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This Toronto mom is afraid to send her autistic child to kindergarten. Inside the unfolding crisis of special education in Ontario schools

As students head back to school, educators and parents warn that a lack of support isn't just failing kids who need it, but entire classrooms.

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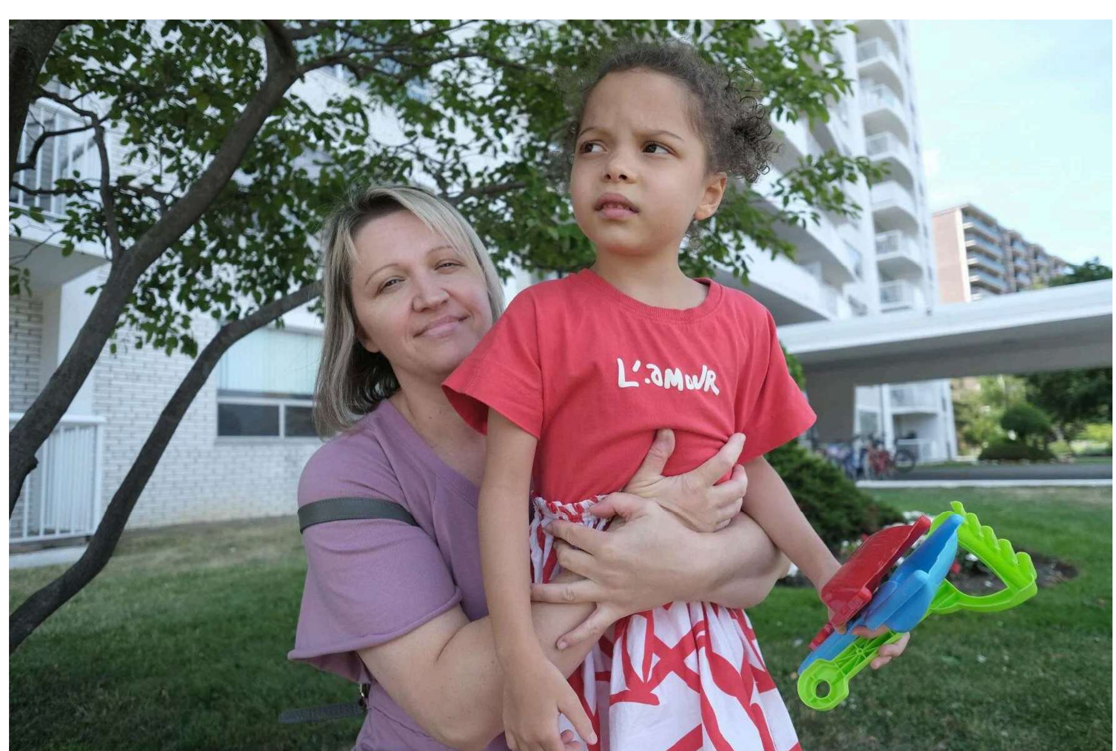

Yelena Vaiman and her daughter Milana, 5. Milana is autistic, non-verbal and has significant developmental delays, and it's been very hard for Yelena to figure out what to do for kindergarten in September.

R.J. Johnston/Toronto Star

By Isabel Teotonio Education Reporter

Months ago, Yelena Vaiman began preparing for her daughter's entry into kindergarten this fall. She knew it wouldn't be simple, but didn't expect "unnecessary roadblocks" that left her feeling "trapped in a bureaucratic maze."

Five-year-old Milana is autistic with significant developmental delays. She's non-verbal, and doesn't respond to her name or understand danger. At home, adults watch her closely — otherwise she may wander, chew paper, eat soil or throw toys at her younger sister.

“We always have to be on guard to make sure she’s not hurting someone,” says the North York mom.

After registration at the local public school, Vaiman told administrators her daughter requires constant supervision. Instead, she says, they enrolled her in a regular mainstream classroom without sufficient support.

