

STORIES OF EXCLUSION

From Brick & Mortar to Online Learning

2021

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“The changes to DL schools will disproportionately affect students with disabilities and designations. Life is already difficult for us due to a societal system that doesn't care to be inclusive to all. Please don't take away the few educational options that we do have for our children.”

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EDITOR'S NOTE

All stories have been edited to remove any identifying information about families, districts and online learning schools. While this information was collected with every story, families were ensured that their identities would remain anonymous. In addition, district and online learning school information was removed in order to focus on the larger collective story being told and to avoid any suggestion that these stories are specific to any one region of the province.

As the terminology has recently changed with the passing of Bill 8, the reader will notice various acronyms representing online learning experience. These include Independent Distributed Learning (IDL) and Distributed Learning (DL). These have been left as written in the story submissions, with an understanding that the new terminology of “online learning” and “online learning schools” applies to each.

Readers can review the tables following the stories, which contain lists of the districts families departed, online learning schools they joined, and a tally of the diagnoses that were shared throughout (though there was no request for families to disclose any diagnosis in the story submission form, meaning all diagnoses shared were at the discretion and upon the initiative of the individual families).

INTRODUCTION

These stories of school exclusion are shared by BC parents and guardians of children with disabilities who have transitioned from brick and mortar school to online learning due to reasons of exclusion. They were collected as a special interest project by parent and education consultant, Jenn Scharf, as a way to make the experiences shared on social media more visible outside of parent support groups.

School exclusion comes in many forms, including:

- Denial of accurate information regarding student rights, policy, etc.
- Denial of access to school without documented incidents
- Lack of appropriate and/or necessary support
- Cutting support worker hours previously assigned to the child
- Being put on a reduced schedule
- The student not having regular support available
- Seclusion and/or restraint
- Relation, hostility or open aggression from school staff

Together, these 60 stories represent the very real experiences of families from districts¹ across the province and with disabilities ranging from autism to cerebral palsy to giftedness². Each story is both unique, yet sharing common threads.

Together, the stories portray the challenges of brick and mortar schools, and the successes of BC's online learning schools best known for serving disabled learners³.

¹ See Table 1 for a list of school districts identified in story submissions.

² See Table 2 for a list of disabilities shared in story submissions.

³ See Table 3 for a list of online learning schools cited in the stories.

STORY 1: My Son Was So Excited to Start School

My son was so excited to start school he literally ran to the first day of Kindergarten, but this excitement didn't last long. Our son has anxiety and is on the waitlist for an autism assessment. He is also gifted and has behavioral challenges, low frustration tolerance and sensory processing challenges.

Kindergarten was challenging but the nightmare didn't fully begin until Grade 1 when his teacher called him "not normal", he was not allowed to have recess with other kids, and he spent most of his time with an untrained EA. In addition, the school would not allow him to come for more than 3 hours a day and he often would be sent home sooner. A staff member from the school district said he should not come to school full time because it was affecting his mental health - and they put that on him/us and not their lack of support and their abusive seclusion tactics. He was not assisted with co-regulation and repeatedly put in a room that we were told was a "calm room" and later discovered it was a tiny cement closet with a small window. He became increasingly distressed and would not leave when we dropped him off at school. We thought it was just separation anxiety. We didn't realize it was because he was being psychologically abused.

EA's refused or just didn't use the sensory tools and plan we had provided as parents. He now has PTSD from the psychological mistreatment he experienced at public school. He also has very low self esteem and self worth. The school we were at dismissed our concerns about seclusion and refused to make changes that would help him. We left public school in March 2021 and moved to distributed learning. Since leaving public school he has excelled academically (he'll be skipping forward a grade in a few subjects) and is beginning (slowly) to get his confidence back. Our whole family has experienced immense trauma and hurt from the public school system and it will take time for us all to heal but I am thankful that we were able to move our son to distributed learning.

STORY 2: My Son Was Asked to Stay Home

My son was diagnosed with autism in Grade 4. Prior to Grade 4 he had struggled a bit in school with complying with demands but had consistently attended and completed all schoolwork. After diagnosis, the school tried implementing an ABA program even though we told them it wouldn't work due to his PDA profile. It failed and caused my son to become suicidal. He did not go to school for several months. In

Grade 5, he had a teacher who connected with his heart first and he attended the full year. However, despite having a district BCBA involved and a full time EA, the school was not able to find a way to get him to do schoolwork so he attended but did not participate in class. In Grade 6, he had a teacher who again tried ABA techniques. This again led to worsening mental health and school refusal. While the school always said they were open to new ideas, the principal used punishment as a tool regularly in the school and my son did not trust his intentions. My son was asked to stay home several times after very preventable meltdowns that school staff should have been trained to prevent. By Grade 6 (with the same principal since Grade 1), my son's school trauma was so profound that he had done no learning since Grade 3 (with the exception of the COVID shutdown when we as parents supported his learning at home). The school made many promises of doing things differently but would never follow through. We made the decision to move him to IDL for Grade 7 for greater flexibility in meeting his learning needs.

STORY 3: She Was Exhausted from Masking

My daughter was diagnosed with autism in late Grade 1. She received no support in Grade 1 beyond an IEP being written. In Grade 2, she struggled with COVID fear but attended consistently until Christmas. After Christmas she refused to return to school. We eventually determined that she was exhausted from masking to try to meet the teacher's high expectations of being "typical" and of having no support in the classroom to meet these expectations. Prior to this teacher my daughter was the happiest child ever and did very well in Kindergarten and Grade 1. The teacher imposed unrealistic expectations around my daughter's return such as we would only be allowed to try to get her to go into the classroom for five minutes at the beginning of the day or after lunch. During none of those five minutes would the teacher help - she just started teaching the class and left my daughter to try to get the courage to enter on her own (parents were not allowed in the classroom due to COVID and there was no EA support). When my daughter was unable to meet these expectations and return as quickly as the teacher wanted, the teacher gave up trying. A BCBA from the district created a back to school plan but the steps did not take into account the importance of the relationship between my daughter and her teacher and the fact that my daughter did not feel safe with this teacher. Again no EA support was offered. We were unable to get my daughter back to school under these restrictions and decided to change to an IDL for Grade 3.

STORY 4: He Was Met at His Level

My son is entering Grade 5 in September. For the second year, he will be enrolled in a DL school. Our family had been discussing teaching him at home for some time and in fact brought it up with his public school in Grade 3. I suggested he go down to half days because of extreme school anxiety and that I teach him at home. This "threat" (which I didn't intend to be one) resulted in a team meeting where they told me this would be detrimental to my child's learning.

My child has ASD, as well as ADHD, developmental coordination disorder, Generalized Anxiety and learning disabilities in math and written expression. He is also extremely bright, curious, thoughtful and hilarious, and performs well above grade level in some areas. He is, in short, a square peg, and public school is not made for square pegs. It might strive to be inclusive, it might claim to be inclusive, but our lived experience tells a different story.

We began teaching him at home during COVID. My son had a one-on-one EA in his Grade 3 classroom 80% of the time, but from March to June of 2020, he received three 20-minute Zoom calls with his EA. This was not per week, but in total. Though he needed his work adapted or modified as part of his IEP, he did not receive any individualized learning. We understood the great stress on teachers and didn't ask for any, instead we opted out of the class assignments and purchased a curriculum that would meet him at his level. I reduced my hours of work and transitioned to working at home, and I taught him. My son, who could not spell a single three letter word, moved up two grade levels in three months. His math skills improved, as did his confidence. Most importantly, though, the daily meltdowns that occurred at school, the need for a special drop off plan with the EA because of the screaming and crying that occurred when I left him, disappeared. We had received a prescription for anti-anxiety medication to start him on during spring break. We did not give him any. Instead, though the world presented us with so much more reason to be anxious, my son was thriving, learning and calm.

There are 16 DLs in the province that are organized to support SE students with a unique funding model, allowing families to earmark funding to directly support IEP goals. Last September we enrolled in one of these schools, and we used his funding for curriculum, for Occupational Therapy, and for EA support in the form of a four member small-group learning class of ASD students two mornings a week led by a BC certified teacher and an EA. My son, for the first time in his school life, was receiving support that fit his needs and his goals (evidenced by his first IEP review where the goals were noted as achieved!). Instead of twice yearly school OT visits, which resulted in written "plans" his classroom teachers were way too overburdened

to implement, he received frequent and direct support. At home, he learned from a curriculum that targeted his abilities. Instead of modifying Grade 4 math, we found a curriculum for students with dyscalculia and started at Grade 2. We did Orton Gilligham spelling programs, and again he jumped grade levels. We worked on printing and typing and instead of all school work being scribed, he became more independent in his writing. He was met at his level, and received support that was tailored to his individual needs - this, for the first time in his schooling career.

I was no longer asked to keep him home when his EA was sick. I no longer arrived at school pick-up to find him reading on a beanbag chair while the teacher taught a lesson to the rest of the students. I no longer arrived at pick-up to find that he was not in the classroom, but was wandering the halls and his teacher had no idea where he was. My son was no longer offered a "cheat sheet" of equations instead of manipulatives to assist with his math work. All of this happened at public school, multiple times.

The sixteen DLs with funding models to support neurodiverse students in this way work for families. There are extensive waiting lists for a reason. I know a number of DL students with parents who are teachers or EAs, parents who know exactly what public education offers and know that it is not a fit for their child. I was an EA for years, so I feel I can speak with some authority on this myself.

Please remember that our students are individuals. There is no one-size-fits-all education model. True inclusion isn't offering the same opportunities to all children, it is offering different opportunities tailored to each learner so that they all can be successful.

STORY 5: He Cried Every Day

The things that stood out as the most horrifying were:

- My child was not allowed to eat lunch with the other students in his class. He was instead taken to a separate room with children of varying cognitive abilities and disabilities. They called it "lunch bunch".
- Although I had advocated for a private 1:1, paid for on MY dollar, he was refused. I also actively sought greater in-school support and was instead told to "quit making mountains out of molehills". He was left to struggle, mostly alone.
- It took 18 months to get an IEP. The document was laughable.

He ended up being so miserable in the public school system that he couldn't even eat. He lost 6 lbs between the start of Kindergarten and Christmas of 2019. He cried every day, begging me not to leave him at school.

STORY 6: He is Safe and Supported

I have a child with autism, intellectual disability and two rare genetic disorders. In Alberta from Kindergarten to the beginning of Grade 1, my son was mentally and physically abused in the public school system. His EA in Kindergarten would demean him and forcibly grab his wrist, making it hurt. This school then told us that we would be a better fit elsewhere. They sent him to what was supposed to be a specialized classroom of just six children in Grade 1. On a tour of the school, before the first day of school, my son told the male teacher to shut up and go away. Before I knew it, this teacher grabbed the back of my son's shirt, and pushed him into a seclusion room, locking him inside. This was not a life or death situation, and nor was the teacher's physical self threatened in any way to cause such a reaction. I tried to open the door, crying, but it was locked and I screamed at the teacher to open it, to which he did. My son was traumatized. Keep in mind my son is also a medical kid so had trauma from doctors visits, and we had explained this to this teacher before the tour, that he was scared of males, so sometimes he will say shut up as a defence. We also made it clear we didn't want that room used, but this teacher did it anyway, forever wrecking all of our planning, and my son's inclusion in public school. My story was in the news, and we advocated against the use of seclusion rooms in Alberta because seclusion and restraint was being abused and misused and going underreported. The NDP government banned their use in Alberta, but unfortunately when the Conservatives took power they were reinstated.

We are in BC now, and are very happy with our DL. He is safe and supported. But I will never forget, and neither will he, the trauma that was caused to him, and our loss of inclusion in the school system. This is a problem all across Canada.

STORY 7: Our Son is Flourishing with Child-Led Learning

My son has ADHD. It's hereditary and we were watching for it and had paperwork and diagnosis ready before we even hit the public school system. In our son's first year, he spent more time with the secretary outside the principal's office than anywhere else because no one had "the resources" or "the time" to help him learn. He was told he was interrupting when he would suddenly realize he had to go to the

bathroom, and would end up wetting himself. Instead of listening to constant reprimanding, my son started hiding under furniture to escape. All this happened and I didn't even know it was going on. By Grade 1 my son learned the best way to coexist is to just keep your mouth shut and don't get in anyone's way. There are simply too many kids with too many issues, and with too much boring copy work for a little boy with ADHD to handle. So we pulled our son, spent our personal money to fill in the gaps, developed a more hands on and experiential learning program and he is THRIVING! He has learned to read, has gone up at least two grade levels in every subject and is making and building social relationships and getting the unstructured play time to round out his learning. Little boys need to move and run to learn. We have finally found a teacher at our DL/OL that gets the ADHD brain and experiential learning and our son is flourishing with child led learning. His ADHD allows him to hyperfocus on interest areas for long periods of time and dig in and excel. I love watching him actually learn. In his own words he has said "I didn't learn anything at school in two years. It was way too distracting and then the other kids would pick on me or leave me out because I was behind on the instructions". He also said "I miss playing with my friends at recess but I don't miss getting beaten up by the older kids". He was Grade 1; Grade 1 and getting beaten by the older kids - in a zero tolerance school system.

STORY 8: He is Healing

Kindergarten was a nightmare. My son got overwhelmed and would scream. The staff made a social story saying "Scream = Go Home". He was sent home almost daily and the counsellor also agreed with this plan.

Grade 1 was better. He was still sent home on occasion but the teacher was more accommodating and collaborative with me.

Grade 2 was when the absolute nightmare began. The staff did not want to listen to me and ignored my concerns. My child eventually fell through the cracks while I was screaming from the rooftops for a team wrap-around supportive approach. I was advocating hard to the district, and the district decided to cut his hours to one hour per day. This devastated my child. He refused to go and did not attend school after this. It's been nine months since my child has been in school. I can't even bring up school yet. He is healing. When he has healed more we will be doing DL as I cannot let my boy be excluded and traumatized again.

STORY 9: My Younger Son's Story is Important

I have three Autistic children: two boys, ages 12 and 16, and a girl, age 7. It took the pandemic and having their schools closed to open my eyes to how harmful the school environment was for them.

As a small child, my oldest son was full of joy. He was talkative, outgoing, and confident. Once he went to elementary school, it was like the joy was knocked out of him. He struggled with fitting in and was often punished for things that others did to him (like being late to class because he was tied up by his classmates). He shrank into himself and eventually stopped talking to people outside of the family. His teachers applauded this, saying that he was finally growing up. If you ask why I didn't do anything about this, it's because I didn't know at the time. He only told me after his autism diagnosis in December 2020.

Many of the incidents that were traumatizing for my son, were hidden from me. The schools didn't tell me, and my son was too ashamed to say anything. He was emotionally beaten down so he accepted blame for anything bad that happened to him. We moved and hoped that a different school would be better for him. It was better in the sense that he was no longer openly targeted, but not better in the sense that nobody saw the signs of distress that were brewing. Nobody noticed that he had crippling social anxiety, suicide ideation, and depression. Because we were a busy family with work, school, and activities, he was able to hide himself. But the schools where he spent most of his time, didn't notice him at all because his behaviour wasn't a distraction in class. They didn't notice his anxiety or depression. They remarked on wanting him to participate more in class and that was the only feedback we received.

During the pandemic shutdown in 2020, I was with my kids a lot more. I noticed things that bothered me that led to his eventual autism diagnosis. The doctors thought he had a classic case. He was my first child and I knew nothing about autism. But if he was such an obvious case, then why did no teacher notice anything? Because kids like him fade into the background. If your behaviour isn't disruptive to the class, then you don't get help for your child.

My son's diagnosis led me to have my other children assessed for autism. My 12 year old son has had obvious issues since he was a toddler. I repeatedly asked his preschool teachers whether or not his lack of speech was normal and they assured me it was... until he was 4. At the age of four, they admitted that he was behind, but

by then, only a year of speech therapy was available to us through public health. He was diagnosed with anxiety, selective mutism, and a speech delay. With three kids, we couldn't afford to continue with private speech therapy, so we asked his teachers to keep an eye on him and if there were concerns, we would try to find the funds for an SLP. His teachers continually assured us that he was fine.

My younger son is a gentle, happy child. His teachers have always loved his sweet demeanor. But they missed out on the fact that he is Autistic and has inattentive ADHD, dysgraphia, and slow processing speed. His report cards were good in the early years, but slowly began to slide after Grade 4. By Grade 6, I was getting calls from the school regularly that he was suffering from a severe migraine. He had stomach aches and crying spells. We took him to a neurologist for the migraines. We took him to the pediatrician because of his attention difficulties in school. He was being bullied. We asked his teachers for help, but because he was a "sweet" child, not much concern was shown for him. It was only after his brother was diagnosed, that the lightbulb went off and we learned that he was Autistic also.

We kept him at home during the pandemic because his physical manifestations of stress (migraines, stomach aches, and crying spells) had receded during the initial school shutdowns due to COVID-19. He joined his public school's gradual entry program that allowed for remote learning during the pandemic.

We hoped that his autism designation would bring extra support from his school. It did - to the tune of one hour per week with an EA. As I watched him struggle each day at home with the unmodified curriculum, my heart broke. I had to fight to get his workload modified and his curriculum modified. He was in Grade 7, but in a split 7/8 class and they were only sending him Grade 8 work. This was in spite of having missed a chunk of Grade 6 due to the school shutdowns. When they finally modified his workload, they essentially whittled it to nothing. He had a few activities in English and Math each week. He was bored, but they made no moves to include him in more of the activities. They were just trying to make me go away instead of actually meeting him where he was. I accepted it, but only because I was just buying time until we could put him into an independent DL in September.

It was near the end of the school year when we finally got the results of his psychoeducational assessment (that we paid for privately due to lack of access in school), when we understood the full scope of his learning difficulties (autism, ADHD, dysgraphia, slow processing speed, generalized anxiety disorder). Note that no teacher at any of his schools suggested a psychoeducational assessment at any time.

My younger son's story is important, because it shows that learning from home is not the magic bullet for kids with a designation. What I hoped would be a great experience ended badly because of the lack of support and understanding of his needs. In fact, I often felt shamed by the teacher for not doing enough to help him keep up with his classmates.

With the independent DL that he will be attending in September, he will have access to funding for therapies, like counselling, occupational therapy and speech therapy. He will have an educational assistant for many hours a week who can help him with his learning challenges. His teacher can tailor the curriculum to meet his unique needs. For us, distributed learning is not only about the ability to do school from home, it is about the ability to get adequate support for children with a designation and the flexibility to modify their curriculum as needed. I fear that the changes to the DL system will result in online schools being rigid with the curriculum, and result in support not being provided to families who need it. My nightmare is that we will be stripped of this support almost as soon as we have finally found a way to get it.

