

Autism funding fight turns to the schools

By Brock Weir

This past summer, the Provincial Government reversed its decision to remove children over the age of five from receiving Intensive Behavioural Intervention (IBI) therapy past the age of five, but with that battle won for now, Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones says attention now needs to focus on the schools.

Last week, Shelburne's representative at Queen's Park visited a Toronto school with Progressive Conservative leader Patrick Brown to discuss cuts to services for kids living on the autism spectrum. She tells the Shelburne Free Press that although the Government's reversal shows that when they "highlight specific issues" they can achieve results, but the battle is far from over.

"Autism is a life-long challenge that parents and families and the individuals impacted have to deal with," says Ms. Jones. "We want to make sure the supports are in place all the way through. There is obviously the need within our school system. If children are going to be integrated into the classrooms, which they absolutely have the right to do and be there, we need to make sure the supports are in place like the educational assistants so they can succeed in school."

Ensuring educational assistants (EAs) in schools are trained in teaching kids on the autism spectrum is a "major" component of ensuring this success, she said, but not just for autism. There is a need for proper educational assistants for children with disabilities across the board and ensuring they are equipped for the next steps in life.

"If you have a disability, you can stay in the school model until the age of 21," says Ms. Jones. "What is happening is, at 21, there are not enough supports out there in the community and not enough options, whether that is transitioning into volunteer, paid or part-time work, or opportunities for enrichment. You have children who have basically gone from a structured day of seven hours in the school system to nothing."

"Kids regress and people change because they don't have the sociability and they don't keep all of the skills up."

The solution, she says, lies not in ensuring that funding is in place to keep those impacted in the school system, beyond the age of 21, rather it is "incumbent" on those at Queen's Park to facilitate a "transition as seamless as possible" for them to get back in the community.

"That model can be a lot of different things. It can be group homes, it can be day programs for places like Kerry's Place, but there are all kinds of models that have been successful, there just aren't enough of them," says Ms. Jones. "We have to make sure that it is in place as well."

"Now what parents are tracking and raising with me is, some are saying 'I haven't got the money I was promised, my children qualify, but I haven't received it.' The other is this transition. If you are a parent of a young child who is going into the school system there are a lot of question of, 'Are there EAs who are trained in autism? Is my child actually going to have an EA that can help them succeed and thrive in the school system? It really truly does change as the child ages. To put it bluntly, the government has broken trust with these families so now there is an undercurrent of fear and distrust. What they are saying is, 'What is really going to be available for my son or daughter?'"