

Havenwood Academy celebrates providing ?paths for every learner?



A first word is always the cause for celebration, but when a non-verbal student makes an important breakthrough, it can mean so much more.

Such was the case for the teachers, instructors, and students who are part of the Havenwood Academy community, a new neurodiverse-affirming school on Edward Street dedicated to creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment ?where every student is known, valued, and empowered to thrive.?

Havenwood, which now occupies the former location of Lighthouse Learning Development Centre, has become a close-knit community since its inception just eight months ago.

It was an inception born out of necessity after Lighthouse moved to York Region's southern tier, leaving local families to look for more local learning opportunities for their children and young adults.

?We had a little parent gathering and asked if this was something you'd want to bring your kids to, about 10 parents said yes, so we opened our doors,? says Angela Caporiccio, Havenwood's Co-Founder and Director of Education, of the Lighthouse families that came together to keep this kind of specialized education available locally. ?It sort of happened out of necessity because, unfortunately, the school system in our Province has a hard time supporting these learners, so we thought, let's create our own version.

?I've been in York Region for many years in special education, teaching in the autism classes in the Public Board and I thought, okay, now it's time to do it for my kid and his community, so that's what we ended up doing.?

Havenwood prides itself on its ?holistic? approach to education and helping students ?build confidence, communication, independence, and meaningful connections within their community.?

?There is actually no other school in Aurora that offers a secondary program,? says Caporiccio. ?We have a secondary program where kids who want to earn a high school diploma can come to us and earn a high school diploma with the proper supports that an autistic learner might need. Right now there's nothing like that as far as I know in York Region and that's a huge hole that's being filled here.

?We approach things [through] a holistic lens where we have everything that you might expect in a regular high school where there's assemblies and a music class, a gym class ? all of those things are happening within this building, which doesn't always happen in autism schools, but then is supplemented by therapy. I think the big difference is there's a lot of therapy centres that do education, but we're really a school first. We're a school that is supplemented by all the different therapies that an autistic person might need to

be successful in school, and the education is very individualized.

?There is a saying in autism that if you ever met a person with autism you've met one person with autism, meaning that their needs and the way they learn, the way they communicate are very different, even from each other. Their education has to match that. Each kid who comes here has an individual education plan that's catered to their specific interests, their strengths, their challenges, and building their capacity.?

Havenwood held an end-of-year celebration for the community on Saturday. While it marked the end of the academic year, the Academy had been in operation just eight weeks at that point.

Asked how they will measure success at the end of their first full year of operation, Caporiccio says their measures of success might look a little different from the conventional school.

?It's not about EQAO tests, grade scores, or how many kids are going to post-secondary,? she says. ?All of those things are great measures of success, but for our kids, I think their emotional and social wellbeing is paramount for us. The world is a difficult place sometimes for students who are autistic and that's sort of why we chose ?Havenwood' because we want this to be a safe haven for them, a place where they can be met where they are because, in our mind, that's the only way learning can happen.

?We often say ?progress over perfection.' If that's one kid learning how to tie a shoe or another who gets an A on their physics test, they're all equally as successful to us. We have one [teen] student who has been with us for the eight weeks who is a non-speaking individual who said his first three words in the last three weeks so, for us, that's a success, and it was a really beautiful moment for us all when he came into his own wanting to express himself and it came out really naturally ? and I think that's because he was feeling safe and supported.?

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