My 7 year old Autistic daughter was with a flexible DL during the pandemic. She is gifted, and we were able to modify her curriculum so that she would be challenged and not bored. Next year, she will have funding for an EA/BI to help with her social skills, and for an OT to help with her sensory sensitivities. When she was in regular school, she wouldn't have been able to do above Grade 3 and 4 math, or read Grade 5 books. She loved her DL experience this year.

Whoever makes these decisions regarding the changes to DL should realize that parents who choose DL for their children, do so because they recognize the unique needs of their child. These needs are unable to be met in a regular classroom setting or with a standardized curriculum even when delivered remotely. My younger son had a terrible time with remote learning without having a curriculum that met his needs and without extra support.

The changes to DL schools will disproportionately affect students with disabilities and designations. Life is already difficult for us due to a societal system that doesn't care to be inclusive to all. Please don't take away the few educational options that we do have for our children.

STORY 10: My Son Had Changed

Our school journey started off seemingly ok. We started off with the assumption that my son had ADHD as both my husband and I were diagnosed as young children. My

son was in a Kindergarten class with a great teacher and there was an EA already in the class to help keep track of him. His teacher advocated for him to have various visuals, was flexible and very patient. His teacher suggested we take breaks occasionally and I agreed as it was so hard for him. He would often be home one day a week and had to be dragged into school kicking and screaming except when there was a favorite activity that day. I had a 3-year-old at home so this worked for us as I was available to have him at home when his teacher said he needed a day off. His year ran relatively smooth, despite the refusals he was happy and progressing at his own pace. His teacher and I agreed he was nowhere near ready for Grade 1 so we started Kindergarten again the next September.

This next year there was a different teacher who asked for him because he was so "cute". I was hopeful that it would work as she made the decision but had observed her previously during pickups and dropoffs and noticed she seemed anxious when children were not behaving the way she expected. I explained the support he had been receiving and the ways his teacher had solved the problems she saw he had without much difficulty. This new teacher had a more "traditional" approach than his previous teacher and there was no EA. Halfway through September, we started suspecting he could be Autistic as his cousin was on the pathway to be assessed.

His teacher did not mention she was having troubles at first and my son is often situationally mute and has low expressive and receptive language skills so we remained unaware of any major problems. By December, my son had changed from his usually laid back but silly self. He fought every day as usual but not even a "fun" day was acceptable and his already sparse communication was regressing. At this point we were concerned and started counseling. Around then we also had the first parent teacher interview where his teacher told me she had been having regular issues with behaviour. He was making noises and not being able to do work without 1:1 help or reminders and disrupting the class. I told her I was also seeing behavior changes and reminded her I had specifically mentioned the assistance needed from the previous year in September. I mentioned that we were seeing a counselor and pediatrician to get an assessment for autism. We continued our weekly mental health days. It was not at a teacher's request this time but my choice. I couldn't have my son in a place that caused him so much stress and knew he needed a break but also wanted to give him an education - something I thought I couldn't provide.

The new year started and to my surprise my son would often be waiting for me in the office when I came to get him for counseling every week. I asked the principal, who was there with him that day, about it. She casually responded "Oh, it's his usual spot." I found out from her that my son had been sent from the class almost daily for making noises and was often sent to the office as he would get louder when being

shut out alone in the hall. I was shocked that I would not have been told as this had been happening for around five months by this time. The fact that it was the principal not his teacher telling me was particularly vexing. I asked his teacher if he had been sent out from class as I wanted her to have a chance to tell me without mentioning that I had been told. Unfortunately, she had the view that accommodating my son by explaining or helping him herself was not fair to the rest of the children and wouldn't apply the suggestions from his previous teacher for solving the issues. I reminded her it was not just my suggestion to help but I was given this advice by his counselor and that the noise issues he was being punished for were stress related.

I finally got my first team meeting of that school year around January to see if the support team could offer his teacher help. I had been asking his teacher for this meeting since September to no avail. At the meeting his teacher seemed confused by any suggestions and it was put forth that we work towards a category H designation to provide support in the future. The principal pulled me aside soon after and suggested that my son should be in a private school so he could get support. I told her we could never afford it and wondered if that is what she had done with her own "special needs" child she mentioned in the meeting. Soon after I was informed my son would no longer be receiving support from the SLP as he was too distracted and not participating.

COVID then closed schools and everything stopped. My son had regressed substantially due to anxiety and had lost half of the little he had learned his first year of Kindergarten. I knew I could not send him back and enrolled him in an IDL for this past year. We could not say the word school without a meltdown/anxiety attack for almost a year after schools were shut.

STORY 11: Her School Honestly Tried to Accommodate Her

My child was actually given 1:1 support without a diagnosis (though she has one now). I know this is not the case in most circumstances. Support workers occasionally were subbed out (if her regular EA was sick, etc), but she always has support. It was difficult for her whenever she had someone different try to work with her. She was still unsuccessful even with support because she couldn't handle the sensory overload in the classroom. She got almost no work done at school and spent time in the "calm down room" many of the days she was there. We switched to half days (at my request, not their suggestion) because the afternoons were just a no-go

for her. Worksheets were sent home most days and we would complete them in the afternoon when she would have been at school. The principal wanted to extend her to full days after the end of the first term, but the teacher and I both didn't feel she was ready (due to "negative behaviours" still occurring frequently, that it was just too much for her already). My secondary concern was getting any academic work done after a full school day (since she was already wasn't getting much done in the half day). I sent her into Kindergarten ahead academically, and she was in danger of falling behind after only one term. Her school honestly tried to accommodate her, but she needed a quieter environment with more individualized instruction than the school was able to provide in a group setting. A couple of years later, she is still unable to attend any group classes, as it is overwhelming for her. She is very successful with her current setup, learning from home. Her IDL school also provides access to therapies to help with her sensory struggles and an EA. We would be totally lost in a brick and mortar system or even a rigid DL system. Equal doesn't always mean the same.

STORY 12: He is Happy, Less Stressed

We were told in Grade 1 that our son was falling behind and was academically challenged. This didn't make sense, because he was memorizing books at age two and doing multiplication/division at 3 years old. So, I insisted that we would pay to have a Psych-Ed done for him. The school said this was impossible and could not be done until Grade 4. I insisted against their advice. My son was diagnosed as gifted with dyslexia/dysgraphia. For the next two years we tried to work with the school to provide the recommended accommodations, however they did not have the recommended resources available to assist him in the classroom. He was often left on his own with talk-to-text technology and not provided assistance or the recommended scribe. Even with the proper Psych-Ed the teachers continued to question if he was gifted. He was bullied by other children and came home full of anxiety and stress. When COVID hit, we joined a DL program. It was like my child returned to us, he began to laugh again. At first he hated learning in the DL program, but slowly he remembered how much he loved learning and began to become more confident again. He has thrived and is extending in all areas of learning. He is working on math two years above his grade with 80 percent mastery. He is happy, less stressed, free to be creative, more confident and has been wonderful to work with. He is still sometimes triggered emotionally by memories of things that happened at school. I have to remind him that here, he is okay and then he relaxes. When I speak with him about going back to a brick and mortar school, he immediately begins to cry and becomes severely stressed about the idea. We stumbled onto DL schooling and it has been a life changer for our son and family. We

are closer than ever and seeing him laugh and being more like a fun loving kid again has been incredible. Changing our program would be devastating to our son, I don't want to lose him again.

STORY 13: My Son Had Been Secluded

When my son began attending a BC brick and mortar school in Grade 2, he already had an autism, ADHD, and anxiety diagnosis, as well as a "watch for these learning disabilities" warning from his psych ed assessment. Throughout his time in the public school system I had to spend countless hours advocating for his rights in the school system by writing and reading emails to and from school staff, and providing educational material to staff only to have most of them not read it, let alone his IEP. I had school staff tell me to my face in front of him that my son was defiant, criticize my parenting, and tell him not to come to school with "that attitude!". My son had been secluded in a "calm down room" on numerous occasions, many of which I was not made aware of, and many resulting from a lack of understanding of my child and preventively supporting his invisible needs. He called this room the "mad up room" because it would only escalate his emotional state and dysregulation further. Then the child and youth worker would stand outside the room making notes about his observed "behaviours" while my child was essentially caged in the room! We pulled him from the school a few weeks before COVID. He has been so much more successful with his DL now that his nervous system is better supported and he is understood by those around him (who we get to choose) as a struggling child with invisible disabilities, rather than a child who is willfully trying to cause problems.

STORY 14: He Was Completely Ignored

My son, now 18, is four years behind his cohort despite bringing education struggles forward for six years, asking for a psychoeducational assessment for three years, and my child being admitted for suicide watch 18 months ago. He was completely ignored by the school district. I finally hired a private psychologist who diagnosed autism and a learning disability. The education system has completely failed my son.

STORY 15: These Were Heartbreaking Messages

My son struggles with dual diagnoses of giftedness and ADHD. In Grade 3, his teachers cornered me every day at pick up time to tell me how difficult it was to

teach my child. I was not offered any hope or solutions other than putting him on medication, which I wasn't comfortable with. There was on-going pressure from the teachers to put him on medication. He wasn't harming anyone with his behaviour, rather he would do things like read a national geographic at the back of the room when he was supposed to be doing a worksheet. For a gifted child with ADHD, I had thought these were appropriate ways for my child to cope and self stimulate when he could no longer sit still doing the worksheet, but to the teachers it was a major annoyance that he continually shifted to novel tasks as ADHD kids do and wasn't always doing what the other kids were. I was told directly he had, "the worst case of ADHD I've ever seen" and that, "he will never succeed in Grade 4." These were heartbreaking messages to hear every day from the people entrusted with his education. If they did not believe he could be successful in their program and I was constantly being told he wasn't learning, how could I leave him there?

He is now enrolled at a DL and thriving. He just finished Grade 9 and has completed his Canadian Ski Instructor Level 2, achieved a high level of American Sign Language Fluency through 3 years of study, all the while successfully completing his school courses in a more flexible way. He has moved ahead in math and science and been able to accommodate some of his written output challenges by using powerpoint and dragon speak in his DL program. His DL teachers were supportive of alternative ways of learning and he was not constantly put down for moving quickly between topics and needing frequent activity and breaks the way he was in brick and mortar schools. DL works for us because the program is individualized and self paced. If he was not able to register in a program where the learning philosophy matched his needs as a gifted/ADHD learner, he would not have the success he is having today. He was being crushed emotionally in public school and was developing a dislike for formal learning that I firmly believe we interrupted just in time, before it became entrenched, by pulling him out of the brick and mortar school environment. I am so grateful I had access to an alternative option with DL. As soon as we made the switch he was sleeping better, eating better, less anxious, and starting to be excited about learning again. Please don't take these options away from our kids.

STORY 16: My Kid Has Fallen Through the Cracks

My daughter is fifteen. She was diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder at age nine after repeated school refusal and several trips to the ER for severe panic attacks that included suicidal ideation.

Since then, she has also been diagnosed with ADHD and we are currently exploring how we can access an autism assessment (the public waitlist is at least 18 months long and a private assessment is between \$2000 - \$6000). However, I am skeptical that even if she had another diagnosis, that it will actually provide her with any meaningful support as I have failed to see it work well for other families, even before the pandemic.

My child has been repeatedly failed by the province's education and mental health systems to the point where she is extremely behind academically and continues to struggle with debilitating anxiety and depression on a daily basis. I am now in a situation where I am juggling homeschooling her to try to get her caught up to her grade level (she's about at a Grade 5 level when she should be at a Grade 9 level), working very part time when I can, and caring for myself and my other child. The supports that I had managed to get into place before the pandemic have either disappeared or are having very little effect because trying to connect with a child virtually (even one without special needs) is extremely challenging.

I sincerely believe that the only reason that my daughter is alive today is because I have accommodated my entire life to meet her needs as much as possible. As a solo parent, this has meant an inability to maintain consistent employment, spending a large amount of my time writing letters like this to politicians and educators, and generally trying to keep my family's heads above water financially and emotionally.

My kid has fallen through the cracks for 6 years, and has only had the support that she's had because I have fought EXTREMELY hard, navigating awkwardly through a broken system, to get it. I don't know if it's because she doesn't have an obvious disability or if I am not advocating in the most effective ways, but what I do know is that the systems that we have in place are NOT working. My daughter's confidence is at an all-time low and she feels like life is just not worth living most days. It feels like I am constantly having to "prove" that we need support because no one else is able to see it because she barely ever leaves her bedroom and is hesitant to talk to yet another "professional" that wants to ask her all the same questions she's heard a million times before.

She needs support that is beyond what I can provide and it feels like no matter how much I am screaming, "WE NEED HELP!!", no one cares.

I just want kids and parents to be able to get the help that they need, when they need it. And if you ask me what this looks like, it would include a Universal Basic Income so that families can at least not have to worry about food and shelter during times of crisis. It would include diverse learning options based on accommodating

the learning needs of individuals. And lastly, it would include easy access to mental health resources for ALL families.

We shouldn't have to wait for a situation to be one of crisis before we "qualify" for any support.

STORY 17: Why Can't I Learn Like Other Kids?

"Why can't I learn like the other kids?"- that was my son's question to me one day after Kindergarten. He was sensitive, observant and obviously smart but also unable to rhyme or remember letters to sounds or even remember to call them letters rather than numbers. It was saying aloud something our family had been worrying about. He had been in preschool, we read to him, we did phonics and we had a family member who had been a preschool teacher help. He had been late with motor skill and language milestones but always managed on the cusp of medical referral. He was still hard for others to understand though since he confused opposites, used wrong but similar sounding words, mispronounced and had erratic story sequencing. Kindergarten did not change anything other than making him increasingly self-conscious and unwilling to do literacy activities at home. I had been anticipating the experience of his school teachers would bring us help or at least direction. Instead, we were surprised by repeated assurances that he just needed more time and there were no signs of learning disability; we were told to read to him more.

Grade 1 became increasingly concerning. Our son would cry and be unwilling to enter class. The level books and "instruction" were confusing. There seemed to be no content control to the levelled reading booklets, he had been taught to guess using pictures. After arguing with his teacher I was informed that just memorizing the booklet was a "perfectly fine strategy in learning to read". I sat confused as she proudly showed me my son "read" even though he did not have to look at the words and she did not correct wrong words of similar meaning. Our son did not even know his letters and could not read any of the words at all outside of the context of that one booklet. Once again we were told there was no sign of learning problems; however, at the same time a parent volunteer took me aside to tell me our son's teacher had become very hard on him and was publicly losing temper and patience with his lack of progress, memory and motor challenges. We eventually learned kids in class had been making fun of him, told him he was going to fail and that he better start trying to learn. Our son was put into Learning Support though we later learned

it was the inappropriate Reading Recovery. Afterschool collapse and constant overwhelm were my son's existence. His self-esteem had plummeted, he became increasingly erratic and anxious. I would pick him up from school and upon eye contact he would begin brimming over in tears. He would usually make it to the car before having a total physical melt down.

Having seen "reading instruction" at school we had arranged tutoring with Sylvan, who quickly confirmed clear learning disability(s), told us the type of testing we needed urgently, advocated and provided collateral information so we could achieve private psych-educational testing years before the school system would consider assessing. Our son was identified as profoundly phonologically dyslexic with rapid naming and significant working memory impairment and suspected developmental coordination disorder which we confirmed on subsequent private assessment. We finally had answers and recommendations to guide the school in early interventions. We had recommendations for speech language therapy, explicit structured science of literacy informed intervention as well as an outline of accommodations and occupational therapy needs. We had an IEP which seemed to promise the needed interventions recommended, understanding and accommodations for our son's success going forward. I felt like I had failed my son though, in learning about his diagnoses he was a walking billboard of every sign and symptom possible. It was despairing that school educators had not immediately known his challenges since they are alarmingly common affecting 10-20% of children. I realized the other children in his classrooms that had been pointed to as examples of how we did not have to worry about our son were in fact the number of dyslexics statistically predictable.

Unfortunately, our son's IEP was not worth the paper it was written on. Staff never seemed to know the contents of his IEP and frequently did not even know he had one. We were forever finding that erratic behaviour at home and school refusal was due to his realistic concerns and lacking support. His accommodations were forgotten, ignored and the new principal repeatedly outright refused them. Speech therapy never occurred. Remediation never changed. Reading Recovery repeated despite it being long known detrimental to dyslexics, the program itself stating that it is inappropriate and its incompatibility with explicit, systematic structured literacy. Grade 3 was a complete avalanche of negligence, ignorance, disability discrimination and trauma. The lack of real support, remediation and accessibility coupled with staff inflexibility and pressure to simply stop being disabled resulted in explosions our son and family were blamed for. Staff pushed our son into embarrassing emotional outbursts because they decided they knew better than the actual diagnosing medical professionals. It was their opinion that he needed to be "encouraged" as they did not believe his pediatrician or the multi-hour occupational therapist

assessment quantifying his visible motor impairment. He did not feel safe, supported, heard or able to self-advocate. The chain of events that would occur were beyond reason. For example: profoundly dyslexic child that does not know his alphabet demanded to do work far outside of ability and IEP. He becomes upset so is punished by being sent to the calm down room. Child escalates in the calm room when surprised by it having been changed to only contain books. He tries to self-advocate asking for his existing successful IEP calming strategies but anything other than books are disallowed. Child cries and knocks over chairs. Child is blamed and secluded. Ableist principal refuses to see that they created a forced failure situation for an upset dyslexic. Parents informed they must “accept” this absurd situation while being told their son needs to be “prepped for restraint”. We were told our son “could not get out of doing the work” yet they had no intention of providing effective remediation.