It was the beginning of a months-long struggle for a special education placement, one that many Ontario families face as schools strain to support students with different disabilities.

Vaiman explored multiple options — from schools with autism supports to specialized kindergarten classes — but they weren’t available for Milana. Despite reassurances from the board, she remained concerned and escalated her efforts, contacting trustees, board officials, the ombudsman, even the Ministry of Education, with no resolution.

“A regular classroom is dangerous, for her and also for others,” says the mom. “I cannot take this kind of risk.”

Their story is part of a broader crisis unfolding in Ontario schools — one that affects students with special needs, their classmates and teachers, too. Parents and advocates say the problem isn’t the presence of kids with special needs in mainstream classes, it’s the lack of support.

As students head back to school, educators and parents warn that a lack of support isn’t just failing kids who need it, but entire classrooms. At the heart of this is a complex question: How do we best support students with high needs in a system that often lacks staffing, funding and resources?

The issue has divided parents of kids with special needs. Some prefer their children to be in smaller specialized classes with trained staff. Others favour inclusion in a regular mainstream class — a growing practice by school boards since about 2000 — though system-wide challenges can mean inadequate support.

Meanwhile, parents of children — with and without special needs — say all kids are affected when mainstream classes turn chaotic because students aren’t properly supported, which can result in behaviour issues and, at times, safety concerns. There may be lessons disrupted, kids lashing out violently, classrooms evacuated and teachers stretched to the limit.

All of this is playing out against a backdrop of rising school violence, with students of all kinds acting out for a range of reasons, and a cohort of children still recovering from the pandemic, both emotionally and academically.

This isn’t about students with disabilities being violent people — that’s a harmful stereotype, says David Lepofsky, chair of the Toronto District School Board’s Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC), made up of members from organizations that represent parents of children with disabilities or special education needs.

“It’s unfair and wrong to mislabel it as ‘inclusion’ for a student with disabilities to be assigned to a class without the educational supports they need,” he says. “When any students with disabilities are not having their learning needs met, this hurts them, their classmates, the teaching staff, their families and our society.”

“Wherever you are for your child’s needs — inclusion, special class, some combination of the two — the current system is horribly broken and is underserving tons of kids. That’s not just Toronto, that’s across the province.”

Nicole Sullivan gives her son Kai a foot zerbert. Sullivan and her husband Jamie recently faced a tough decision: Keep their non-verbal, autistic son at his local school for Grade 1, which means no guaranteed support. Or move him to a specialized program.

Steve Russell/Toronto Star

‘You feel that you’re a burden’

Terms like special needs, disabilities and special education are often used interchangeably, but they don’t mean the same thing. Special needs is a broad term used informally to describe any need that isn’t typical, including physical, mental or learning challenges. Disability as defined by the Ontario Human Rights Code — it protects students from discrimination and ensures they receive accommodations — broadly covers all physical, sensory, mental health, learning and developmental conditions.

And special education refers to programs and services that support students with a range of learning needs, diagnosed or not. A student has an “exceptionality” if their needs fall into one of five categories: behavioural (includes difficulty getting along with others); communicational (includes autism and speech impairments); intellectual (ranges from giftedness, to mild or developmental disabilities); physical (includes physical disabilities and blindness); and multiple (more than one exceptionality).

Advocates, however, say the categories are dated because they don’t include all disabilities that human rights law protects, excluding students with conditions like ADHD and mental health issues that fall short of behavioural problems. And while special education is often associated with some disabilities, it also includes students who are gifted, many of whom have no disability.

A report by the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, published in the spring, shows years of funding cuts and policy changes have left boards unable to provide adequate supports. It notes that as special education needs grow in number and complexity, resources and services have declined; teachers in specialized and mainstream classes feel overwhelmed; and the shift toward inclusion and closure of programs has reduced classroom support, increasing burnout and behavioural issues.

At the TDSB, roughly 41,000 of its 238,000 students have special needs; about 75 per cent are in regular mainstream classrooms, while the remaining 25 per cent are in specialized settings.

