

Learning experience

Hearing set over special education placement battle

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Ottawa Sun

Ottawa's public school board is ignoring its own experts by refusing to keep an 11-year-old girl in special education classes, her mother charges.

Wendy Dehler fought for four years to have her daughter Steccia placed in a Language and Learning Disabilities (LLD) class, finally getting her a spot in Grade 5 at Hilson Avenue Public School.

But after two "tremendous" years of progress, Dehler has learned that the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board doesn't offer LLD classes beyond Grade 6.

It wants to send Steccia to regular classes at another school for Grade 7 in September — even though board experts assessed Steccia and recommended she be placed in a special education class.

So Dehler's bracing for another fight.

Difficulty spelling

Though Steccia would get some in-class assistance from an educational assistant, Dehler said it's been tried before and doesn't work. Despite having in-class help for four years, Steccia began Grade 5 still having difficulty spelling her own name.

"The children were realizing there was something different," Dehler said. "It was starting to affect her self-esteem."

And bullying became a problem.

Once at Hilson things changed.

"Mum, there's kids just like me," she told Dehler.

"It was like a whole new child," Dehler said. "She's made tremendous progress."

Steccia has a hard time reading, understanding oral instructions and doesn't fare well at math. Dehler is afraid Steccia's dramatic improvements will stop if she's put back into regular classes.

Ottawa lawyer Monica Song is representing Steccia, fighting for a "stay of placement," which is supposed to ensure the status quo is maintained for students in cases of placement disputes between parents and school boards.

Dehler wants Steccia to remain at Hilson in her Grade 6 classroom pending a resolution, but with Grade 7 course materials.

The stay of placement should be automatic, Song said.

Placing her in regular classes "does not consist of a like placement," she said.

"We're not trying to break new ground here," Song added. "There are very clearly defined rules."

Song will represent Steccia at a Special Education Appeal Board hearing Sept. 9.

If the issue remains unresolved at the end of the hearing, an Ontario Special Education Tribunal hearing may be convened.

Song said the Dehlers would also accept an interim placement in a Learning Disability (LD) classroom.

Board experts tested Steccia in November and December. Her educational assessment report said she worked "conscientiously, putting forth her best effort" during testing.

It recommended an application to a Grade 7 LD class.

Her speech and language assessment report came to the same conclusion, saying Steccia "continues to benefit from intensive intervention and (a) small classroom environment."

"Many gains have been noted in the past two years that Steccia has been in the class and she has benefited greatly from intensive support."

The board says experts are but one facet of the Identification, Placement and Review Committee process that's initially used to place so-called "exceptional" children.

Executive Supt. Barrie Hammond said placement is determined "based on a review of the child's needs... and the ability of the board to provide for those needs."

The school board is one of few to even offer an LLD program, he said.

"We've found that the program is successful enough that (students) can usually continue in Grade 7 with only basic support," Hammond said. "If they still need support... we provide it, to the extent that we can."

"We're not trying to break new ground here ... there are very clearly defined rules."

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DARREN BROWN/OTTAWA SUN

Steccia, 11, and her mother Wendy Dehler are frustrated the Ottawa Carleton District School Board wants to put the young student back in a regular classroom in September.