We pulled our son out of the school while we worked out much of the above situation. The new learning support teacher had been one of the needed puzzle pieces. They had been my son’s prior Kindergarten teacher that had no understanding of learning disabilities, which did not seem to have changed despite becoming the new remediation specialist. We requested qualification details and found only additional training in Reading Recovery. Our son was suicidal at 9 years old. He had wanted to know if children were made to go to school in heaven and if he fell off a cliff would it be painful or too fast to feel. We did not know what to do but requested the hospital-homebound teacher as our son would rarely leave the house due to anxiety. Eventually we would try another public school; however, the entry had planning problems. The psychologist had set himself up as my son’s safe person in the entry but no relationship with the teacher was established; the psychologist tried to just excuse himself to leave my son with the class which caused anxiety and confusion. After one day we were told the gradual entry had to stop and we were to contact CYMH because the psychologist did not have the time needed to support the entry. I asked if that meant we had to homeschool our son because I did not understand what the plan was. Eventually we were told they were changing our son’s designation to extreme behavior and would arrange an EA in future. We spent months waiting, without schoolwork and without a timeframe. In approximately April, we finally started an EA supported entry but then COVID closed the school. Our son had spent possibly 2 hours in a classroom and a maximum of 15 partial days at a school for his Grade 3 year. In discussions with the case manager at the new school, it became clear that our need for explicit, structured, science informed literacy instruction was to be no better served. The case manager would not even use the term dyslexia despite it being his diagnosis in the report and under the DSM-V. It was boggling but they would provide an EA for our son’s school-created

emotional/behavioral problems but still not support the initial, primary problem of school being 100% inaccessible due to his disability.

During this time, I had applied for a special education department entry with an Independent Online Learning school on the recommendation of BCEAccess and parents of other dyslexics. It seemed to be the only answer, the only equitable educational access avenue. We used the Orton-Gillingham therapeutic tutor referral service and eventually found an incredibly skilled teacher that had hoped to retire but took pity on our son. It was a difficult road as my son had so much trauma and teacher distrust issues. She was disability and trauma informed and soon my son realized that what she did was different. He started to realize that he was not broken, stupid or unteachable. Our IDL helped us change designations to the more appropriate chronic health and directed his funding to therapeutic tutoring, other therapy and even social programs. In 2 hours a week for a year our son went from not knowing his alphabet to reading. Prior, he had no phonological awareness skills at all, he could not hear the difference between many sounds or even tell what part of a sentence was words or hear syllables. It was not possible for him to understand the letter-sound relationship because it had seemed totally random. He did months of speech therapy work, holding his throat to hear the difference in voiced and unvoiced pairs. I had not understood that there was an entire foundation needed prior to phonics and his complete inability to rhyme more than an odd quirk.

Our son has since flourished. He only needed to be taught explicitly by competent professionals instructing him in the manner known to be needed. He faced nothing but barriers, trauma, exclusion and inaccessibility in the public school system. They did not have the expertise, understanding or resources. Our son would still be illiterate and possibly a suicide statistic if we had stayed with the public school system. Honestly, the biggest tragedy is that most of the staff that had worked with him were committed teachers that loved children and cared for him. I think they would be crushed if they understood just how damaging their help was. I remind myself daily of the tremendous help we received from our IDL and our amazing OG tutors to help balance the venomous anger I have towards our school system. Alternative educational options, alternative environments and alternative instruction approaches are required and need to be available for many of our children that can't fit in the one size box. Until our experience, I never would have realized the importance of having such alternatives available. Our son required a safe, controlled environment in which to recover. I am thankful in a way that we were shoved out of the public system as we found what was needed. There is a good reason why such a high number of special education needing children are enrolled with IDLs and their outcome results with those children are so much better.

STORY 18: It Took a Long Time to Build His Trust

Our son never liked school, but he performed well. At home it was a different story, lots of anxiety that manifested in violent meltdowns. When we would bring up our concerns with the school, they said he seems just fine at school, a model student. So they either didn't believe us, or didn't have any extra time/energy because they had to triage the children who were outwardly struggling at school. From our own family budget, we had a psych ed assessment that finally showed the struggle our son was having: learning disability, anxiety and ADHD that was masked behind a high IQ.

Even with the psychologist report, we had to fight the district for the Q designation. For his Grade 3 year, the school tried to help lower his anxiety with some accommodations, but the staff's capacity to do so while managing the needs of so many children, didn't do enough. Our son started refusing school, we were not able to get him out of the house. He missed a large number of days. When the school reached out to see what they could do, their only solutions were to physically force him to school, or small other adjustments to his routine. What he really needed was a classroom of far less children and more individualized learning plans, something the current system just can not accommodate.

His violent meltdowns at home and school refusal continued. His self hatred started to be noticeable, with threats of wanting to harm himself. Then COVID hit, and with no one expecting him to attend school, his anxiety dropped significantly. We then paid for a private autism assessment that showed that he is autistic. For his Grade 4 year, we went with an online learning program - distance Learning, with an optional 2 day a week in-class portion. Having the flexibility of the special needs funding was exactly what we needed. We were able to sign him up for online Minecraft communities where he was able to build a friendship community and learn about various school subjects through the game. We paid for OT consultations to help with sensory needs and execute functioning challenges. We hired an EA to come into our home and build a meaningful relationship with him.

It took a long time to build his trust, but with this funding it happened. Due to his previous school trauma we've had to take it slow in his recovery. With the in-class portion, this has helped him re-enter a classroom setting. Hoping that by highschool, he has regained his confidence and gained tools to advocate for himself, he will be able to reenter the regular B&M system. He might not though, he may never get back into a B&M school, and we are counting on the flexible special needs funding to

be there for him to finish his schooling. Without it, this high IQ child will not be able complete his high school diploma.

STORY 19: There Was No Support for Her

My daughter is Autistic and was also born without a thyroid. When we attempted to put her in public school for Kinder we were told that she would not have 1:1 support. She was a huge flight risk at that time and also needed occupational and speech therapy. We were told that none of those therapies were likely to be provided more than once a month, if at all, and that if she was that much of a flight risk I should purchase a GPS tracker in the event of an emergency. I was not confident that the school could keep her safe let alone provide her with the additional support that she needed. After two weeks of school and having her attend less than 100 minutes, we decided to keep her home. There was no support for her, there was no plan to keep her safe, there was no plan to provide her any sort of additional therapy that she was entitled to. The stress of going to school for very brief periods of time with too many transitions she simply could not tolerate. Having her with our IDL school has provided an immense opportunity for her. She has weekly occupational therapy, speech therapy, and counseling. After three years of home learning she is now completely verbal, very rarely mute, is social, attends group classes in the community, and is thriving. If we drive past a public school she still gets anxiety, she will often pee her pants, which she rarely if ever does otherwise. It was so traumatic for her and so detrimental. She has made leaps and bounds being a home learner and I would hate to see this opportunity taken away from her as well as others.

STORY 20: He Has Finally Begun to Thrive

My child experienced bullying at the hands of other students, teachers, and staff to the point where (at 5 years old, in Kindergarten) he was expressing statements about not wanting to exist. Any attempts at addressing issues within the public school system were met with dismissal, denial, blaming, deflecting and shaming. My child entered KG excited to learn and make friends, and was already working several levels 'ahead'. That deteriorated rapidly as he was forced to repeat busy work and denied opportunities for advancement or enrichment. He became bored, dejected, anxious and began to resist going. He experienced increased meltdowns and began to lash out, and was quickly identified by other children as an easy 'target', but was unable to express what was happening to him during the day. He became increasingly agitated and would completely shut down whenever he was asked about his day at school. I inquired about assessments through the school system after his pediatrician

recommended a PsychEd and ADHD screening. I was told it would take at least three years and there was no guarantee he would get one.

We tried two different public schools in two different districts, for Kindergarten, then the public DL/OL in our district for two years. By the time my child moved to IDL/IOL he was unable to get in the car in the mornings, unable to enter the classroom on the part-time classroom days, and unable to engage in anything that even remotely resembled 'top-down' teaching/learning without massive dysregulation, meltdowns, and further trauma. It has taken years of patience and therapy and he is only now starting to open up about the extent of abuse he was subjected to in the public system. In his first year alone he was dragged down the hall by the arm by his teacher, spent afternoons in the principal's office where he was told he couldn't be trusted (by the Principal), excluded from the classroom to sit in the hallway, denied recess and other outdoor activities, denied library books, denied enrichment materials, and was subjected to derision and bullying from peers and adults, including another parent in the drop off lineup.

IDL/IOL was not our first, second, or third choice or attempt to find a 'fit' in the public system. Only after moving into his current IDL/IOL program has my child begun to heal from the traumatic experience of the public school system. Three years later he still experiences traumatic 'fight or flight' responses and heightened anxiety at the mention of 'school', 'classroom', 'teacher', or 'worksheet'. Any reference to returning to a b&m program or any form of 'structured' learning environment (online or in person) causes a panic response and utterances of self-harm.

Since leaving the public system my child has been (privately) identified as Gifted, Autistic (PDA profile), and ADHD, with a written output & maths learning disability- none of which were supported or believed in the public school system. He has finally been able to access specifically tailored and curated academic and social-emotional supports through resources available via his IDL/IOL and by directing his SN funding (which is not possible in the public system). He has finally begun to thrive and embrace his full potential along with developing a healthy and positive self-identity and effective self-advocacy skills. He is able to engage again with enthusiasm, confidence, and excitement - as long as he feels respected and can deep-dive into his choice of topic, using his choice of methods and approaches that work with his style of learning. This has only been possible through the support and flexibility offered through his IDL/IOL.

The BC Public Education system is not set up to support unique learners, autodidacts, bright & quirky learners, those who do not fit the mold of a 'one-size' approach, or those who require additional support and accommodation in order to

thrive. My child is one of countless others who have experienced school related traumas and exclusion in the public education system that is not built to support learners like ours. Like so many other families, ours finally found hope, and a supportive thriving community, because of flexibility of choice among educational options including DL/OL and IDL/IOL. Losing access to these options is terrifying as a parent, and being forced back into the public system would be catastrophic for my child's recovery and long-term wellbeing.

STORY 21: DL Has Been a Life Saver for Us

I have two children who we pulled out of school in the 2019/2020 school year. My younger child had been having medical issues and experienced great distress when trying to attend school. All teachers and counselors we spoke with encouraged us to deal with her anxiety. When she started high school, she was completely overwhelmed. The school did try to accommodate her by providing her with an alternative classroom, but she only managed to attend 4 or 5 days of school. The high school she was at made no attempt to contact us, or figure out any way to get her back in the building. We called in daily to say she wouldn't be in attendance, but no attempts were made to work with her to get her back in school. By October, it was clear that she would not be attending school, so we removed her and enrolled in DL. There, she was given a modified curriculum so that she could proceed through at her own pace, without any pressure. In the months since we removed her from the bricks and mortar school she has been diagnosed as being Autistic. She did not and does not have anxiety, she had unacknowledged autism, which was identified first by her teacher at our DL, who happens to also have an Autistic child.

Our older child has a similar story. She quit attending Grade 11 classes in November of 2019, managed to finish the term, but we formally removed her from school at the end of term in January 2020. She was in a state of shutdown, unable to get to class, unable to focus on the work when she was in class. She was experiencing bullying - kids were telling her that COVID was getting closer, that it was here, because she reacted. No attempts were made by staff to curtail this type of bullying. She was working with multiple counselors, both through the school and privately. The school counselors (who were completely over-extended, and tended to focus on scheduling, rather than social-emotional counseling) were again focused on her "anxiety". Their solution, however, was to switch her classes - basically telling her that school would be easier in different classes. It seemed that their only concern was getting her through to graduation, not her emotional state or her life goals. Again, after removing her from bricks and mortar and enrolling her in DL, she was diagnosed as being Autistic. She was in Grade 11, so 12 years of formal education in the public

school system, and no one identified her as even possibly neuro-diverse. And, having removed two students from the same school within five months, no attempts were made by the school administrators or school district to contact us to find out why we removed our kids.

DL has been a life-saver for us. The kids can choose how and when they complete their work; and if they take longer to graduate, it is seen as OK, rather than a failure. The bricks and mortar system seems broken to me - assuming that all children are ready to start school at 5 years old, and ready to graduate at 17/18 years old - there is no room for deviation. This lack of flexibility excludes all children who develop on a different timeline, or need more or less time to complete the requirements. If it weren't for the option of DL, both of my kids would officially be high school drop-outs, as there would be no way for them to complete their schooling with only the brick-and-mortar option.

STORY 22: We Have Seen Amazing Growth

My decision to remove my children from the public system came after years of fighting for support and care for my child. My son lives with juvenile idiopathic arthritis and FASD. We pulled him in the fall of Grade 6 after he was in the middle of an extreme flare up and the school administration refused for him to use the school elevator that was installed for special needs children. He was barely able to make it up the flight of stairs to get around the school. On that particular day he was moving with the class and another student pushed him down the flight of stairs as he was moving slowly due to difficulty walking. With talking with the school nothing was going to be done about this incident. That was our breaking point.

We also ran into many other barriers with the school district. Our son was denied for a chronic health designation as they stated that his condition wasn't chronic. This child lives with chronic pain and is on immunosuppressant medications and pain medications to be able to make it through his daily life. We also found that he was not supported with his learning challenges either and was refused EA support as he was too well behaved and there were non-designated children with behaviour issues that could benefit from EA support more than him. He fell extremely behind in school because of this as he is very quiet and timid.

Since starting with IDL we have seen amazing growth in our son. He is now going into his Grade 10 year with EA support and working towards his Dogwood diploma. He is the first of his biological family to ever make it this far in the school system and

has a very bright future ahead of him. If we are to lose the IDL system I am extremely concerned for his schooling outcome.

STORY 23: The School Couldn't Accommodate His Needs

Our son has significant special needs including autism and other diagnoses. His school career started out in Kindergarten where they couldn't manage him and abruptly moved him to a new class halfway through the year which was very hard on him. By Grade 1 his challenges had increased as he had very unique learning needs. He couldn't manage large groups, noises, demands, or transitions. The school couldn't accommodate his needs and instead continued to push him beyond what he could manage, resulting in aggressive and destructive behaviours. Instead of recognizing them as behaviours associated with multiple special needs, the teacher decided it must be due to trauma and reported us for abuse. All the professionals in our life were shocked. Everyone knew his needs and how he reacted but his teacher was new to him and made snap judgments. We knew then the traditional school environment was no longer suitable for him. Despite multiple trained professionals trying to educate them, they just couldn't see his needs for what they truly were. His needs were so high they could not even assess him to see where he was academically. His first year of DL learning he thrived. We put special support in place that was tailored to HIS learning and he was able to learn to read and write, do math, and share his learning. Moving him to a new school when we found something that worked for his needs would be detrimental.

STORY 24: He Stayed for Only One Lunch Hour

At the end of the year, my son came home with a completely unused box of school supplies, and a whole new skill set of screaming and kicking, which even the home room teacher privately admitted was learned behaviour from classmates. He stayed for only one lunch hour, otherwise I would pick him up at 11:30 and on other days even earlier than that. There were a few occasions when I was phoned at home in the morning and asked to keep him home because he did not have an EA for that morning, even though he has an official diagnosis and an IEP. He spent the majority of his time at school in the learning resources room where he was literally being babysat. We had one EA that was very kind and tried her best, however she was not trained and actually undermined the progress we were trying to achieve with his

therapy plan. His home room teacher was equally kind and tried to include him when possible, but she had a very volatile class with many children requiring support, with or without official diagnoses. I feel like my son was just there to provide financial support for the undiagnosed students. We started DL for Grade 1 and will not go back to brick and mortar unless he chooses to do so.

STORY 25: School Exclusion is Not OK

My daughter was diagnosed with complex mental health issues and suffered through an awful 1.5 years of brick and mortar school. Even though she had an "H" special needs designation and an IEP, I was constantly called by school administrators to come and pick her up from class. As the months went on, she was excluded more and more to the point where they were only allowing her to go to one class and no socialization at all. She was not allowed to go out for recess or lunch. She lost her friend group and was socially isolated. Physical fitness was a core part of her IEP yet the school would not allow her to attend gym class. Our experience with public school has made her hate formal education. If it weren't for IDL she would be completely falling through the cracks. We need IDL desperately. All kids deserve to learn how they learn best and our local public schools are not up to the task of educating children with complex needs. School exclusion is not okay.

STORY 26: There Were No Other Options

Both my children had difficulty in our catchment school. My oldest spent his first year of Kindergarten hiding in the coat closet. We asked the teacher every day how his day went, and we were told it was great! I didn't really notice much because I was going through a mental health crisis at the time, but even a whisper of something that we should check into would have helped. We found out that the class EA for another student was also supporting my son. Close to the end of the school year, the teacher went on maternity leave and the replacement teacher brought this to our attention in the last two weeks of JUNE. That didn't leave us any time to talk to appropriate staff to get support in place for the fall.

Grade 1 for my son was much less traumatic. His teacher realized that there was something going on and put in some coping strategies for him when he felt the classroom was overwhelming (a quick walk to the water fountain and back helped him reset). She mentioned to us a few times her concern about his difficulty with eye contact. I made no real connection with that, as I also have had the same difficulty. I think she suspected that my son was Autistic, but our GP at that time did not identify it as he is not a pediatrician trained to screen for autism.

Grade 2 was fine, as the subsequent teacher adapted the same coping strategies as the teacher from the previous year. Grade 3 was when everything went sideways. The teacher ignored ALL the coping strategies that were in place. She was verbally and emotionally abusive towards my son, screamed at him, mocked him for crying while trying to comply with her demands, and lied to us about what was going on in the classroom. Her actions also put my son into the position of being bullied on the playground and in the classroom, as children follow the leadership of the teacher (sticks and rocks were actually thrown for this, with no repercussions from school administration). The teacher later told us we had to take our son to the doctor for medication because she decided he was having petit mal-seizures because he was not looking at her when she spoke to the class (lack of eye contact again). We were told by not doing so, we would be reported to MCFD for child neglect, as she had been instructed by the school nurse that was what needed to be done. When we took our son to our GP, the doctor was puzzled by the teacher's qualifications to diagnose and recommend medication. He referred us to a specialist, who was also puzzled by the same thing. All the testing showed that my son was not having seizures. Upon looking more closely into what had transpired, the community school nurse told us she had received an email from the teacher about my son asking if she THOUGHT these particular symptoms were petit mal-seizures that needed medication. She tentatively replied that checking with a doctor would be advisable, as she had not observed this with my son. We found out about the classroom behaviour when I was at the school playground and a couple of his classmates came up to me to ask about my son. They were worried because they witnessed my son's treatment at the hands of the teacher. My son had grown darker and darker over the months (between October when the teacher first showed up in the class until February when we were growing more alarmed). We withdrew him from the school on the advice of medical professionals because at that point, my then nine-year-old son was talking about killing himself. He was in so much pain. We enrolled him with a DL, and that was just a temporary measure. We were advised to unschool him for a while since he was so traumatized.

