

School board's special education program touted

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Rainy River District School Board trustees heard a presentation from special education administrator Char Bliss during their regular monthly meeting here last Tuesday night.

The board's special education department serves about 650 students, making up roughly 24 percent of the student population, which demonstrates the need for high-quality support.

"The purpose of special education for our board is to give kids the supports and whatever they need to be successful in their pathway," Bliss said.

When students first come to school, the board works with the "Best Start" Hub, the Fort Frances Nursery School, and other child services that kids attend before coming into kindergarten and will hold transition meetings to assist them.

"For kids that have higher needs, often they are already working with the Ministry of Youth and Children Services," Bliss explained.

"That means someone is already supporting the family and/or supporting the child so we work . . . with the agency to help this transition into kindergarten be hopefully a smooth one."

Bliss stressed that in kindergarten and students' primary years, they need to have extra supports in place, such as sensory manipulative in the classroom, to help them succeed.

"We know when kids come in, they're as young as age three and they're often going from where they're napping during

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—Char Bliss

the day, having snacks whenever, having play time whenever, to having a little more routine," Bliss noted.

"They're having to follow a schedule they're not use to."

Individual Education Plans are given to students with special needs who require extra accommodations outside of what the regular classroom teacher and/or educational assistant can provide.

These plans outline the supports the school team will provide and encourages a team approach consisting of the student, parents, staff, and agency to help promote success for that student.

They are individualized plans directly tied to the student's needs and strengthens, and indicates how the student will meet their goals throughout the school year.

The special education department uses a tiered approach to serving students with special needs, which features three different levels.

Tier one is the supports that are provided within the classroom. These are provided by

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the teacher or educational assistant, and might look like a quiet setting, more frequent breaks, or specialized classroom teaching strategies to help support students.

Tier two is when the classroom teacher requires support, which may involve working with a special education resource teacher.

"It might mean bringing in an autism support worker or it just might mean that the teacher has tried all the strategies, all the tools that they have, and still need some more support helping that student," Bliss explained.

Tier three is when the safety of the classroom becomes an issue and these students may be put on a safety plan to negate risks.

As well, a behavioural therapist likely would be brought in.

These safety plans are meant to support students who pose a risk of injury to themselves, other students, and staff.

"We spend a lot of time training staff on how to de-escalate situations," Bliss stressed. "We don't ever want a hands-on approach when working with students."

Staff are trained in non-violent crisis intervention training, which is designed to limit physical contact between staff and students.

Bliss also touched on the "Secret Agent Society" program, which is designed to help students in the Grade 3/4/5 class at Mine Centre School develop positive social and friendship skills.

The class was chosen because it is a prime age for the social-emotional and self-regulation skills the program teaches.

So far, staff have given feedback indicating a noticeable difference in how student are able to successfully use strategies developed through the program, Bliss said.

"The kids love the program," she enthused. "It really targets how to build friendship skills, and it also targets those social skills and allows for positive

peer interactions."

As well, Bliss outlined several of the partnerships the local public board currently part of to assist students with special needs.

Most recently, the board formed a partnership with the Kenora-Rainy River Child and Family Services so there now are counsellors scheduled into the board's schools on regular days.

Students can schedule appointments or use them as a drop-in service if they need to talk.

"Community partnerships is one of our strong areas when it comes to special education because we understand how important it is to work with our community partners in supporting students," Bliss remarked.

"Fort Frances Tribal Area Health and Service has been just awesome in supporting families that have students with special needs," she added.

FFTAHS has two case managers in the area to assist students and their families who require special education.

"They really support families and students—making sure they have the supports they need, and that extends outside of the school and into the home," Bliss said.

Bliss also highlighted a pilot project during her presentation that involves a partnership with Community Living Fort Frances and District and the RRDSB.

"We've worked with them to support transitions to post-secondary pathways for students with developmental disabilities," she noted.

"We're in our second year and this is where we are really trying to support making sure that students with intellectual or developmental disabilities have a purposeful pathway for when they leave high school," Bliss explained.

"So whether that's school, supported work, or unsupported work, we really want to make sure those students are supported and their families have the right supports in place."