

Shelburne students share outlook returning to school during first day back

By Paula Brown

Summer is out, and school is back in session.

Students from grades 9 to 12 gathered outside of Centre Dufferin District High School (CDDHS) on Tuesday (Sept. 7) morning as they awaited the official start of another school year.

“It was really nice to have students back with us in-person,” said Adam Rowden, Principal of the local high school. “There’s a lot of energy and excitement, and all kinds of hope and optimism that comes with the start of a new school year.”

For students and teachers, Tuesday didn’t just mark the first day of school, but also the return to learning in the classroom.

“Our staff, I can see the smiles on their faces because they get to see and interact with students,” said Rowden. “Our staff went into the teaching profession because they want to work with students and help students. We’re going to do that in whatever circumstance we find ourselves, but being able to see students, talk to them, get feedback from students who are right there in front of you is something that all our staff are looking forward to doing again.”

This year marks the third school year affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, but the difference entering the 2021/22 school year can already be seen.

Where an assembly line of COVID-19 protocols and safety measures were once set up, students wearing masks now freely walk up to the school, sanitize their hands, and make their way to class. While the hallways are still one way, students can now stop at an assigned locker, at lunch time they can eat in the cafeteria, which was closed last year, and the school is waiting on guidance to bring back sports.

“The school year is feeling more like it used to. I think for our senior students in Grade 11 and Grade 12, it will feel a little bit more like they may have experienced in their Grade 9 and 10 years. It should feel a little bit more normal,” said Rowden.

Despite returning for the start of another school year out of online learning, when students were asked by the Free Press about how they feel returning, many expressed anxiety about the year ahead.

Two Grade 11 students at CDDHS, Keylisa Lewis and Jaden Leid told the Free Press they are nervous about the in-class curriculum after experiencing online learning.

“It’s mostly the subject I’m scared about. The whole COVID thing happened in Grade 9 for me, so I never really had that full high school experience, so we still don’t know what to expect, it feels like we’re starting all over again,” said Leid.

“Grade 11, that’s when your marks start to count the most for university and college and that’s really terrifying to me,” said Lewis.

While happy to be back at school in person, Grade 9 students Hiba Manga and Daylin Parker both said they’re still concerned about schools shutting down.

“I’m happy I don’t have to stay at home all day, at least I can be more productive at school and to see my friends, but I’m nervous about the school shutting down again. It’s scary because you don’t get to learn properly with remote learning, it’s not the same,” said Manga.

Rickey Spence, a Grade 12 student at the local high school, is currently doing a victory lap before heading off to post-secondary and

said the struggle with online learning last year was why he chose to take another year of high school.

While students expressed concerns directly related to school, many said they felt comfortable with the changing protocols.

"We've been in this for almost two years now so I feel like we know what to expect now, and most people just adjust," said Spence.

When asked about preparing for the current school year compared to last year, Principal Rowden said lots has been learned since the start of the pandemic.

"We learned a lot last year from having students in the building, the biggest is being flexible and responding to changing dynamics. The COVID-19 situation is always changing so we need to adapt and we'll get through this together in a positive way."