All efforts to work with the school administration lead nowhere. Nobody looked into what was going on in the classroom. We could not get a SINGLE MEETING with the principal with the teacher to address this. We did talk to the vice principal though, but that did not go anywhere. We went to the assistant superintendent, who directed us back to the school administrator, saying that we THOUGHT we heard the teacher say this. We had a recording of the teacher telling us about the medical diagnosis and an email.

My younger son was in Grade 1 and suffering from growing anxiety at school. At one point, when a teacher was trying to tell the kids to not eat the paint, my son interpreted that to mean that it was highly toxic and he would die from it. He would not touch anything that the paint CONTAINERS had touched (which was every desk in the classroom). Then he was convinced that his saliva was also toxic, so he wouldn't swallow his own spit (this is rather awkward to speak around, so it was thought he had a speech impediment).

The following year, we transferred both children to another school that was outside our catchment. That year seemed to be relatively good, except for some bumps. My older son had a great teacher who was pretty flexible and understanding when he needed to step out of the classroom, and accommodated him when he was balking at some of the assignments that he felt were too easy. This was fine UNTIL she went on maternity leave. The replacement teacher was a carbon copy of the teacher who had traumatized him. He did manage to stick through the rest of the school year though.

My younger son had a rougher year, as the teacher declared that we needed to read to him every day (I was reading 10 books each evening). He had declined to read aloud in the classroom because the teacher had told him in front of the entire class that he read like a baby. This resulted in playground bullying. Then, the teacher had talked about how many things in our environment are toxic and not good for us. This is not good for a child who has OCD (which we later had diagnosed - delays were due to a slow medical system). He struggled with math and spelling, so I gave him additional support at home using math manipulatives and used Bananagram tiles to work with his spelling (writing was not going to be an option for him). Spelling went from 2/10 to perfect score each time.

The following year was Grade 5 for my older son. The teacher he got was the SAME teacher that was a carbon copy of the Grade 3 teacher. At that point, he sat down with us and told us there was no way that he could make it through Grade 5 with that teacher. He felt targeted by the teacher. He had pulled out a chair to sit down, and it was a little loud. The teacher accused him of doing that because "he wanted attention". We tried to transfer him to another teacher in the school, but that was not possible so we withdrew him and enrolled him with the DL. The first few months home learning were a little slow for him, as he needed to do things that didn't look like school, but he was continuing to learn - we just didn't tell him he was learning. We talked to the teacher about what bare minimum needed to be done, and he was good for guidance, suggestions and resources. We managed to get him moving back on track in January that year, and he finished relatively well.

My younger son stayed at the B&M school, and continued to get worse. He struggled with math, and we found out that he was being pulled out of class for Indigenous Studies during academic instruction of critical subjects (my children are identified as Indigenous). While Indigenous studies is supposed to be implemented into a general program, our local district does not make it an inclusive program, and chooses to segregate indigenous children from the classroom to cover these areas. I was spending a lot of time at the school library volunteering, and bringing my son, or he was working at home with his dad. He came into the library quite frequently to feel reassured with my presence. The times I stayed home, I would not be surprised to get a phone call from the school that my son was not feeling well. He missed weeks at a time of school because he would spike fevers, so I couldn't send him anyways.

The summer between Grade 5 and 6, my older son was finally diagnosed as Autistic. We decided that since he had a pretty successful Grade 5 year, we would enroll him again with the DL. That year worked out quite well for him, particularly once he got additional tutoring support using his DL funding (prior to that, I wasn't sure what we could use the funding for). He finished very strong in Grade 6.

In the fall of the same year, my younger son was formally diagnosed with anxiety. We also took him for a Psych Ed, and he was diagnosed with dyslexia and dyscalculia. We were advised to get an autism assessment for him as well. Since our income is limited, that was going to have to wait. The school was never going to screen him for any learning challenges, and did not know to test him. Because he could read (as I had been supporting his reading all along), had a superior vocabulary that exceeds that of most adults, and was articulate in expression, his dyslexia was missed. His dyscalculia was missed too because when he didn't understand something on his homework, I took the time to just break everything down into smaller components so he could understand. In January of that same school year, he received a formal diagnosis of OCD. The school received the report mid-February, and then we finally had a chance to do an IEP with the Special Ed department. Shortly after that was Spring Break, and COVID shut everything down. At the time, I had no idea that the IEP did not reflect his designation. The school had missed that in all the documentation.

For the 2020-21 school year, we talked to my younger son in MAY about whether or not he was comfortable with going back to the classroom or should we enroll with the DL. He pointed out that COVID was not going to magically disappear in the fall and opted to learn from home. He THRIVED. He was considerably more relaxed, less anxious, and was much more eager to learn than he had before. I no longer had to struggle to get him out the door to school or have to pick him up from school before I even got home from the drop off.

My older son's Grade 7 year was spectacular. He finished his math course a good three months before the end of the school year. This was a very different child from the Grade 3 year. He had very good marks at the end of the year, and excellent feedback.

I am also Autistic and understand the challenges of sensory overload, hyper-fixation, and specific learning needs. I have also been a private teacher for over 40 years and have taught students as young as three all the way to senior citizens. The one thing I have learned is that until classrooms have teachers who are skilled in teaching with a trauma-informed practice, have a mindset of full inclusion of all students, and who are flexible thinkers in adapting to the needs of students, DLs and IDLs will have a place for the students who have been marginalized by the regular system.

We left our district because there were NO OTHER OPTIONS available. We opted for a public DL because we were okay with the structure and guidance from the teachers. If there had not been a public DL available, we would not have been able to afford to buy our own separate curriculum, and we would not have had access to the special education funding that my son so desperately needs to be successful. The one thing that a lot of kids need is STABILITY to learn. And if they are having fun when they learn, it helps retention.

STORY 27: She Was Able to Direct Her Learning

We left the community school on the island as the curriculum was uninteresting to my child who had a ton of engagement in learning. Her teachers chose her to always be their assistant, which had some benefits, but was ultimately leaving her bored. High numbers in the classroom focused on the children who need the most help leaves the ones who are ready to move forward waiting. We wanted to try another method and last year was her favourite year in school. She was able to direct her learning and bond with all her classmates. Inclusivity at our DL is huge and it's so important as girls become preteens.

STORY 28: Our Daughter Was Repeatedly Isolated

My daughter was born after a chance discovery of an in-utero intracranial bleed which resulted in Cerebral Palsy on her left side and Global Developmental Delay. We shouldn't have been able to save her or my wife, but our doctor caught it by being extra cautious and ordering extra ultrasounds late in pregnancy. It was an amazing thing that saved them both, and I wish that was the end of the story.

We agonized for years, going to appointments and hearing about therapies and treatments. We navigated that all with my own expertise as a social worker, with all the support in the world, and it STILL almost tore our family apart. We thought, when school started, that things would change. Instead, what followed were years of heartache, blame towards us, targeting of our child, mistreatment, abuse, and neglect from multiple staff in multiple districts.

Initially our child was bounced from EA to EA, never finding support despite her "A" designation. The people who did support her were stymied and held back by the very district who appointed them, leading them to be admonished by administration. Our daughter was placed in the care of untrained, incompetent and downright inappropriate individuals. Eventually, we discovered that our daughter was being left in a storage closet, by herself, when she became too frustrated or overwhelmed. We were told she was too loud for her class, and when we demanded that she be given an EA for 1-on-1 support, they said that staffing wouldn't allow for that.

Later, our daughter was repeatedly isolated out into the hallways, forced to do work beyond her skill level, was given no assessments or support, and the same story with EA's: no training, competence, or common sense. At one point, our daughter and EA went "missing" on a field trip as the EA had decided to walk our daughter home in her wheelchair without telling anyone. The school administration constantly dismissed our concerns and problems with EA's.

Finally, at one point, she was sent home one day because there was no one to care for her. That seemed to be the constant; if she was overwhelmed or upset, it was her fault, and we had to always come get her. It was never the school's inability to provide her space and support to be calm - just always her fault. This time, when she was sent home, we noticed she was quite lethargic and had an injury to her face and ear. It looked like she had been hit.

The next day, we were told cryptically to keep her home as there was no one to care for her. After a long conversation where Admin tried to lie but kept changing their story, I was told that there had been an incident. Supposedly, my little child, fully disabled, had "headbutted" an EA and they now refused to work with her, and a WorkSafe investigation had to be done. They tried to label her as aggressive. I was not allowed to bring my child to school until the investigation was over. However, I knew better. I knew that my daughter was not someone who would headbutt someone, and that the injury to the side of her head was suspicious. An injury to my child's head, with a shunt in from her injury, could prove to be fatal.

What followed was months of lies, avoidance, and dismissal that I had to wade through to find answers. They had no idea what they were doing, how to assess her needs, or how to support her. Despite her having Inclusion BC involved, they were clueless, arrogant, and tried to blame my family and my disabled child. A headbutt became an accident which became an EA hitting my child. But they lied every single step of the way.

I recorded every meeting in a clandestine manner. I took notes. I never raised my voice and I used every single strategy in my arsenal to get to the bottom of what had happened. I involved the Superintendent and Special Needs Principal. There were excuses, lies, more dismissal, and best of all, they tried to frame me as aggressive as well. I dropped the bombshell on them that I had recorded everything, and would be pleased to review the tapes to talk about how I was being aggressive. Things changed in their attitude then.

However, less than a few months later, they left my child in a hallway with a child known for violence and lashing out. He struck my child in the head. They did not perform a first aid check. They "lost" her in the school when I came to get her. They had a brand new EA with her who had no idea what was happening. Again, lies and blame. We took her out of school. Nothing ever was done about it.

Finally, at a different school, they did their best to try to provide EA's but it was always a struggle. My child was left out, time and time again. No support. No assessments. No compassion.

Then, COVID. No plan. No support. I doubt they even know we are with a distributed learning school now. They haven't had an IEP for her in 1.5 years. No contact. Nothing.

As far as they are concerned, their problem is solved. That problem being my beautiful little girl. The "violent, aggressive, overwhelmed, at-fault" little disabled problem.

Then, take into account the hundreds of parents I support in my work. All the stories that ring true, of schools and school districts seeing our children as problems. Now, you want to take away the DL's who listen, who actually support us, who allow us to see our children as learners, as beautiful, growing people instead of your problems.

Shame on you. Shame on the Schools, the Districts, and the BCTF.

Your system failed. Your system is about closets, isolation, blame, and lies.

Your system isn't good enough to teach my child. Your system is sick.

STORY 29: My Children Experience Success Through IDL

My Autistic triplets have intellectual disabilities, are nonverbal, high energy, arm flap, are escape risks, one self harms when frustrated, and need 1:1 support. For Kindergarten, they attended for two hours a couple days per week, with the district claiming they wouldn't be able to handle more. However in Alberta, they went to preschool five days a week, for the entire day, within an elementary school setting. The school eventually expanded them to two hours per day, five days per week, with a promise of increasing it eventually. After half a school year, it expanded to 2.5 hours per day. The district stated they did not have enough funding to support my triplets 1:1 for a full school day. They stated the funding level they bring in only covers a CEAs pay for half a day. They further stated other kids needed the CEA support during the rest of the day, so none was available for my 3 children. When a CEA was sick for other kids in the school, such as a tube fed child, my three kids would have to stay home so their CEA could cover the other child's care instead. My kids were denied their limited school time, so other kids could still attend when their regular CEA was sick. The district didn't want to make only one of my three kids stay home, so all three kids had to stay home.

In May of Kindergarten, my triplets were finally allowed to attend for five hours per day, but I was continually told how much of a problem my children were, needing recess supervision, lunch supervision, as well as classroom support. My triplets were needing 1:1 support for the entire length they were at school. My triplets have severe food aversions due to their autism, and only ate five foods, of which two needed to be freshly cooked or my children refused to eat them. The district told me they couldn't cook their wedges in the Actifry, which is the only way my children would eat them.

They told me they didn't have the facilities to cook their cheese pizza (cheesy melt without pizza sauce). The other foods my kids would eat were honey nut Cheerios, Bear Paws and Lifestyle cookies, so that is what I sent daily, and my triplets would eat their warm meals as soon as they arrived home. My children spent the school year isolated from other kids. They were to arrive after all the other kids were settled in class, and were to leave before the other kids got out for lunch break, and then in May and June they had to leave before the school buses arrived for the other children.

At our year end IEP meeting, I discovered my triplets were only in the classroom for 5-15 minutes daily, then removed, as my triplets were deemed a distraction to the other kids, and therefore hampered the other children's learning. They told me my children were unable to sit still for circle time, would make noise and arm flap, and would circle around the room. One child was allowed to play with kids shoes in the hallway. All three were put into an empty resource room that had a couple rocking chairs and tables, but no school activities. In May of that year, when my childrens' time at school had increased to five hours per day, the school finally brought in activities for my children to do. They brought in simple items such as pushing pompoms through a hole, and other simplistic time-filling activities or sensory-based activities, but not educational learning activities. I discovered my childrens' CEAs had been told they should not be holding my childrens' hand for safety - they had a strict hands off policy. I questioned this, as my children are escape risks. I was told my children could run out the door, through the parking lot, run between parked cars on the street, but as soon as they stepped foot onto the road where traffic was driving, then the CEAs could grab my children to prevent them from being hit, but before that, the CEAs were restricted from holding their hand or touching them to redirect them in a safe manner. I was then told that because my children were moving to a new catchment, my triplets would be reduced to only one hour of school per day. They claimed it was because my triplets were only able to be in Kindergarten class for 5-15 minutes, so one hour would be hard on them. They stated my children would have a hard time transitioning to a new school with new CEAs. They stated they would look at possibly increasing each child's time in school by half hour increments, if the child did not display any behaviours. They clarified that one child might only ever be at one hour per day, one might be able to go for 1.5 hours daily, and another for two hours daily, but with any behaviours that child would drop down in hours allowed to attend school. They stated my children would also have no CEA support for lunch or recesses, so I would have to pick up my children for those times, until they ever worked up to handling longer days at school without any behaviours or disruptions. They told me they would not guarantee my children would have any CEA support for Grade 1, and most likely not 1:1 support as required. At this point, I told them that my children would go to Independent Distributed Learning school

instead for Grade 1, and they stated “it won’t be any better there.” The district called child protection on me in retaliation, claiming my children only ate Bear Paws and cereal in school, and that my children were small for their age. Child protection investigated the concern and closed the file on that reported concern, as my children have excellent pediatric care and food aversions are common for Autistic children. It was a fraudulent report made in retaliation for moving my children out of the district.

My triplets have completed five years with an IDL school and they are doing well. My children are modified learners due to their intellectual disabilities, and have the ability to be themselves while learning. My children can arm flap in excitement, jump up and down and clap for being proud of their accomplishments, and can take as many body breaks as needed to be focused on their learning. Simple achievements are openly praised, school work is hands-on activities and educational toys to help them learn. My children do not print or draw, as they are unable, but have options of using technology and tactile objects to learn. My children have PT, OT and SLP that come to our home for therapies, and my children are happy and free to be their authentic selves. They are learning in a safe environment, with appropriate support and materials for their abilities. Due to their intellectual disabilities, they are unable to do and learn as other kids their age or adapted learning children can do, but my children experience success through IDL modified learning, are happy and thriving.

STORY 30: We Are Happy With Our School

It is hard to write about the time period when our complex child with autism, ADHD, anxiety, sensory issues and mild intellectual disability attended brick and mortar school. He was not allowed to attend a full day of school, despite all the assistance we provided in sharing our home team strategies with our Consultant on whom we spent hundreds of dollars in attending meetings to no avail. No one ever listened to me, the BCBA Consultant we brought in or to POPARD who when brought in to work on strategies, the teacher briefly stopped in and the vice principal who was his support teacher tapped her watch saying: “I didn’t know it was going to be this long”. None of the strategies were ever implemented properly. The EA tried, but after trying to be authoritarian with my child too many times it became a toxic relationship. One day the EA said, “I don’t know what to do”. I went to the library and got a book on Costa Rica, gave it to both of them and said, here you have this in common. You’ve been there, we are planning to go. I’m going to work now. You guys have fun reading.

I got so many calls telling me to pick him up, having to leave work. He was isolated in a seclusion room and the only social contact he had was another SN boy they called his “preferred friend”. They called it reverse inclusion on his last IEP review and stated

how successful it had been. I told them he was being abused in solitary confinement with a toxic relationship. One of his classmates walked up to him once and told him that he wasn't in their class - she was right, he wasn't. That hurt. He was never socially included and left as an outsider. I even had to bring him after the bell rang, pick him up whenever they decided or long before the last bell. I have an honors degree in Psychology, I know what works for my kid. No one would ever really listen to me. The amount of stress and almost daily phone calls from the school has left both me AND our child in need of ongoing counseling for trauma.

Fast forward a year later, I have a child who has made amazing progress. He does school through an Independent Distributed Learning School and I would compare the amount of work, subjects covered and improvement against any child his age in the province. He completed a vast amount of work last year in all subjects along with much needed therapies in OT, SLP and with his BI to coordinate both our home programs with his school program. This is all made possible with access to funding to allow therapies which meet his complex needs and education that is adapted to meet his needs, both social and academic.

We can't make these kids become neurotypical, it is the neurotypical that must bend to create the environments in which these children thrive. We are happy with our school. He lectured during camping to a group of adults and friends about DNA and genetically back evolving chickens into dinosaur like creatures. During that...I thought, "wow we have come a long way". Please do not take this success away from him or me by changing our access to make his education accessible for him through our independent learning school. We are mindful to use our SN funding to support future goals to become a great member of society. Please don't force us back into a model where he will once again be an outcast in solitary confinement just for being born with disabilities.

STORY 31: Our Issue Was Very Straightforward

My son was born with a very straightforward eye issue called nystagmus. Simply, his eyes shake, BUT his amazing brain figured out very early on that if he midlines his right eye onto what he is trying to look at, viola his eyes stop shaking. Amazing right?! Even his children's eye surgeon thought so. Our son didn't need surgery, but continues to see his "special eye doctor" yearly. Now, imagine turning your head to the left all day in a classroom, in music class, at an hour assembly in the gym or at library storytime. Now imagine if your placement is on the right hand side of the

room when looking at someone at the front of the room. You have to turn your head even more to get your eyes to stop shaking. Try it. Look at something about two meters away, turn your head to the left so that your right eye is looking at it directly. Now, move your body from the right hand side to the left hand side of the room. As you move to the left hand side of the room, your neck muscles, shoulder muscles, back muscles and even buttocks will relax. My son had a letter from his “special eye doctor” asking for priority placement for our son on the left hand side of all spaces in school to help develop his muscular-skeletal, nervous system and other body systems to the best of his ability but no one could remember or make sense of where our son should sit after multiple conversations. And if they did remember, or our son remembered and reminded them, he often had to sit by himself as the placement was an afterthought. Our issue was very straightforward and simple but even this was overwhelming for the public system to deal with.

