grade one, according to Thompson, in a portable with an education assistant, no teacher and no work, except what she provided.

“I just assumed that the school board would be receptive to working with our team, willing to create the best educational plan available for my son,” says Thompson. “Boy was I wrong.”

Though Daniel was eventually placed in a community classroom, Thompson says the poor transition led to severe regression. Daniel's psychologist feared they would lose all progress he'd made from three years in therapy.

“Needless to say, that ended our relationship with the public school system,” says Thompson. Soon after, she got the idea to start the Lighthouse, which offers a modified Ontario curriculum taught by credited teachers. The school is for children with autism in grades one to eight.

Autism is a neurological disorder for which there is currently no cure. According to Autism Ontario^[2], an estimated 100,000 individuals in the province have the disorder.

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In Ontario, children with autism are supposed to receive an Individual Education Plan^[3] (IEP) within 30 days of starting school. This is developed by the student's teachers and community agencies to address the child's specific needs.

"I am highly confident in the programming the board offers for students with autism," says Susan Logue, who is the superintendent of student services for the York Region District School Board^[4]. "But there are always families, particularly with students with varying levels of autism that feel that the needs of their child individually can be met in different ways and we support that, too."

Greg Kliewer also felt he needed to take his son's education in his own hands. He began The Little Blue Schoolhouse for Autism in Barrie^[5] to ensure his 14-year-old son, Tavish receives the "specialized education he needs." The school caters to adolescents and adults affected by severe autism.

"Tavish is non-verbal, has epilepsy and a host of behavioural and intellectual challenges. He is self-injurious and over the past couple years, started to become aggressive to other people," says Kliewer.

Despite collaboration and cooperation between the family and the public school system, Tavish has been unable to safely attend public school for over two years.

While they couldn't see another option, taking their kids out of the public system does come with a hefty price tag for Kliewer and Thompson. Parents pay between \$24,000 and \$30,000 in tuition for children to attend either school.

Still the parents feel the specialized approach is essential for their children to succeed.

"Schools aren't necessarily designed to be able to support students like Tavish in a way that they need to be supported," says board-certified behaviour analyst Tammy Frazier. "These types of schools and programs are so essential for students like Tavish so that he can receive the type of services that will help him to be more independent and part of his community."

"We will make it our job every day at the Lighthouse to never allow our children to use their diagnosis as an excuse, nor will we allow them to not work hard and try their very best every single day," says Thompson. "Our children can be great, and they will be great, they just need someone to believe in them."