

TDSB cancelling kindergarten program for children with special needs ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

With help from a unique program for kindergarten children with special needs, Travis, a four-year-old with a brain injury that makes him prone to behavioural issues, has endured fewer meltdowns. Travis enjoys telling stories about his day at school and he loves pretending to be a dinosaur or a car.

The program has given Travis the support he needs to settle into the routines of a school day, said Ab. Velasco, one of his parents. So it was an unpleasant surprise when Mr. Velasco recently learned the program will be shuttered at the end of the school year as part of the Toronto District School Board's strategy to integrate more children with complex needs in to regular classrooms.

"I don't think there's a parent out there that will tell you they want their kids to be in a segregated program. No one wants their kids to be singled out," Mr. Velasco said. "But the reality is ... that there are kids who can't cope in an inclusive program."

The kindergarten intervention program (KIP) that Travis attends is small – just 25 young learners spread across eight schools. Its cancellation reflects a broader debate in the public-education system on how to integrate special-needs children with behavioural issues in regular classrooms. Parents and educators are questioning how to balance the right to an education for students with behavioural issues with the need to keep them, other students and teachers safe.

In recent months, The Globe and Mail has documented how pupils are being removed from classrooms because of disruptive behaviour; families are asked to pick up their children early or keep them home and other parents fear for the safety of their own children.

The TDSB said the kindergarten program was reviewed last year as part of its wider commitment to provide a more inclusive learning environment and to eliminate systemic barriers for at-risk students. Spokesman Ryan Bird said that despite the program's goal to teach children social skills so they could move into a regular Grade 1 classroom, it wasn't successful: Children who were in KIP were suspended at a higher rate; they were in special-education classrooms in earlier grades; and they were not meeting standardized testing benchmarks in later grades.

Further, he said, the data showed that the majority of students in KIP were boys, from low socio-economic backgrounds and racialized groups.

"Both international research and our own research tells us that suspending and streaming students can serve as barriers to future success," Mr. Bird said in a statement. "By promoting the integration of most students into regular classrooms, while providing additional supports to those who need them, we're providing students with the best chance to achieve postsecondary school success."

The KIP predates the introduction of full-day kindergarten in Ontario. In KIP classrooms, class sizes are intentionally small – a maximum of seven students – and typically led by a special-education teacher and a child-and-youth worker. Travis's classroom has six children. (Mr. Velasco and his husband adopted Travis, and requested that their son's prognosis, which was acquired while in utero, not be published to protect his privacy.)

Families have been referred to the program because, even though their children can participate in the kindergarten curriculum, they need help following classroom routines and developing social skills.

Those skills, however, are now taught in a full-day kindergarten learning environment, where four- and five-year-olds are exposed to two years of a full-day, play-based learning environment with a teacher and an early-childhood educator.

Gillian Parekh, an assistant professor at York University whose research has focused on inclusive education, said that students placed in contained special-education programs in elementary school are more likely to experience barriers accessing academic-level courses in high school.

"Evidence points to a rigidity of students' pathways through school, which greater inclusion hopes to disrupt," Prof. Parekh said. She added: "Making such determinations as early as kindergarten can set students along trajectories that significantly limit their future

opportunities."

Still, Laura Kirby-McIntosh, president of the Ontario Autism Coalition, worries that despite promises, the children in KIP won't receive the same level of supports in a regular kindergarten classroom.

"I'm all for inclusion, don't get me wrong. But inclusion without the right supports is just exclusion waiting to happen," she said.

Mr. Velasco said he had hoped to move Travis into a mainstream classroom in Grade 1. The family may slowly start to transition him into a typical kindergarten classroom this year in preparation for the end of the KIP.

"The reality is he's going to a senior kindergarten program, and in terms of what the supports are, I think that's something we have to discuss and really advocate for at that time," he said.

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