STORY 32: He Was Trying to Cope and Survive the Day

My son went to Kindergarten as a happy child. Always kind and smiling. I was always told how bright he is. In Grade 1, he started to develop some anxiety. Each year it got progressively worse. In Grade 3, he felt sick every day before school and tried to avoid going. My son had no behavioural issues at school and I was always told he was a pleasure to have in class. He was restrained by the teacher while I left because he was always “fine” five minutes later. Later, I understood his “fine” to be something called masking. He was trying to cope and survive the day, but suffered inwardly. This was my first child and I regret that I just blindly followed what the teachers recommended as they were more experienced. This experience (the teacher prying his fingers off me so I could leave and then holding him) traumatized him deeply.

It was in Grade 3 that we finally had a psych Ed (privately) as I knew that there had to be more than anxiety going on. The results were gifted, LD in written expression, ADHD and slow processing. He was in the 99% and also the 2%. This is called twice exceptional when you’re at both extreme ends of the bell curve. When trying to get accommodations, I was told they’d never seen a student with my son's learning profile (I’m sure there have been, but unidentified). He was in French Immersion, spoke the best French in his class, could not print, could not say “hi” to other kids, struggled socially and his teacher did not know what to do with him or how to help him. We went on to Grade 4 with hopes that now that he’d had a psych Ed, things would get better, there would be support. My son started almost every day with the counsellor who would transition him to class. This “worked”, meaning I could drop

him off, but temporarily. I spoke frequently with his teacher who said my son was doing well. What he was doing well was sitting quietly and not being disruptive. He had started meeting with an LST in September once per week for 30 minutes. I tried to get updates and was told everything was fine. This did not make sense as my son started to outright refuse to attend school and wouldn't leave the house in the morning. In December before the Christmas break, the teacher surprised me by telling me that my son hadn't produced any work so far that year and she was unsure what he was learning! I was livid. With the number of times I questioned and was checking if they were providing accommodations per the IEP, why was I hearing about this after 4 months of school? The teacher's reply was that he was one of 25 and all the kids needed attention, so she couldn't give my son extra. I asked the LST what specifically she was helping my son with and she said she was still working on establishing rapport. I had provided my son a tablet and the necessary apps and had been told the LST would help him learn how to use these for his LD. After advocating over the years and particularly in Grade 4, I was exhausted and my son thought school was meant to punish kids. He kept asking me what school was for and why I was making him go.

Half way through Grade 4, we pulled my son out and put him in a private school for gifted and learning disabled kids. I felt completely pushed out of the public school system who could not teach my quiet, bright boy. The environment was much better, although due to previous trauma at his B&M public school he continued to not cope well. If we'd started there from Kindergarten things would have been better. He continued until Grade 5, when COVID hit. Just prior to this, my son also received an autism diagnosis. While everyone else was stressed out with the closure of schools/online format, my son was so relieved he would not have to attend school. It was during this time that I could really see a lot of his academic difficulties and was shocked how they had never been brought to my attention. On and off, I'd wondered about homeschooling as the school environment was too overwhelming (I wasn't aware of DL's at the time). I am thankful for COVID in the sense that it forced us to do home learning and I discovered how much more opportunity there was for my son to reach his potential if I could create an environment that supported his learning needs (something neither of his B&M schools could do).

For Grade 6, we stayed home and enrolled with an IDL. I spent a lot of time researching the philosophy of the different DL's with Special Ed departments to find the most suitable one. It has been nothing short of a miracle how my son has transformed over the past 1.5 years. He has started to enjoy learning and now we can focus on his interests, which given he's ADHD and Autistic is crucially important for developing skills. My son is starting Grade 7, and we are looking forward to a year of video editing, learning through Minecraft, analyzing politics, and many more things.

It took us almost all of Grade 6 to deschool and we have had many discussions about his 'old school' (public from K-4). He still hardly wants to talk about it. He feels as if he was being punished and in prison and forced to tolerate being in such a highly unsupported situation. He regards the school as evil. It's a strong word, but that's how awful it was for him.

STORY 33: Their Schools Refused to Provide Assessments

Both my children have learning disabilities, sensory processing disorder, Complex Neurodevelopmental Disorder and ADHD. Their schools refused to provide assessments so I went privately through Jordan's Principle, which is how they got those diagnoses. Prior to that, no EA time was given, little student support time and no accommodations. One teacher made comments on report cards such as: "needs to learn the value of hard work", "needs to pay attention", and took recess away if my child did not finish her work. My daughter, who was in high school, started refusing to attend school and the school wanted to use a behavioral plan, rather than determine why she was having difficulties. I took both kids out of brick and mortar and our IDL has been fantastic at providing the support needed and the accommodations to be successful. My high schooler is actually looking forward to school (DL) starting this year!

STORY 34: This is Required for the Wellbeing of my Child

I met with my son's Grade 1 teacher at the beginning of the year to discuss some concerns that had arisen in his Kindergarten year, and some strategies that worked well for him, as well as to share with her that he was on the waitlist for ASD assessment. By October, he began sharing with me that he was spending a lot of time having been sent out in the hallway for disruptive behaviour and was often left alone and crying. I soon started getting calls to come pick him up early for increasingly disruptive behaviour. It was then that I started hearing somewhat regularly from the school's behaviour support teacher but was upset that these concerns were not brought to me earlier by his teacher and that I had to hear about it from my son, weeks into him frequently being sent out into the hallway.

Unfortunately, by then my son had already internalized that he was "bad" and as such began to act out purposefully as I feel he wanted the choice to be bad to be his.

It was then (leading up to the winter break) that he began to show increased anxiety and school refusal. Unfortunately, we were not in a position employment-wise that we were able to keep him home despite him often crying and begging not to have to go to school (and my mother's heart began to break).

I had hoped that after having two weeks off my son would feel better about returning to school but this was not the case. He began getting physically aggressive with staff and the behaviour support teacher then suggested a temporarily decreased attendance schedule and they applied for a mental health/intensive behaviour designation while he was still awaiting ASD assessment. I was told that he would require a designation in order to get more support. This incited me to begin researching my son's right to an inclusive education and doing webinars on IEPs etc. I spent a significant amount of time emailing school staff trying to the best of my ability to advocate for my son and his increased support needs. This came at a significant toll to my own mental health and I felt that my son and I were both being lost to this relentless process that never ended up making any real difference.

When the IEP meeting came I voiced that my main concerns were my son's emotional and social wellbeing, but there were no changes to the level of support he was given and breaks from the classroom were still largely rewards based.

He finally received his ASD, ADHD, and anxiety diagnoses at the end of April and initially I was hopeful that this would change things for the better at school and that he would finally get his needs better met. Unfortunately, the diagnosis did not prove to be the silver bullet I was hoping for and by then my son had already come to the conclusion that his teacher, the staff and adults in general were not to be trusted and he hated learning. At this point he would often, in his words, "start an argument" at the beginning of the school day as he was aware that this would result in him being removed from the classroom to spend the day in the behaviour support room or be sent home. His temporarily reduced attendance schedule was never increased and it was suggested to me by the end of May with three weeks left of school that perhaps it would be best if he didn't return for the rest of the year.

At the final IEP meeting, I strongly advocated for one-to-one support for his next school year and was told by the principal that the district head was a "numbers guy" and that my son would not be able to access one-to-one support. The principal also said that they preferred not to have an EA for any one student and rather have one present in each classroom. Despite my protests, my husband was initially keen to have my son return to school the next year with the hope that with some time off and a new teacher things might be better for our son. However, we have made the decision to leave brick and mortar school and have enrolled in online learning. This

requires some changes to our employment situations but I feel strongly that this is what is required for the well being of my son (as well as for my own mental health), and that is what is most important for us.

STORY 35: He is Back to His Old Self

My son has always been a bit different than the other kids but always has been a joy. He loves everyone and everyone loves him! In play school he needed a chair while everyone sat on a carpet together so he could swing his legs. This helped his ears work. As a Kindergartener he needed a timer to complete his work - making it a game kept him on task! As he got older teachers became less and less accommodating. I recognized that he was a bit behind so I repeatedly asked for a psych Ed and was denied because he “wasn’t a full two years behind and he isn’t disruptive”. His mental health began declining in Grade 4. He slowly was slipping from us, becoming a shadow of the boy we once knew. After school he had 3 hour meltdowns, was withdrawn and depressed. One day after school I received a text from a classmate's mom that he had been slapped by a teacher. He didn’t tell me. I asked him and he burst into tears telling me that his substitute teacher hit him in front of the entire class and that his EA had been dragging him by the arm all the time to the teacher’s desk. I asked him why he was being treated like that and he said it was because she said he was lying that he didn’t understand what to do, but he really didn’t understand the directions. I was devastated. In an effort to not have a lawsuit the school district fired the teacher and offered to do a psych Ed immediately. My child’s results were ADHD and Clinical Anxiety. In the following weeks I couldn’t even get him in the building. He would put his hoodie over his face and I’d have to leave him in the office - both of us in tears daily. He would come home and say nothing was better and that as soon as I left they kicked him out of the office. I asked if the staff was willing to change the way they were working with him after the psych Ed and they said unless I was putting him on medication there’s nothing they could do. I put him in therapy and pulled him from public school.

Now, he is back to his old self. He still struggles with anxiety here and there (especially surrounding school). We have found a WONDERFUL IDL that has been such a blessing for him. He has had the same EA for three years now who works with him one on one a few times a week for social emotional stuff, LA & math. He has access to a counsellor and will be going to speech therapy this year because he struggles with getting his words out. Our IDL also has a one day in person blended program which is helping him be more comfortable with school without triggering anxiety. This is SO important for him. He needs to face his fears in small steps and taking away this option would be catastrophic. Too many changes at once would be

catastrophic and damaging to him. We have a plan in place to set up to be a successful, independent & confident adult. He needs the flexibility he gets through their programs to meet his individual needs. He needs the consistency of having mostly the same adults as teachers and EAs. I hope this story offers a glimpse of another facet of why IDL schools and having a choice where your child attends is so important.

STORY 36: Our DL SE Department Advocated for Us

I'm going to start my story in 2000, when I became a certified teacher in British Columbia. I spent the next 11 years filling various public education positions, including the role of support teacher for special education students. My experience in that role was to observe that funds had to be shared amongst funded and non-funded students. Professional services like speech-language or occupational therapy were a once a year visit (if that). Students were largely kept in their grade-level classrooms, where teacher assistants or other classroom adaptations were permitted to help them cope with daily school work expectations.

In 2006, I started a family of my own. As a brand new parent, I was slow in realizing that my daughter (now 15 years old) was developmentally delayed. Her speaking tended toward echolalia, and she avoided eye-contact. Other behaviours like wandering off and hand-flapping were things we noticed, but really were not sure about. We were referred for speech-language therapy (accessible every couple of months) and a Supported Child Development worker (to help our daughter at preschool).

As she reached Kindergarten age, the school district decided to implement full-day Kindergarten classes (instead of half-day ones). I was very concerned, as I knew my daughter was not developmentally ready to cope with such long days. I went through the steps of registering her for public school and met with the support teacher, but I did not feel good about any of it. The more I thought about it, the more I felt that my daughter would be coming home to me each day not having taken in the information presented. She often required her name to be spoken several times before she would attend to what someone was communicating with her. To avoid evenings of re-teaching and (anticipated) social bullying, I decided that DL education would be the better option for my daughter.

In 2011, I set aside my public teaching and I contracted my services to a DL school. I was very thankful to have the opportunity to work with my own daughter, with the option of taking on more students (if and when I was ready). Gradually, I did take on more local students, which provided my daughter with a small class experience.

Ten years later, I can tell you that DL education has been the best possible option for our family. The personalized instruction our DL school and special education department has provided has been bar none. Here is what the last 10 years of DL education has meant for our family:

For my oldest daughter, now 15 years old, she's been able to access the professional services and assessments required to address her specific needs. Early in her education, I despaired of ever getting a diagnosis that would put her in a funded category. Despite all her concerning behaviours and academic delays, she just didn't seem to fit into an identifiable category. So, we simply pressed on with each school day, thankful for the fact that we could individualize her learning in the home setting. Then, the head of our DL special education department advocated for us. With assessments and doctor's letters in hand, they were able to approve a chronic health category through the ministry of education. Only this year, her category changed, when she was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder.

As hard as it's been to walk this journey with my daughter, I am so gratified that the years of perseverance (during our time in DL education) have aided in her development. As it happens, her experiences have paved the way for her younger siblings in DL education as well. Three other siblings have followed in her footsteps: a brother diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder and developmental coordination disorder, a sister diagnosed with specific learning disabilities and a younger brother diagnosed with mild intellectual disability. In the end, DL education has been the answer for us.

In the days ahead, I understand that the Ministry of Education is looking to restructure DL education. As a taxpayer, my desire is to see freedom of choice remain. We have been connected to the DL school for the past 10 years, and I have no wish to change schools. Requiring families to enrol with a DL school in their school district would be far too limiting, especially given our family's small town location. The Ministry of Education currently has an opportunity to expand their knowledge of the valuable services that DL schools offer to children (especially with special needs). I hope they will consult with all of our DL schools (collectively), so that our province can raise a standard of excellence in the education offered to diverse learners.

STORY 37: He's a Completely Different Child Now

I am an adoptive parent. My son came to us with several diagnoses and tons of trauma: FASD, ADHD, and as of Kindergarten ASD. He deals with several learning challenges. Prior to adoption, I was a full time education assistant in our small town. I attended many conferences and classes during pro-d days and remember hearing from others that attended from other schools around BC how their students that they worked with were just seat warmers and would never amount to anything. Wow, as I think to myself these kids are not even given a chance to succeed. Then our adoption went through and I left my job to be a full time stay at home mommy. Our first years with our then 3.5 year old were very hard, he was aggressive, destructive and just plain difficult. As a couple we persevered through and accessed assistance through individualized child development, they were amazing at helping through these difficult times.

Preschool came, friendships were hard for our son, even being around other people was an issue; he preferred to be alone. Then the decision of Kindergarten needed to be made. We discussed B&M school but with his aggression and meltdowns we knew he was not going to be able to sit in a classroom, especially with lots of kids. So we looked at home education learning and discovered our school. We felt it was a perfect fit for us. My husband and I were confident this was the best option for him, to not have to sit at a desk to learn or around a lot of people. We enrolled him for Kindergarten and he will now enter Grade 4 this 21/22 school year. We have seen so much growth and learning from him - he's a completely different child now. He loves to learn at home, and has made it clear this is how he wants to learn till Grade 12. I am enjoying seeing him learn and get excited about what he is learning. For us this was absolutely the BEST choice and will never look back.

STORY 38: IDL Has Become Our Lifeline

I was a teacher at an independent school in the Lower Mainland. I TOC'd at this school and became a F/T teacher there until my child was born. Then, I joined their TOC list with the intention of returning to F/T teaching once my child was in school full time.

When my kiddo was 3.5, we enrolled them in the school's preschool program, which operated inside the elementary school building and was the "feeder" preschool to

the elementary school. We knew that in order to secure a spot for our child in K, we would need to be attending preschool there, so we enrolled.

It soon became apparent that my child was a square peg, and the classroom setting was a round hole. My kiddo had learned to read the clock during their P3 year, and would be watching the clock to see when they could go home. They would also hide out from the other students in the hallway that connected the classroom with the bathrooms. As an autodidact, my child taught themselves to read at age 4, so they would lurk in that hallway, reading the posters on the wall and sometimes (intentionally, for fun) reading the words in "opposite speak". The teachers were concerned because my child would not engage with the other students or obey on command; class performances were often opportunities for my kiddo to stand as still as a statue, despite knowing every word and action to every song. During carpet times, my kiddo was the one lying on the floor or wiggling around. When it was time to stop playing, mine struggled to transition. When it was time to move from one activity station to another, mine refused.

My child was stressed out, and finding it hard to cope with school. Their outward stress behaviours amplified over the course of time. Separation anxiety, preschool refusal, and stealing little things from the classroom were some of the behaviours that were observed. My child also struggled with the transition from home to school, so in the end we would show up late for class and have them picked up earlier than their peers. This continued throughout P3 and P4, with my kiddo being the only student who was on a modified/reduced attendance schedule.

To their credit, the preschool teachers tried to get us some classroom help. They applied for my kiddo to get Supported Child Development and other program funding that allowed for an EA to work with them in preschool. The applications also allowed us to get OT and SLP screening and support, as well as observations from a community nurse.

Still, there was no improvement and no increase in my child's ability to attend preschool. None of the strategies that the teachers tried to implement had worked. My kiddo was still attending on a modified schedule at the end of their P4 year. By this time, the class was preparing to transition into K, and the preschool teachers were creating opportunities for the P4 kids to spend time in the K classrooms. My child had an especially hard time with those days, because the schedule was different and so were the expectations. An increasing anxiety led my kiddo to start kicking, hitting and attempting to bite their teachers.

None of our child's challenges and anxieties were new to the teachers and administration of both the preschool and the elementary. We were very candid and clear with them from the onset of P3 until the end of P4, about how we would be available to help support our child during their K year, and we also discussed my expectation that the school would use non-behaviourist, respectful strategies to support my anxious child when supports were needed. The school agreed to these terms after meeting with our child psychiatrist. We set up learning plans for my child in early June, and they were promoted to K at the end of the year.

However, on June 30th, the elementary school admin reached out to us to come in for an emergency meeting. During that meeting, they rescinded our child's enrolment in K, claiming that they did not have the ability or know-how to support my child's needs without resorting to using behaviourist methods. They also believed that our child posed a danger to the other students, and therefore they were not willing to give our precocious kiddo a chance.

Despite staring down a long weekend and summer holidays (when schools were all out of session), this private school refused to provide any option other than giving us a list of other schools to contact. We tried to negotiate for partial days and we offered to pay for an EA out of pocket, but they were resolute in their decision. They basically told us that if our child "improved" by the end of K, they *might* consider reinstating the enrollment for first grade.

