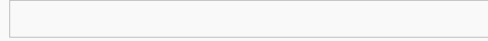

Raphael Centre closing

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Parent concerned child will not be best served in mainstream classroom setting

Dawn Stanyer is worried.

Stanyer's 11-year-old son, Darius Wadstein, lives with autism and has been going to the Raphael Centre at St. Michael School for five years. There, she said, he has received the care he needs, as well as activities that build life skills for him. The Raphael Centre, however, is closing.

"I'm worried he's not going to get what he needs," Stanyer told the Times-Herald on Wednesday, noting that her son doesn't communicate verbally. "They do things like cooking (and) taking him out shopping to learn life skills. You don't get that in a regular classroom."

The Raphael Centre is a facility in St. Michael School for developmentally disabled children. According to Superintendent of Learning at Holy Trinity Catholic School Division Ward Strueby, the students currently attending the centre will be moved into regular classrooms – some in St. Michael itself and others in schools in their catchment areas – all while keeping the supports they currently have in place.

"The goal is to follow the ministry philosophy of inclusion, where we want to have them learning with age-appropriate peers, in their home schools," he said on Wednesday.

There are fewer than 10 children affected under the Catholic board and a few more who will be brought into the Prairie South School Division. The centre was a partnership between the two boards and students covered under both divisions made use of it.

"The biggest part here is that we want to have students in their home schools, learning with age appropriate peers," Strueby said. "We want to set students up for life after school as well, and keeping students segregated is not our philosophy now. It's not what we want to do for these kids. We're really excited for the change and believe it's what's best for kids."

Tony Baldwin, Director of Education at Prairie South, echoed Strueby, saying that the main concern is the improvement in education for the students.

Stanyer, however, does not see the logic in this plan.

"Maybe it's age appropriate, but they're not going to be at age appropriate mental levels," she said. "It's about who understands and who doesn't. In that program, I know (Darius) is safe."

Stanyer said that anything can be a trigger for her son, and that having many people in a room can make him uncomfortable. In the five years he has been at the centre, she has had to pick him up and take him home twice because of his behaviour.

"That was with six kids in the classroom. Imagine a classroom of 20 or more, then what are we going to do?" she asked. "Call me every day?"

Strueby said the shift has nothing to do with cost cutting, in fact, having aides with children scattered throughout classrooms and even schools will likely cost more than the current model.

“Each student’s program looks a little bit different, because every student needs something a little bit different,” he said. “So it’s based really on the students’ strength and needs.”

Still, Stanyer said she feels “ripped-off” by the board and their decision. While she has received phone calls and been informed of the changes, she said her concerns have so far gone unanswered.

“I was not consulted at all,” she said. “I feel like I’m not being taken seriously ... How many of these kids are actually going to be benefiting from this closure?”

Strueby said the board spoke with parents several times individually over the phone and have been arranging meetings as well. There are plans in place to move students over to the mainstream system in June and the shift should be complete in the new school year.

“Parents have been consulted. Transition plans have been put in place,” he said. “We’re going to give the students what they need for them to improve and get the best education they can possibly have.”