

## Parents closely monitoring numbers as classes resume



Nancy and Ethan Galaski had their masks firmly in place as they left for St. Joseph Catholic Elementary School on Thursday morning for Ethan's first day of Grade 2.

For Ethan, it was a first day of school markedly different than what awaited him as he began Grade 1 last fall.

It was an orientation day for elementary school students and parents alike across York Region as they re-learned the ropes to safely re-enter school in this present 'new normal.' It was a day filled with questions, some of which were unthinkable this time last year, but they are necessary as the community comes to grips with COVID-19 and the stark realities that come with it.

Parents did not simply walk their children to school or put them on a bus for a day of learning. Instead, it was a family affair as they learned new procedures, protocols, health screenings and hygiene measures necessary to allow in-class learning to continue in a safe manner.

But the numbers of new cases of COVID-19 across York Region and Ontario are on the rise and this, according to parents, will be a contributing factor in just how long they keep their little ones at school with their friends.

'Going forward, my biggest thing is to watch for cases in the community,' said Ms. Galaski as she and Ethan waited for orientation to begin. 'If the community stays low like it is now, I feel comfortable with him going. If that changes, then I will change my answer. That is a big thing. If I felt uncomfortable with the cases in the community or outbreaks happening at this particular school, then I will pull him out.'

Numbers were also a big factor for Natalia Marino, who has also enrolled her son Leo at St. Joseph.

While Leo told The Auroran he was excited to get back to school and meet new friends, his mother said she knew being back in the classroom would be a positive experience for her son 'and she will be monitoring not only numbers, but feedback she gets from her son on the procedures that have been put in place.

'I know it is going to be a positive experience with really great teachers,' she said. 'We're happy to be here for orientation and we're really looking forward to them being with their friends in the classroom. There is nothing like real-life problem solving. There is nothing like learning how to share and learning to take turns. You can't do that in a different space. That is our biggest piece and that is what we're going to stick to until we are told differently.'

Ms. Marino said while she appreciated the online classroom experience was new for teachers, she found that some of the procedures carried out between March and April were 'lacking.'

'Understandably, it was all the teachers' first times and everybody is learning, but Leo is an only child and we don't have that socialization and that piece is extremely important,' she said.

Ms. Galaski said she too also found gaps in the online learning process, particularly when it comes to French Immersion programming, which is a staple at St. Joseph.

'There are two major reasons why we decided to enrol Ethan,' said Ms. Galaski. 'One of them was for work; my husband and I are both working and our jobs need us to be there at least part of the time, although we do have some flexibility. The other big reason was French immersion. At St. Joseph, he goes to French Immersion and I feel like the first two years are fundamental in their ability to pick up a language. Having him online, I just felt was going to be a wash and we were going to have to put him into English school.'

'To be honest, I didn't feel like the online learning was ready. If it was almost ready for French immersion, which they haven't answered, really, I do suspect they will put the French immersion kids with the English schools and that will impact their ability to pick up French. His teacher would send home a couple of spreadsheets that were in French but fundamentally we were the ones teaching him French and we don't think we're capable enough to teach him French!'

Donovan Baugh's daughter, Marielle, is enrolled in French immersion at Lester B. Pearson Public School and, with another daughter, Sidoni, at Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary, and a son William just entering Grade 2 at Hartman Public School, the back-to-school season is a busy one for their family.

After dropping William off at Hartman, Mr. Baugh said he and his wife were 'a little apprehensive' in doing so as cases of COVID-19 continue to rise, but as it is not a 'sharp climb' they are closely watching for any changes.

'If we get a call later today that something spiked or there is something at a school nearby, we'll come back and get our son,' he said. 'For now, we think the schools are taking appropriate measures, especially Hartman, to keep them safe. Even the way they are setting up the school, not having all of the kids in at once, I think is wise. We'll monitor our child later to see if there is anything going on and we have that through the weekend, which is smart also.'

'We feel there are enough measures being taken for us to feel a little comfortable, but let's be honest: we know now it is flu season coming up so it is going to be very hard to determine what is going on, but it is a cautious approach. We're down the street, we're in the neighbourhood, so if there is anything or an inkling of something we will come and pick up our son.'

Nevertheless, they are 'cautiously optimistic' about the start of school and having gone through COVID at the end of the 2019-2020 school year has given them a sense of what the online alternative is and what needs to be done.

'We're already used to that from last year, so I don't think it is much of a stretch,' he said. 'We're local but I can't imagine parents who are coming from further away and what that is like. They probably have a bit more apprehension.'

**By Brock Weir**