By this time, our hearts were broken and we felt utterly betrayed by the school and their admin. Many of my close friends were teachers in this school, and the staff had become our "village". And yet, we were being forced out for no other reason than the admin's belief that their staff wouldn't know how to work with my kiddo (even with my help)!

A number of kind, inclusive parents from the preschool class offered to start a petition on our behalf, because they too believed that "diversity is our strength", but in the end we were soured on the admin of the elementary school for not even giving our child a chance to succeed, and for "othering" us because my child's support needs were unique.

We ended up enrolling at an independent distributed learning (aka online learning) school for K. I took my name off the TOC list for the elementary school and we completely cut ties with a number of the staff and all of their administration. Later that summer, my child was diagnosed as Autistic, with generalized anxiety and developmental coordination disorder. We qualified for extra funding based on our child's Level 2 Category "G" support needs, and the funding was claimed by our IDL.

We never tried the public school system in BC, but given that we had such a terrible experience in a well-funded independent BC school where I was even on staff, I have no doubt that my child would have been even more excluded and less supported in a larger class in our school district.

I am disappointed that my kiddo will never know the thrill of starting early elementary in a classroom, of dress up days and book fairs and Christmas concerts. However, our exclusion from brick and mortar learning, which began quite against our will, has since become a choice we have made intentionally, and this has proven to be the best option for my child. Now, they are able to learn things *their* way (autodidactic learning), in a setting devoid of other kids and distractions, and with resources and supports curated specifically for their needs and strengths.

IDL has become our lifeline, the only way for my child to flourish as a learner and receive the quality education that they deserve. It has provided my fourth grader with an equitable education, and given us the freedom to give our child the best education without sacrificing their mental health.

STORY 39: My Kids are Brilliant

My kids have never gone to public school. I enrolled my son with an Independent Distributed Learning School in Kindergarten. He is in Grade 2 this year and starting his third year while my daughter is starting Kindergarten also with the same school. We were lucky to get spots.

There were various reasons why my husband and I decided to learn at home with our kids. When we ended up in BC and learned about distributed learning schools, this was a great match for us. When we got an autism diagnosis for our son, our reasons to home learn were reinforced. The ability to access special education support while also doing home learning was a big reason why we decided to enrol instead of being registered homeschoolers.

We are an Autistic family. My husband, me, my son, and my daughter. All of us; autism plus ADHD, pathological demand avoidance, sensory processing dysfunction, rejection sensitivity dysphoria, and anxiety are all part of daily life in our house. Believe me, it's not easy working from home and schooling at home while managing anxiety and sensory processing of four different people BUT this is the better fit for our family. I can't imagine sending my kids to brick & mortar schools. Oh wait, I can... and that's why I'm choosing not to.

First of all, my husband and I have our own experiences that led to our decision to home learn with our kids for elementary at minimum and then see where it goes. So far, every time I contemplate putting my kids into a full-time classroom, I am reminded that it's not the right time yet.

Being at home gives us the flexibility to schedule things in ways that work for us. It can take us 2 hours to get out of the house. That's not an expression, it's a reality. Waking up, getting breakfast, getting dressed, getting lunches and backpacks and out the door for an 8:00 start means that we need to get up at 5:00 which means we would always be dealing with chronic lack of sleep because even with melatonin we get to bed late. By the time the kids got to school we would have already dealt with overwhelm, shutdown, going mute, panic attacks... by 8:00 my kids would be STARTING their school day overwhelmed and exhausted and needing at least 30 mins by themselves, not put into a classroom with additional sensory overload and expectations.

But let's assume that everything went neurotypically for a morning and they were starting school fresh as a daisy. My son would have about 10 mins before he started refusing to do anything with the group and was stimming (vocally and lots of movement, lots of ways to distract others in the classroom). My daughter would have maybe one hour before she was overwhelmed and in shutdown. Neither of them would learn ANYTHING (other than the prevailing message that they aren't good enough), behaviours would sky-rocket, anxiety would be through the roof (because we are already dealing with that without additional triggers), I would be picking them up from school before lunch every day. They still wouldn't be in the classroom, and my ability to work from home would be even more limited by getting them ready to leave the house, getting them there, picking them up early... yeah the morning would be a write-off and the afternoon would be trying to help them regulate. They wouldn't do the homework. They wouldn't get access to the support they need. They would fall through the cracks.

How do I know this if it's all hypothetical? Because I have listened to stories of those around me. I have heard the stories of those who left brick and mortar and enrolled in distributed learning (I am also a SE teacher with another DL). I have watched my kids on the playground, in preschool, and in activities. I have watched them in small groups and big groups. I know my kids, I know anxiety, and I know Autistic burnout.

But here's the thing: my kids are brilliant. They really are. They are ahead of grade level in reading and math. My daughter's ASD paperwork also shows a gifted diagnosis. They learn all the time BUT this is always on their own terms. I can't tell

you how many times we've started math or reading lessons at 6:30 because that's when their brains are ready to engage and be focussed.

Flexible ways of receiving information, demonstrating information, and scheduling have been key in my children's successes. Being able to learn on the periphery is important for my son. Rigid classroom schedules and curriculum where they need to follow the classroom or miss the learning opportunity means they would miss the learning opportunity. The day would be spent trying to transition them from one thing to the next and by the time they transitioned, the class would have moved onto the next thing (and then my daughter would be crying and hiding under anything she could because she wants to do the activity that just finished).

Flexibility is key for me to follow my children's lead in their learning, both academic and social. My son is also hypermobile and is still developing fine motor skills so he is already 25% done with his Grade 3 math program before the first day of Grade 2 but he can't form letters independently and even tracing is hard - at home, I can use resources that are appropriate for him. After a year and a half of total isolation, they are even more behind their peers with social development and building their regulation coping skills for group activities. That's where we are picking up this year. Home learning means they can be involved in a few one-hour activities each week to work on these skills in manageable chunks and then have the down time they need to regulate again. As time goes by, I hope to extend those social and group learning opportunities, but it will be a while before they are ready to attend full-time school, if ever.

Flexibility means we have access to SE funding for therapies and opportunities that align with IEP goals. My kids have been able to attend regular occupational therapy, counselling (play therapy, music therapy), gymnastics, forest school one morning a week, and receive personal EA support in the home. They have received some curriculum resources (we have also paid out of pocket for dancing, swimming, Girl Guides, Scouts, field trips, a zoo membership, and various curriculum resources).

If the option to enrol with a distributed learning school gets taken away, I will not be putting my kids into a brick & mortar school, because it would not be good for their education, social skills, or mental health at this time. Frankly, I don't think it would be good for my mental health either. Given the option, I will switch to registered homeschooling and forego the support because my children's mental health and self-confidence is more important to me than getting an official report card.

STORY 40: Please Don't Fail Us

I have two boys. One boy aged 10 who is dyslexic. Another age 8 who is highly gifted. Neither received the support in class that was supposed to be upheld from IEPs. Due to lack of support staff and most importantly, knowledge in these two areas. Both were left crying most days.

The one with dyslexia was ridden with anxiety and depression was setting in. The last week of school before COVID hit and online learning started he couldn't go to school due to how neglected and overlooked he was in class. He was made to feel an outcast and suffered daily.

My gifted child did not learn anything in the two years he was in school. There was no support or plan in place to ensure gifted kids got a chance to learn as well. He was bullied due to how "different" he was. He stood out and it was very hard on him. Every single day. He is a very personable and intelligent boy and he has found his people now that he is no longer in a brick and mortar school where the knowledge pertaining to gifted children and understanding severely lacks.

All children have a right to learn! Brick and mortar schools have absolutely let both my children down and they suffered educationally and emotionally. They are now in an IDL school and are part of a community to be with other kids and socialize but be able to home learn. Community and connection is vital - just as vital as education and every single child should get it in whatever manner that allows them to thrive and not be torn down.

My boys have thrived and surpassed grade levels in several subjects. Both feel challenged and proud of what they accomplish. They work hard and love being part of a community. They no longer cry daily or become silent and sad for their individual challenges they had in a brick and mortar school.

To have to uproot them out of the community they/we as home learning families have built and the teachers they love and who understand them would be devastating to us all. These children will once again be left behind. The support they have now and absolutely need can not be matched in any other capacity. Please don't fail us all and uproot our children - a lot of whom were holding on by a thread in brick and mortar schools.

STORY 41: Our Saving Grace

Thank you in advance for reading about my son's journey. This is my son. He's 10 years old. He was diagnosed with ASD at the age of 3, ADHD at the age of 8. He also has a tic disorder, which can make things a bit tricky. He is a bright, happy and exuberant boy who deserves the same educational opportunities as everyone else.

His journey of exclusion started in Kindergarten, where he was constantly being taken out of the classroom and brought into a room without any other children. This saddened him and quickly began to take a toll on his self esteem and self worth. He was misunderstood, his needs weren't being addressed or met and he was barely surviving the day. His teacher and those involved in his IEP meeting even went so far as to discourage him from continuing at his school "warning" us of how the grades ahead would require him to be seated and stay seated. This didn't sound like an environment that would suit my neurodiverse child therefore, how can public school claim to be "inclusive"? Inclusive means my son's needs have to be met too!

I realized quickly that this wouldn't work. We researched high and low and moved on to an independent school. Despite the fact that this school is meant to be for kids on the spectrum, it wasn't quite right either, they began to exclude my son as well. ABA in the end did more damage than good.

I am incredibly fortunate that our family can afford my leaving work to home learn with my child, and having found DL options was our family's saving grace. I'll write that again: our saving grace. We did the research, searched high and low for schools who could truly support my son, and there weren't any. DL was what worked! DL has helped us find our family's stride again.

Please consider those of us who have tried it all, researched it all and have often been discouraged at the sight of an ADHD label. My son is neither aggressive nor injurious to anyone, he just needs his sensory environment with other children to be minimal, and his school day to allow him the opportunity to move, and to be himself. Please do not remove SE DL's from us, we need them. Inclusion in the public school system does not mean inclusion for all, in our experience. And families deserve the right to offer our neurodiverse children a SE DL program (no matter where it's based out of) that works best for their kids. Taking away our neurodiverse kids' options isn't right and isn't fair, we truly have no other options.

STORY 42: My Younger Two Children are Thriving

I have three children with special needs. I struggled to have all their needs supported. My youngest child is most likely gifted, but has severe learning disabilities and autism. He can't recognize letters, even at age 9. I was told that because he had an autism diagnosis, the school wouldn't be able to provide him a PsychEd to determine his learning needs, and he needed Orton Gillingham to learn. I was told the school doesn't have training, and the likelihood of him learning to read without it was low. It was suggested I hire a tutor to meet his needs. We also struggled to access support for lunch and recess. He desperately wants friends, but is Autistic. He needs support to initiate and learn how to play. I was told there were not enough EAs to support him socially at school. He felt he was failing in all areas, despite being incredibly intelligent. They would make him do worksheets for 3 year olds over and over, though I explained to them why this wasn't working, and wouldn't work. He was bored, being treated like a toddler, and not being supported to learn.

My second child was accessing an autism assessment, and the support teacher informed me she didn't believe he could be Autistic, despite significant learning and social delays, which she agreed existed. I asked her to fill out the paperwork for the autism assessment, and she lied on all the paperwork, saying he could do things and had social skills he absolutely did not have, and that were detailed goals on his IEP. I had to ask the principal and the previous resource teacher to fill out the documents again, and even they were shocked by what she had said.

My third son has the capacity to go to university. He requires basic adaptations such as information being broken down for him, notes being provided for him for the class, and not having to give verbal presentations. High school teachers refused to provide these adaptations, despite them being in his IEP. One teacher told me that he didn't want to set a precedent for other students. Another teacher refused to give notes, or get someone else to write and provide him notes, as she said the class was her intellectual property. When I finally ended up at the district level to get him to access notes, she chose to print off her own notes for the whole year, and drop over 100 pages on his desk stating, "I don't know what your mother thinks she's going to gain from this, and don't think you're allowed to bring these notes to class with you and cause issues with the other students". In gym class, the teacher would ask those he assumed identified as boys to pick the female they think is cute to be their partner, or make other inappropriate comments like this, which was incredibly uncomfortable for students. When my son joined a computer course, I connected with the teacher letting him know my son was Autistic, and the teacher went to the

principal angry that an Autistic child was in his class, because he didn't understand how he would do the work. If he forgot to sign his name on an email, he would criticize him and refuse to answer his questions.

Due to all this, I had three children in three different schools (because apparently there wasn't space to keep my high school students together). My oldest son had to leave his French education, because I was told many of the French teachers didn't want special needs students in their class and worked together to get them to drop out. The resource teacher worked very hard to support my oldest son, but could not force the teachers to follow the IEP and support the students. I was told that they had personal autonomy.

At DL, my oldest son went from getting 'C's to 'A's by having teachers that supported him. My younger two children are thriving, have had psychological assessments, and can access counselling, speech, and specialized tutors. We are able to arrange 1:1 support when in social situations. These are just a couple examples, but my children did not learn in school, they didn't get to experience success and feel as smart as they truly are. They were made to feel uncomfortable, like their support needs didn't matter and that they were not important.

STORY 43: We Chose to Learn at Home

My son has always feared going to a brick and mortar secondary school as he was bullied for his learning disabilities in elementary school. In addition, there is very little support from our local school. When we reached out to administration at our local high school in my son's Grade 9 year to share his challenges with executive functioning, written expression disorder and slow processing speed they told us there was very little support available. We chose to learn at home as a result.

STORY 44: That Was My First Red Flag

My child never attended public school. Our experiences with exclusion began in preschool. My child attended preschool for 2 years with a full-time support worker provided through Supported Child Development. She was a flight risk and had profound needs with feeding, toileting and communication.

The support worker tried her best, but she was neither trained nor experienced enough to be able to work with my child. I found that even though I was paying for preschool, I was called to come pick her up for "tantrums" often. She was echolalic

and would come home repeating "I don't like you and don't want to play with you" over and over.

I would randomly stop by during class time and watch through the window as she tried to hide in the corner wringing her hands, while her support worker was helping others in the classroom. I was pregnant with my second at the time and didn't have the mental capacity, energy or skills to advocate for my child as I should have.

She was finally diagnosed with autism at 4 years old and I thought for sure things would be better in Kindergarten since she now had a diagnosis. I was so hopeful! We had our Kindergarten transition meeting with all the stakeholders in April 2017. Even though I made it clear that she was a flight risk and had profound needs, she was not being offered a bell to bell EA.

I asked how it would work for recess and was told that there is a parent playground supervisor that watches to make sure that the younger children don't cross a line on the ground during recess. That was my first red flag.

I had asked our OT for feeding to be at the meeting because my child used a chart to eat each bite of food and was a choking risk. We had come a long way with feeding by then and it was amazing that she was eating rather than being fed with a g-tube as the doctors had recommended. The OT offered to come into the school to teach the EA the feeding process we used for my child. The school adamantly refused and suggested that she send in a video so that the EA could watch it instead. The OT said that it wasn't best practice and didn't see why she couldn't come show the EA in person. The school said it was against their policies. That was my second red flag.

The last red flag for me was during the classroom orientation portion. One of the Kindergarten teachers looked directly at me while I was struggling to contain my anxious child. She said, "I've been teaching for 25 years and we didn't used to have so much ADHD; parents you need to put your children to bed on time". I was blinking back tears as I left that classroom.

The unwillingness to accommodate for the health and safety of my child is what set me searching for an alternative to public school. I came home from that meeting feeling sad, defeated and with the realization that public school was not going to be the best place for my child to thrive and learn. I didn't want to put her through more trauma than she had already experienced in preschool.

There was a news article around that time about an Autistic 5 year old Kindergarten boy in Alberta who wandered away from his elementary school and drowned. That was my worst fear with my child also being a flight risk.

I remember Googling "special needs school bc" and coming across the website for our IDL. I had no idea, at that time, about what distributed learning was or that there was even an alternative to public school.

We got into the Kindergarten program for the fall and it was such a relief! I could focus on my newborn and feel assured that my older child was thriving, learning and being supported appropriately.

My child is now entering Grade 4 and has learned so much with the support provided through our IDL. Over the years we have done equine therapy, music therapy, speech therapy, swimming, camps, OG tutoring, behavioural intervention and a toileting program amongst other things.

The support and therapies tailored specifically to my child are what has made the most difference. She went from echolalic to speaking in full sentences and being able to verbally communicate. I have asked her every summer, since Grade 2, if she wants to attend a bricks and mortar school in the fall and she always says no. This is not an education that a public school would be equipped to provide.

STORY 45: We Will Never Return to Public School

My daughter had extreme anxiety issues. Also, I suspected that she had learning disabilities. School just pushed her aside and ignored not only my concerns but also my daughter's needs. I finally pulled her and had her assessment done. The list of neuro-challenges she has is very long: dyslexic, ADHD, anxiety, tourettes, audio disorder, sensory issues and social issues just to name a few. We now have funding support from our IDL. This was almost solely used last year for an OG tutor. This tutor has been a game changer for my daughter's academics and self-esteem. We will never return to public school. If we are unable to continue with our IDL with the upcoming changes, we will just register. It will be a shame.

STORY 46: My Son's Learning is Fully Supported

Seven years ago I enrolled my Autistic son in our local school for Kindergarten. I met with the Kindergarten teacher, principal and the resource teacher for an intake meeting. I attended the meeting with my son's behaviour consultant for support.

The resource teacher, without knowing anything about my son or his sensory needs, said she would be getting him a weighted vest to help him focus at school and that she would request the district OT to see him so it could be approved. From the get go she wanted to use approaches that might have worked for another student without considering the individual needs of my child.

We talked about support and I said my son would need 1:1 EA the entire school day; that in fact he often needs two support adults for outings and other programs. The Kindergarten teacher said it wasn't possible for him to have a 1:1 EA for a full school day. I explained that for safety reasons my child cannot attend school without 1:1 support. The teacher said the best they could do is 2 hours a day for an EA. She said his needs weren't as big of a priority as other students with special needs, such as a child in a wheelchair with a feeding tube.

I explained that my child, while not having a physical disability, is quite complex and at that time needed an adult to assist him with eating. He still needs full support with dressing, hygiene and toileting/diaper changing. He needs constant close supervision for his safety, he is a flight risk and has no sense of safety. He has PICA so he could eat something bad or choke on an object. My child is nonverbal and has a developmental delay, intellectual disability, anxiety disorder, and SPD. He REALLY needs full time 1:1 support or he cannot safely go to school or anywhere else. In fact, as mentioned he really needs 2:1 support.