Deciding which placement is best can be a challenge. Nicole Sullivan and her husband recently faced a tough call: keep Kai, their non-verbal autistic son, at his local school for Grade 1, or move him to a specialized program.

Kai is happy at his school. But in kindergarten, his class had a teacher and a designated early childhood educator. In Grade 1, there is just one teacher.

That's a concern because he's a runner. Last year, Kai slipped out of the school library just as his class arrived. He ran out a door, through the yard and across the street, with a panicked teacher chasing after. He was unharmed, but the incident underscored how vulnerable he is without proper supervision.

In June, the TDSB offered Kai a spot for this year in a "mild intellectual disability" program at another school with a fenced yard. But his parents worried it might limit future inclusion and set him on a track with fewer educational opportunities. They ended up declining, saying the system demands critical choices of parents without enough information in a short amount of time. This fall, Kai will be back at his local school, though his parents may bring him home for lunch each day to ease safety concerns about him running or wandering off.

"You feel that with a special needs kid, that you're a burden," says Sullivan.

Nora Green, who represents Inclusion Action in Ontario on SEAC, opposes a "segregated" model, saying it's key that students with special needs are supported at their local school. They're more likely to build connections with people in the neighbourhood — and that "dramatically changes people's lives."

Plus they learn from their peers, says Green, a retired special education teacher. She recalls a field trip to a grocery store where a mom, who volunteered to help, broke down in tears because her son had never behaved so well — he was copying classmates walking in a line.

Nora Schramek moved her daughter out of her school because of the many class disruptions by students with special education needs. Schramek supports inclusive learning environments, but says there needs to be more funds invested to adequately support students with special education needs.

Andrew Francis Wallace/Toronto Star

A shift toward inclusion

Research shows inclusion benefits students with special needs, and when supported with proper training and resources, they often make greater academic progress, compared with those in separate settings. Their peers can also benefit from teaching strategies that promote empathy, acceptance and collaboration.

The TDSB is currently reviewing the effectiveness of its special education programs to see how well students are doing. At a board meeting in June, when TDSB staff proposed increasing the size of two different types of special education classes, Trustee Michelle Aarts criticized the "segregation" of students with special needs, especially racialized boys and low-income kids who are disproportionately represented. She noted students in contained specialized classes have lower graduation rates, do worse on standardized provincial tests, and the vast majority never return to an inclusive setting.

Leo Lagnado, who represents Autism Ontario on SEAC, says both mainstream and specialized classrooms have value, but what matters most is ensuring the right supports. For some students, "smaller specialized classes are actually the only places that they feel comfortable."

He notes that research shows some kids thrive in specialized settings, with trained educators, predictable routines and sensory-friendly environments — and that forcing students into the mainstream can induce stress, anxiety and trauma.

Often, students are included in theory, but isolated in practice. He recalls hearing about an autistic boy, whose teacher didn't know how to manage his behaviour so he sat in the back reading books about cats. "No one would talk to him, no one would include him, he learned absolutely nothing, but hey, he was included because he was sitting there."

Lagnado believes boards are shifting toward inclusion mainly to save money, not because it's best for students. In boards where intensive support programs have been cut, he says more kids are refusing to go to school. Others are being excluded, with principals asking parents to keep them home due to inadequate supports, or to pick them up early when they act out.

John Weatherup, president of the Toronto Education Workers CUPE Local 4400, which represents support staff at the city's public schools, says boards often delay formal assessments until Grade 1, fearing early labels — a decision he argues ignores where the need is greatest.

"If you catch these issues early then it's less problematic in the later years. If you don't catch it early, then it becomes a problem you won't be able to solve," says Weatherup, adding members say it's particularly tough getting additional support in kindergarten.

He says as more students with needs are integrated into classrooms without the resources, reports from members of classroom evacuations are becoming more common. This is when students are temporarily removed for safety reasons, often because a child is in crisis and acting in a way that could hurt themselves or others. Rather than removing that student, staff may escort the rest of the students out to de-escalate the situation.