The school was designed in a California style where all the classrooms lead directly outside instead of into a hallway, even the bathroom access is outside. The property surrounding the school was not completely fenced in. There was a real safety issue for my son. After all this they still only agreed to two hours and they were perfectly ok with my son only being able to attend school for two hours a day due to lack of support on their part. I later emailed the principal about my concerns and he said my son would be supported, however, I wasn't convinced.

My son attended Welcome to Kindergarten with all the other Kindergarteners for the upcoming year. My son was so overwhelmed that he was crying and screaming and

having meltdowns. He couldn't handle being there. The Kindergarten teacher and the principal had a deer in the headlights look on their faces when they saw my son. They really didn't believe anything I was saying until that moment.

As the summer was ending, I was waking up in the night with panic attacks imagining my son being at a school that didn't take his needs seriously and how dangerous it could be for him to attend. I didn't want my child to become one of those special needs students who dies at school because no one thinks it's important to properly watch him.

After speaking with a friend about it, she introduced me to IDL home learning and encouraged me to apply to a few schools to see if they had space in a SE program. This was in mid-august and somehow I found a spot for my son and we have been with the same IDL school ever since. My son is starting 6th grade and still has the same level of support needs. Through IDL my son's learning is fully supported and he gets all the services he needs.

STORY 47: My Daughter's Anxiety Increased Again

My daughter was a "square peg" from the start. She started Kindergarten reading at a Grade 4 level - and we tried many schooling options in Ontario before moving to BC for job-related reasons. None seemed to be a good fit. Once in BC, we settled on a late French Immersion program in our district. She found the workload immensely stressful. Her executive functioning skills were no match for the high academic expectations of this program but she pushed herself really hard and then felt exhaustion and despair because she could not keep up with her peers. Within a couple of months of starting the program, she was diagnosed as gifted with autism. We provided the psycho-educational report to her school and had a meeting with the district psychologist, the principal, the resource teacher and classroom teacher. Every single one of the psychologist's recommendations that I brought up from the report, we were told would or would not be implemented "at the teacher's discretion". Because my daughter had attended such a variety of schools prior to entering the French Immersion program, everyone assumed her difficulties were due to "adjustment" to the expectations, workload and structure of French Immersion. No additional support was ever provided to her in this school. The teacher did not adapt the work or expectations in any way that we were ever aware of. It made no sense to me (and still doesn't) why a teacher with no background

knowledge of autism or giftedness would be given full discretion as to whether or not the recommendations of an experienced psychologist would be followed.

She eventually transferred to the local high school, where things got even harder for her because she now had multiple classes and teachers and different expectations. She was a smart student, and tried really hard, but she just did not have the energy to get through the demands of a typical high school day. Every day after school she would be exhausted, but still had to get through homework. Every morning we battled to get her out of bed and she usually arrived at school late and slept during her first class. My daughter developed serious anxiety; she went on antidepressant medication, and this helped a bit but she still started to hate school. She begged to learn at home. I agreed to a two-week trial where she would ask her teachers to give her all the assigned work in advance and she would be responsible for getting the work done without reminders from her parents. She agreed to this and managed very well, but missed the social aspect of school so wasn't ready to commit to home learning yet. As the school year progressed, however, she became less and less able to cope with the demands of school, and eventually had a breakdown and began refusing to attend. Her paediatrician was concerned and recommended homebound learning. The idea was that a teacher would be assigned to collect the assignments from each of her teachers, my daughter would complete them at home, and then every week the teacher stopped by our house to pick up the work and bring it to the school. Without the pressure and demands of being at school, my daughter began to recover and her anxiety decreased. She completed her work and felt ready to attend just a few of her classes in person. She chose to go to school for just Japanese and art classes at first as these were her favourite subjects and she did not feel anxious about going to these classes. Once she began attending these two classes again, though, the pressure began. The teachers from her other classes would see her in the hall and many of them were asking why she couldn't attend their class, too, if she could come to school for art or Japanese. The homebound learning teacher also spent most of her visit every week pressuring my daughter to go back to school. She heavily implied that her services were being misused, and directly told us that she was supposed to be working only with students who had "real" illnesses that prevented them from attending school. Although she didn't say those words explicitly, the message was clear: we don't believe you that this is too hard, we think you should do what everyone else is doing. My daughter's anxiety increased again.

I began researching alternative options. I learned about the cross-enrollment option in BC whereby my daughter would be able to take some of her classes through an online school and others at her bricks & mortar school. She thought this was a great solution and decided that for her following year (Grade 10) she would like to do her heavier academics through online schooling and attend the local B&M school for

classes like art, PE, music, and languages. This would allow her to continue to maintain her social connections with her friends and take subjects that are harder to do on your own at home. We (and her paediatrician) felt that her anxiety would be much lower if she had less time "in the building" and that the flexibility of being able to take some classes locally and some online would be the best option. My daughter made an appointment with her guidance counsellor at the B&M school and told her that she wanted to explore this cross-enrolment option for the following year. The counsellor flatly refused to support this idea. She incorrectly told my daughter that she could only take classes online through our local district's DL program and not through any other DL. She went on to tell my daughter that if she were to only take some classes at the B&M school, she would not be permitted to be on school property during the rest of the school day, and that they would not allow her to work on her online courses on school property. They were unwilling to organize my daughter's schedule to ensure the classes she would take in person would all be back-to-back in order to prevent her having no place to go for one class period mid-day. Finally, the counsellor said that she had seen many students attempt online courses over the years and that none of them had been successful, because it was too hard. She told my daughter not to take the online classes.

This whole experience completely crushed my daughter's belief in the local school's ability and willingness to support her in learning the way she needed to learn. We were disillusioned by the whole process and decided to enrol her in DL full time for the following year. My daughter ended up completing four years of high school through her DL (they encouraged and supported her to take an additional year to finish high school so that she could spend more time getting ready for university). The DL provided additional support via some of her Special Education funding due to her G designation, which made it possible for them to hire an occupational therapist, a tutor and a psychologist to provide counselling. These supports made a crucial difference to her mental health and self-esteem. My daughter thrived as a DL student. She consistently got very high grades in her online courses, had a good relationship with her teachers, and graduated with an overall average that was high enough to win her generous entrance scholarships at every university she applied to. We sometimes struggled to find other teens for her to connect with, but she made some close friends through home learning; a teen from the Interior she met on a DL field trip to Bamfield became and remains my daughter's closest friend to this day. My daughter loved the flexibility of DL high school; she completed some of her credits through independent DLs because they offered subjects she was interested in or had more summer course offerings than were available at her public DL.

My daughter is now a full-time student at SFU studying chemistry, math, and archaeology. During her time in a DL, with the support the special education funding

provided to her, she changed from an anxious, very unhappy kid who hated school to a young woman who was eager to attend university, has a very high GPA and who has multiple professors offering her research opportunities and lab positions. I am quite certain that this would not be the story I'd be writing about her today if she had continued to struggle and feel like a failure at her local B&M high school, with absolutely zero support being offered.

STORY 48: My Son Was a “Square Peg”

My son is another "square peg" with a similarly unique educational trajectory. We enrolled him in French Immersion Kindergarten and he struggled from the start. He was a kid who needed to move, who hummed to himself while he was thinking, and who would blurt out every thought that came into his mind. He often behaved impulsively because he just couldn't see the possible implications of what he was about to do. During his Kindergarten year, like his sister, he was also diagnosed as gifted with ASD. Later, he was also diagnosed with ADHD. His Kindergarten teacher did not seem to believe that these diagnoses or the recommendations from the psychologist were relevant. She put my son in time out and removed privileges instead of making adaptations to the program based on his learning profile. By the end of Kindergarten, my son was an unhappy kid with very strong negative associations with school. Although he was lucky enough to have more understanding and gentle teachers for Grades 1-3, he was often bored and dysregulated at school. His impulsivity, poor social understanding, and tendency to act in inappropriate ways when dysregulated all led to him being sent to the principal's office very often. The other students in his class frequently provoked him into misbehaviour, and then watched him get into trouble, but the teachers didn't see what was happening and because of my son's reputation he was usually assumed to be at the root of whatever problem was going on. We were actually very fortunate that the resource teacher and principal at my son's school really liked him, and they were very supportive, but they did not seem to know what to do about him. He understood the rules and expectations at school, he just couldn't follow them. They didn't seem to know how to fit my square-peg-of-a-son into their round hole of a school. He was smart, funny, charming, and likeable as a kid, but he was far from the student that they expected him to be. Everyone assumed he just needed to try harder to follow the rules, but no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't get it right.

As the years passed, this whole experience weighed on him more and more and he developed very poor self-esteem. He began to talk about himself as "a bad kid" who couldn't follow the rules because he "couldn't make good choices". He had yet to

make a close friend in his class, and often heard the other kids talking about birthday parties to which they had all been invited but which he was excluded from. Meanwhile, the teachers began to pressure us to move him out of the French Immersion program. I pointed out that he was a gifted learner and was likely to be bored in the regular English class but they were not able to guarantee they could offer him any programming specific to gifted kids. Our district did not offer specialized gifted classes (and even if they did, his behaviour profile likely made him a poor candidate for those programs!).

When I realized how damaging his school experience was to his self-esteem and how much he hated learning, I began to seriously contemplate the possibility of enrolling him in a DL. At the time, I was a full time student studying computer science at university. I was constantly being pulled out of my classes or from tutoring sessions in the math workshop in order to pick him up from school because he had once again been disruptive in class and sent home. It was difficult for me to stay on top of my studies and homework with this situation as it was, so I made the very hard decision to give up on my degree program and have him learn at home. I enrolled my son in DL for Grade 4 and we tightened our budget and prepared to give it a try.

Just as his sister had benefited from the flexibility of DL, so did my son. We were able to use part of his Ministry of Education special ed funding to pay for an autism consultant, a play therapist, an occupational therapist, group classes with other home learners, and eventually, tutors to help him learn subjects that were harder for me to teach at home. He spent his first year or so at DL saying he "hated learning" and refusing to do almost any academic work, and his classroom teacher and resource teacher at the DL were incredibly supportive and willing to accept our creative attempts at providing experience-based learning instead of workbooks and worksheets. After being given lots of time and space (and the appropriate support from the team of specialists the DL was able to hire with his funding) he gradually discovered a love of learning. I will never forget the time he suddenly picked up some math textbooks that had been gathering dust on the shelf for more than a year, and within a couple of months he had done about four years worth of math curriculum. Suddenly my unhappy, disaffected and dysregulated boy was an avid mathematics learner who craved more new learning. We found a flexible tutor who was willing to spend a couple of hours with my son every week going over any and every subject that my son expressed interest in. Before I knew it, my son was moving through high school math and science with this tutor. The DL was more than happy to let him work ahead, so that he was able to earn grade 10 and 11 credits in those subjects while he was in Grades 7 and 8, and the special education funding also paid for a study skills tutor to help him with executive functioning and organization. By Grade 9, I realized my son was doing well enough that we should try the bricks & mortar

school again; we felt he needed more social connections, and that he would transition better into post-secondary schooling if he was coming from a more traditional high school structure which would offer similar kinds of deadlines, assignments and exams.

We were able to gradually transition my son into a small, supportive public high school in grade ten. The teachers loved him - he was polite and interested in them, he had an unusually high amount of interest in learning compared to the typical student in their classes, and was happy to be there because he knew it was his own choice and that he could always go back to DL. Because he had completed so many Dogwood credits early, he was able to finish up his required graduation credits before the end of Grade 11, and opted to stay for another year anyway in order to participate in a specialized performing arts/music program offered by the high school. The music program allowed him to feel socially competent and to learn many "soft skills" like how to work in a group and how to overcome disagreements. He was also invited to join the high school improv team, which travelled to Ottawa and won the national improv games. The incredible success my son experienced during those last couple of years of high school are directly attributable to the support he got during his time with a DL. He is now a full time student at university studying computer science and math. He entered university feeling competent, eager to learn, and knowing that he could do well in a variety of learning situations and settings. If I had kept him in the local school system, and eventually sent him to the bricks & mortar high school at which his sister had such a difficult experience, I strongly doubt he would have been in such a positive place when he graduated.

Neither of my children were directly "excluded" or "forced out" of the local schools. In fact, we had some positive experiences with educators there. But the gradual erosion of my children's self-esteem and mental health that came from being asked to fit into the narrow expectations of these schools was very real and serious. I had to give up six years of potential income and set aside my own education and career plans in order to support my children after the local schools left them miserable, anxious, and feeling like they hated learning. Not all families would be in the position to do this, but for those parents like me, who feel like they can't just stand back and watch while their bright, capable kids become bitter and disillusioned, it is ESSENTIAL that the Ministry of Education continue to maintain the flexibility and parent choice that exist in the current DL system. British Columbia's school system was able to work for my kids only because we could take advantage of the flexibility of DL. In particular, the access to special education support that we could use for targeted interventions based on their unique needs made a very important difference for both of my children. Please do not take this option away from families like mine who just want their kids to be happy and to love learning, but who are blessed with children who

are just too "outside-the-box" to really make the local schools work well for their learning needs.

STORY 49: We Were Able to Work on His Self-Regulation

I started my home learning journey when my oldest daughter was in Grade 2. She was well above grade in her language arts, reading, writing and comprehension. When I spoke to the teacher at the time, they felt that she was reading but not comprehending above grade level. I felt that I had to find a solution that would tailor her learning to her strengths and abilities.

When my next child, my son, was about to start school, we realized, the Support Teacher and myself, that his social and emotional development was not where it should be. When he entered a brick and mortar school, we were quite sure that he would have had difficulty, as he used behaviour to show his lack of development and would then be labeled the "bad" kid.

Through home learning we were able to work on his self regulation, his communication and his executive functioning. He attends school one day a week through our IDL and is a valued member of the class. Without homes learning my children and I would likely be frustrated and disillusioned with learning. Through IDL they see every opportunity as a learning opportunity and want to learn.

STORY 50: These IDLs Have Been a Saving Grace

My son is 9 years old, he has autism, intellectual disability, two rare genetic conditions and various other diagnoses. My story is a little different, in that we moved to BC specifically for its home learning program, due to trauma from public school in Alberta - from my research BC has one of the best homes learning programs in the country.

My son experienced trauma in public school, in Alberta from Grades K-1. In Kindergarten, his EA would forcibly grab his arm and hurt his hands. She would belittle him for not remembering his alphabet and single him out from the rest of the class. This made him hate school. He couldn't tell me why he was having meltdowns each morning before school, or why the self harm increased, at one point

so desperate to avoid school he wrapped a seat belt around his neck. It wasn't until close to the end of the year I figured everything out and promptly pulled him.

The principal from this school told us about a different program he could enter at another school for Grade 1. We were told how wonderful it would be for him. We were so full of hope this could be his fresh start. We met with the teacher from the program a few times to discuss his challenges and his trauma. Finally the day came that we were going to introduce my son to the school and his new male teacher- this was simply a tour of the school.

Unfortunately it turned into a nightmare. My son, who was fearful of school already and of males due to multiple medical exams and tests (which the teacher knew about), began to have a meltdown in the hallway. This teacher demonstrated zero patience or compassion. As we entered the classroom, my son was refusing to move from a seated position on a bean bag. The teacher touched his back and said "when kids are bad this is where they go" and pointed to a seclusion room. This room was just a big heavy door, with a lock and no window. Everything happened so fast I had little time to react. My son swatted at the teacher, and the teacher grabbed the back of his shirt and pushed him on his knees inside the room and locked the door. I was in total disbelief and shock. I ran to the door to open it but I was unable and screamed for the teacher to open it- to which he did, and then left the room.

My son and I were crying.

It was at this moment I knew there was no going back. His opportunity to experience public education was gone. So I began homeschooling him. But homeschooling in Alberta is nothing like it is in BC. There is no support and you are on your own. We ended up moving to BC, and joining an IDL. This has been absolutely life changing for my son! The school is supportive, the teachers are kind and compassionate, he is now thriving and making leaps and bounds!

For the government to make changes to who can access which school according to district- it would be devastating for us, and children like mine would be displaced and left behind. And what is the reason for this? Why fix something that is not broken? The government does not realize that many special needs children are in DL/IDLs because public school has been traumatic for them. These IDL's have been a saving grace for them and for their families.

STORY 51: He is Excited to Learn Again

My 7-year-old son attended his local school for Kindergarten and Grade 1. He struggled with anxiety (especially social anxiety) and never made any friendships in his class. He also complained daily about being bored at school. I spoke with his teacher on numerous occasions about his struggles to make friends and she assured me that she would address it and have him work with the resource teacher to address his anxiety.

However, because my son shuts down and becomes very quiet in episodes of anxiety, his issues were largely ignored. He would see the resource teacher once and then they would decide he was fine and return him to the classroom with no support.

In January of his Grade 1 year, he began to have episodes of paralysis. Sometimes it affected just his legs but other times it was so severe that he couldn't lift his head or drink through a straw. He began missing a lot of school and after many trips to the hospital and neurologist he was eventually diagnosed with Somatoform Conversion Disorder. Basically his body could not cope with all of the psychological stress he was experiencing that he began to experience his distress in physical symptoms. In his case, by having episodes of paralysis.

During Spring Break we noticed a massive improvement in his symptoms. Once he was removed from the stressful environment he began to regain his movement. By the time spring break was over he was so improved that we decided to remove him from school.

He is now enrolled in an IDL and is thriving. Although we are at the start of our home learning journey, I already feel really positive that this is the right place for him. His teacher is working with us very closely to ensure that his needs are met both emotionally and academically and he is excited to learn again.

STORY 52: My Son Decided to Complete Grade 12 at Home

My son was diagnosed with a genetic connective tissue disorder at the age of four. We chose a small community school and had a great intake meeting with the principal. The Kindergarten teacher was very good at developing a safety plan. We

had a PT/OT come and visit and even came to our home to help us develop some plans for at home to support him at school.

During K year the principal asked for information to support his dx. I gave her a letter of his dx from the geneticist. She came back saying that he was not accepted for a designation. I was surprised and said, well do you need more information, all the 20 page letter talked about was genetic information like how long his tongue was. She said nope we can not reapply.

Grade 1 came and then came the difficulties. The OT/PT retired. On the first day of school I asked the teacher if she had any questions for me and was she aware of my son's diagnosis. She said that she'd read his file. That scared me even more as anyone who would have read his dx should have questions for me. So I prepared a 20 page document for educators package from the international foundation and highlighted everything that pertained to him.