Nora Schramek grew desperate for change after her daughter Marilu's kindergarten class became increasingly chaotic, with a few special needs students frequently acting out.

The longtime parent volunteer loved the school community, but felt she had to leave when Marilu started coming home with daily headaches from the constant classroom noise. It got so bad, Marilu would wear noise-cancelling headphones in class — typically used for students with sensory issues, which she doesn't have.

Schramek wrote to TDSB officials, urging them to find more support staff for the class. When nothing changed, she moved her daughter to another school in March 2025.

Similarly, Amanda Pires was concerned about her daughter's Grade 2 class last year, which was routinely disrupted by a boy, whose violent outbursts led to classroom evacuations and kids getting hurt. Early on, Pires pushed for more support — administrators won't disclose if a student has special needs for privacy reasons, but Pires said it was evident the boy needed support.

In December, her advocacy ramped up after the boy pushed her daughter Leah to the ground, punched her in the back and pulled her hair during gym class. Days later, he slapped Leah in class.

Pires says she heard from other parents, whose children were in the boy's classroom last year, that there were similar safety concerns then. In both cases, the board responded only after parent complaints, and only with temporary support. "It's a short-term Band-Aid solution," says Pires, noting once the support is pulled, problems return.

As the school waited for temporary support for the boy, the principal moved Leah to another Grade 2 class. Even after the move, Pires kept writing to board and ministry officials pushing for change, saying that for classrooms to be truly inclusive, consistent and dedicated support is needed.

The TDSB said in a statement it is "committed to providing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students," and that if any parents or guardians have concerns about classroom placement for their child, "there is an appeal process to have the decision reconsidered." The board added it is not able to comment on specific cases due to privacy.

Amanda Pires says her daughter's Grade 2 class last year was routinely disrupted by a boy, whose violent outbursts led to classroom evacuations and kids getting hurt. She advocated for more classroom support.

Richard Lautens/Toronto Star

Special education funding shortfall

This summer, Lepofsky, chair of SEAC, wrote to the education minister and the provincial supervisor overseeing the TDSB — one of a few boards under provincial control — urging them to better meet students' needs. While more funding is needed, he said, money alone won't solve the problems. The system must also become easier for parents to navigate because the different placement options, categories and jargon makes it hard to figure out what services and programs exist, how to advocate for their child, where to go when needs aren't being met, and how to secure the necessary learning supports.

According to the Ontario Public School Boards' Association, 71 of the province's 72 boards last year spent more on special education than they received — a shortfall of more than $800 million. Toronto's public board alone overspent by $38.5 million.

"This is not sustainable, and it should be addressed as a priority by the provincial government," says Kathleen Woodcock, president of the association, which is calling on the province to work with boards to ensure all students have access to the supports they need.

For the 2025-26 school year, the province expects to spend $3.85 billion on special education — a 31 per cent increase since 2018, says a spokesperson for Education Minister Paul Calandra, noting 10,000 education staff, including more than 4,000 education assistants, have been added to support students.

Back in North York, Vaiman remains concerned about her autistic daughter's placement for kindergarten. Milana just wrapped up an Ontario Autism Program initiative that helps autistic children transition to school for the first time. However, she won't be starting anytime soon.

Vaiman refuses to put her daughter in a mainstream class at the local school, saying it's not a good fit. The board told her Milana must first be enrolled at the local school before she can be considered for a specialized program — but the mom worries the process will take too long.

So Milana will stay at home, with her stay-at-home mom who relies on support from her parents.

"It'll be exhausting," says Vaiman, who may try home-schooling. But she adds, Milana "cannot thrive in a regular classroom … I am not looking just to get rid of her and put her somewhere she shouldn't be … She can't speak, but she can feel."

Isabel Teotonio is a Toronto-based reporter covering education for the Star. Follow her on Twitter: **@Izzy74**.

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