The third week of school my son was upset because he was only allowed to use the bathroom during recess and lunch. I thought he must have misheard. I went in and, nope sure enough, that was the instructions. I said well no I'm sorry that can not be - did you not read the information I gave you and underlined that he must be able to go to the bathroom anytime he wants? So many times we went in and had problems and had to speak with the teacher about his needs. I was adamant that she had to make exceptions for him. She finally said, in a pretty rude tone, you mean you want an IEP. I said, you mean he doesn't have an IEP? By this time our pediatrician had already called 3 meetings with the school to try and advocate for his needs. He had come to the school for these meetings. Still my son was not offered any support. It was a terrible year with very little support for our learner.

Grade 2 came and another year asking for funding, and another year the principal said it was not possible. But she assured us she was hiring a teacher that would work perfectly with our child. So many good things happened, like no desks and lots of different areas for seating that you could choose. Also, no overhead lights so no migraines. Still no funding and this is when I was realizing that he should qualify for funding after speaking with friends who were principals.

Grade 3 came and we had a new principal. I marched in on the first day, introduced myself and told him we were not going another year without funding, handed him a large folder of supporting evidence and that I expected the school to reapply for his chronic health funding.

Deadline for funding came and went for September and I was told by the school they did not have time to submit. That day I'd had enough and called the district principal. District principal met with my husband and I almost immediately. She informed us that the school had never sent in an application for our son - ever! She went over everything and said she would stamp it and he would receive the designation immediately. She went over what was going on and found out even though my child had a life and death health disorder, his picture was not posted in the staff room for everyone to see. We didn't know this, but we had talked about how our son was having chest pains one day and he had to walk on the school run, but because he had a substitute teacher he was made to run laps around the school because he was walking. I explained how dangerous this was to him. That year I also found out that anytime he had to stay out of a school wide run 2 times a week, he had to sit out front of the school by himself on the front steps. When I went in and asked if he could sit in the office, I was told no he could not, they did not have anyone to supervise him.

That year our son was hospitalized for strokes, but the school still did not have his picture in the staff room. I had gone in to check, even though the district principal had given the school 24 hours to post his picture and medical alert. When asking for support for our child we were told his needs were too great and that we should apply to Variety charity for support.

After his hospitalizations in Grade 3 for strokes and the school's lack of an emergency plan, we were feeling very uncomfortable leaving him at school. His teacher would at least call us if she was not able to be at school so that we would not send him in with someone who did not know him. We decided in April to pull both of our children from school. The school counselor tried to convince us to stay because our children would miss out on socialization and diversity. The school was about the least diverse place I have ever seen.

We then had a phone call with an IDL. What a difference it made, I spoke to the special needs principal and she talked to me for probably two hours on the phone just listening to me. She explained the things they could do to help support us. And it started right away that April, they started planning for the next year. She sent me resources for me to look at. She talked about the at home program and how we should apply for that. They did not only help our child, they helped our family. They were a huge support system for us.

Then in Grade 10 my son decided he wanted to go back. Grade 11 was COVID year and an octet system - one class for 6 hours a day, 5 days a week for 21 days straight. I have a child who gets chronic migraines and all sorts of things and he misses at least 1 day

of school a week. So now 1 day of school is equivalent to 2 weeks of school and who can learn one subject for 6 hours? He struggled with Physics 11 sitting in a classroom so long learning in the morning and testing in the afternoon. He passed his academic classes but he failed welding. He failed because he missed too many classes but this was not communicated to him or to me. When I asked if he had been told I was directed to the vice principal.

Vice principal invited me to a meeting. I show up to the meeting and she takes me into a room with 5 other people I did not know when I only thought it was a meeting with her. I then was subjected to listening to her tell me all they were doing for our child including having an EA in the classroom for him. My child, of course, had no idea and it came out that in fact the EA was not for him. When it was discussed that because of his chronic health it would be difficult for him to come in after school and also for him to come in at lunch time as he would need breaks, the teacher said. "we all get tired, you just have to pull through it". I stood up out of my chair and said you have no right to say that. Are you a child with a chronic health condition? If you are not a child who has suffered strokes, cardiac arrest and aneurysms at the age of 17, then you have no right to compare how tired you are to him. I also asked what the schools policy was to support students with chronic health during this octet system, they told me the students could take the class over again. Then another teacher kept on emailing me that he was taking an extra 10 minute break every day, and she was emailing me every day. I kept on emailing her back saying how important it was for him. My child also had to listen to his principal tell him that he thought he treated school as a mall and was only there to have fun. He did not believe my child was trying and he thought my son could do better. The school was unwilling to work with his IEP for a reduced workload.

My son had decided to complete Grade 12 at home even though he really wanted the highschool experience and the prom. But his experience with so many educators not believing he had a chronic illness was too much. The little support he received was too much. Thank you for reading this. It's hard to keep it short and hard when there is just soooo much more to add - so much trauma.

STORY 53: He is Engaged and Driven

Knowing my son would need assistance in Kindergarten, as he required a support worker in daycare, we privately sought an autism assessment so he would have a designation and an EA. However, the school refused to recognize this need or provide EA support as they didn't see it was necessary.

However, at home I saw my happy go lucky son slowly disappear. He no longer played. He refused to leave his bedroom for hours and hours. He would sit on the floor rolled up in a ball rocking and stimming. He would no longer look at me and talked less and less. He took all the food out of the kitchen cupboards and stashed it in his room. He referred to himself in third person and moved robotically. I had never seen this behaviour before. The child I knew was chatty, loved to play and was always engaged with the world around him. It took years to even get an ASD diagnosis because he was so "high functioning".

My paediatrician wrote a letter stating his behavior was a sign of severe distress and trauma and requested classroom support. The school still did nothing. When I asked why the funding that came with the G designation wasn't being used to support him, the response I got was that it was pooled into the district and not my son's funding.

Then what I was seeing at home, finally showed up at school. The first day of Grade 1, he pinned a classmate down and beat him in the middle of class. He choked the teacher, kicked the principal in the shins and destroyed the room they isolated him in. The next day we had a 3 hour meeting, an IEP was in place and he finally had EA support.

With support my son became more comfortable, began participating in class and made good friends. However, he was having a lot of difficulty with reading and writing. I had understood the school was supporting him with this but it wasn't until school closures with COVID last March that I realized the degree of his struggles and just how far behind he was.

Up until then school and home were two separate spheres for my son. School was for work and home was not. This is common for our kids and his level of exhaustion at the end of the day didn't allow for much of anything.

But with COVID, school was home. Once he began to trust me as his teacher I realized that three letter words were still a huge challenge. I celebrated when he finally recognized DAD. I realized my son was actually dyslexic and could not distinguish letter sounds. Why had no one told me this? Why was he at the end of Grade 3 and still struggling with what he should have mastered in Grade 1? I shared my concerns with the principal, his teacher and LST, hoping they would support him further.

The first day of Grade 4, my son came home crying and feeling stupid. In class he had to interview a new classmate and write down his interests. He didn't know how to

write down video games. I was gutted. Where was the EA? Why did they put him in this position?

Every day, more tears and more let downs. Mommy, no one seems to know I'm Autistic. Mommy, why don't they know how to teach me? He didn't know what he was supposed to do because he couldn't read the board. No one was helping him take notes or explaining what was going on. Another mom commented on all the homework the kids were doing. I asked what homework? My child was stressed with the introduction of French, when, in his words, he didn't even know English.

He finally brought home a sheet of 20 spelling words for a test. I was dumbfounded. I contacted the teacher because these words were way too complex for him. She asked if he could do half? I reminded her that three letter words were a challenge. Then in all sincerity, she asked if I could compile a list of words to work on at his level. She also asked for ideas of how they could help teach him? They were clearly in over their heads, and so was I.

I spoke with the principal and LST about this. I pushed harder for the psych ed that was always promised but never materialized. It had been over a year of being on a waitlist and he was always next or third and then second on the list. The LST explained he would be testing him soon. I soon realized he was referring to the competency testing all Grade 4s would be doing. I looked at that exam and was infuriated. There was no way my son could get through the first three words let alone the whole exam. Subjecting him to such testing would be humiliating and cruel.

Then he came home near the end of September and said, "Mommy, I spend every day at school breaking on the inside. But now that I can control my anger and don't get upset anymore, nobody wants to help me." This broke my heart and I could not send him back another day. I honestly felt doing so was abusive.

I applied to every distributed learning school with SN spots that night. By some miracle, I got a phone call from an IDL school with a spot for him. Right from our intake phone call this school was different. I almost cried when the principal said, "We meet the kids where they are at". Furthermore, my son would finally benefit from the funding his designation granted. When I asked about a psych ed, the principal assured me they would fund that above and beyond the base funding. She also went on to say that base funding was just that - a base. If my child had needs that exceeded that base amount then the school would make sure those needs were met.

He received OG tutoring 30 minutes a day. He did four hours of Lexia a week. He listened to books on Epic. He read on Raz kids. I read to him 30 minutes a day. We wrote daily journals. We played word games. Within 8 months, he advanced from a pre_K reading level up to a Grade 4 reading level.

His success went beyond reading. By June, he was sitting down independently and working through 3-5 hours of work a day. He is engaged and driven. He doesn't really need help with math as he is so relaxed he's figuring it out on his own - often in his head. He's learning to code. He's taking architecture around the world courses taught by an architect and related to Minecraft. He is building renditions of the buildings he is learning about and wowing kids 5 years older than him with his abilities. We are hiking everyday and learning about nature, cycles and ecology first hand. We hatched chickens, handling eggs, learning about chick development within those eggs and out. Our half year at an IDL was not merely "online school" but enveloped whole-bodied learning led by his curiosity and played out firsthand in the increasingly amazing world around us.

He now loves school. He begs never to return to his old school. Even when he is sick he insists on doing his OG tutoring and he does so from his bed. In fact, this week that tutor is taking a vacation and my son begged him not to go. Why? Well, he doesn't feel stupid anymore. He feels understood and supported. He feels valued and capable. He feels seen and heard and cared for. His educators include him by meeting him where he is at. They value him enough to fully invest in his potential. He is taught so he can learn and does learn. This education is the type of education that will build him up and develop his gifts. And when kids like mine are built up to their full potential and given a chance to shine, they do. And out of these bright lights will be the next Elon Musk or Steve Jobs or Albert Einstein. I know that in my heart it is our kids' differences that our world needs most right now and that is why I am so grateful for the schooling we have now.

STORY 54: We Have Found an Educational Option That Works

We called our local public school when it was time for our eldest child to start Kindergarten, but it quickly became clear that they could not accommodate her needs. Stable, familiar and safe adult relationships are required for my daughter to be able to participate. Unfortunately, there were no opportunities to meet school caregivers in advance, and the practice of shuffling students between different classes for the first few weeks would have not have worked for her. She also has

sensory and social differences and we knew that the loud bell, bright lights and large classes would be overwhelming for her. She would not have been able to stay regulated in this kind of environment, let alone learn.

Unlike many, we were fortunate to be in a position to choose a small independent school instead that designed their space to be a calming sensory environment, had smaller classes, and understood the importance of teacher-student relationships. Each year, her teacher came to visit each child at home in the weeks before school started to establish a connection and to remove one of the big first day unknowns. She did reasonably well in that environment for several years.

We learned at the end of her Grade 1 year that she is Autistic. In that year, as academic and social pressures started to increase, even that environment proved to be too much and her self esteem and mental health began to suffer. We have been successfully learning from home ever since where we can tailor her education, social connections, and support to meet her specific needs. The DL school we have chosen is flexible about how the curriculum is delivered, provides substantial funding for the support she needs, and has an option for blended programming. Most importantly, they understand that the needs of complex learners do not fit into a box.

While we have found an educational option that works in our DL school, I am also aware that this is the last stop. Without a DL that can meet our needs we risk needing to opt out of the formal education system altogether. I am very worried that the new Online Learning Model is not taking into account the needs of complex learners and that this is the situation we will soon be facing. A future where my daughter has no workable educational options and a drastic reduction in the support she needs to thrive.

STORY 55: My Children Are Now Both Formally Diagnosed as Autistic

My daughter is very bright and expressive but intense and needed constant supervision/ scaffolding at home and previously at preschool. I had gone to the CDC in January to start her assessment. They and her preschool teacher helped me brief the school and requested my son's first teacher as she had bonded with my daughter previously. Things seemed to go well; there was an EA with another student to help in a pinch and her behaviour/social issues seemed minimal. The main issue the school had was her struggles with both types of incontinence. She was doing fine at home using the bathroom but really struggled with the distractions of a

classroom and had to really focus to hear her body signals. I explained that her pediatrician had said that poor interoception and past trauma were the likely cause and he did not suspect it to be unwillingness or lack of parental help. The teacher was great as usual. After a short trial with undies we agreed to use pull-ups and that I would come to help with the accidents due to stricter COVID protocols and lack of trained staff. I had frequent communication with her teacher who is amazing. She designed child specific strategies, was willing to learn and use strategies I used at home, adapted things to my daughter's special interests and more.

My daughter was seemingly enjoying school, had friends and was learning. Then the school refusal started after two blissful months. She still had few issues in school due to her awesome teacher but getting there, inside the door and managing at home was a totally different story. I suspected she had started masking as she usually is quite vocal when stressed but the administration didn't seem to understand/ believe my very different experience at home. The principal said: "Oh, it's just restraint collapse - it's normal for kids", adding that without an official diagnosis their hands were tied.

I asked about support in the future when a diagnosis was received and the response was non-committal. At our last team meeting before spring break I asked again about the possibility of support for her toileting or social struggles for the next year when she would have her autism diagnosis and restrictions may be lessened but they said she was too "high functioning" and her incontinence was something she had to deal with to gain independence. I explained to them about her drastically different levels of functioning when regulated versus masking and dysregulated. Her teacher tried to help and asked if there was any OT help available next year since EA help was being denied. Her teacher and I agreed to just call and have me come without asking her to clean up herself to provide a temporary solution. As we got closer to spring break my daughter started to crack. She had issues returning to class after recess and lunch. There were many days I could not physically get her to school as her brother was also not wanting to go. Fighting one bolting girl and one flopping boy was too much for my already burnt out self even with my trusty wagon to help me. Over spring break, my daughter had a complete mental break. She was often inconsolable and could not eat or sleep independently. On her worst days she couldn't even speak but to say "momma momma" and had to be held all day except for the occasional break of a favorite show which would hold her interest for the duration. But meltdowns ensued as soon as the credits rolled and this cycle would continue all day.

After spring break I explained to the school what had happened and talked with the school counselor about our next steps. The suggestion was that we do our best to

reintroduce her to school because her anxiety was something that she had to overcome and to have her see a private counselor as she would not come to school to see theirs. While I agreed with the school that she needed to overcome her anxiety and that counseling would help, I knew that, due to her suspected autism diagnosis, forcing her into a stressful situation in which she was not receiving enough support would only further hinder her development and mental health at this stage. The school admin informed me that they could no longer support her due to their closing their online learning programs and that I would have to find a different place to enrol because she needed to attend to be enrolled with the school. Her teacher remained a great support checking in and offered to still send home activities if we wanted. She even gave me year end gifts for both children because she knew that my son would feel left out and didn't want me to have more on my plate. She did everything in her power to help both my children receive an equitable education and I am eternally grateful.

My children are now both formally diagnosed as Autistic (anxiety based extreme demand avoidance/ PDA respectively). My husband and I are Neurodivergent with the high probability of having the same diagnosis as our children. We have suffered trauma at school ourselves. I have no fight in me at this point to do the necessary battling to make public school a safe and healthy place for my children to learn. My husband has only rage left for the school system. He is rightly enraged though. This system of exclusion and inaction has damaged him, myself and has now damaged our children. His response would be seen as a big angry man threatening school staff, instead of being understood as a trauma survivor who is fighting for his family's safety and mental health.

I can no longer trust the public school system to make my children's education and safety a priority. I have no faith that I will be reliably informed when and if a crisis arises with my child. I see that my children may be needlessly ejected from class or punished for behavioral issues they have been briefed extensively on by me and professionals and continue to have people, who devote their lives to teaching children to learn, ignore the suggestions to solve the issues they face. My children are not developmentally able to advocate for themselves and are a risk to themselves, their classmates and school staff if not properly supported. The problem lies not just with "bad apple" teachers and administrators in the schools but district and Government officials play important roles as well. These bodies, from my observation, will not advocate for our children but rather ignore issues and further create crisis situations that harm students and staff, all the while they are telling parents the "best" option for all of BC's children is the "inclusive" public system. District officials and administration are quick to blame the Government for a lack of funds, thus pitting parents against many in the teachers union because of the vast discrepancy

between support needs and support funds available for classes. The teachers that fight for inclusion for their students lose so much because districts, administrators and even their own union fellows refuse to work with them towards educational reform. Without a mass awakening of the general public and all parties involved, we cannot change the public system to make it anywhere near the inclusive sole provider of education they esteem to be. In many cases like ours the diversity of education program options and flexibility of funding needed for equitable education would be virtually impossible to implement on such a broad scale. Yet again failing all involved and continuing the cycle of trauma faced by so many. Children are our future as a province and a country, if we ignore them how much damage are we creating for our collective futures.

STORY 56: He is Happy and He Is Learning

Both our children are enrolled in Distributed Learning. We did not choose Distributed Learning, we were left with no choice. Our beautiful and amazing children are loving, well behaved, intelligent, caring, well mannered, courteous and kind. They love music, sports, video games, animals, and their friends and family. Neither has ever been in any sort of trouble, neither at home nor in school. Our children are loved and cherished, and we will do whatever it takes to keep them safe and help them thrive.

Our 13 year old son is visually impaired. He has absolutely no vision in his left eye, and vision through his right eye is like looking through a fog. He also has severe, poorly controlled asthma, and severe peanut, tree nut, and egg allergies; all will cause anaphylaxis.

Until March of 2020, he attended brick & mortar school. He had an EA, a teacher of the visually impaired that came from out of town to see him monthly, and the head of special education was also his case manager, and put a lot of effort into doing what she could to help him succeed. All that changed when he started Grade 6. His teacher of the visually impaired took a new job, and he no longer had that support. The wonderful head of special ed retired and her replacement couldn't care less about supporting my son. We met with her right before school began and all she did was say, "Well I don't know what you were promised..." and we never heard from her again. He was left with no case manager. One of the other special ed teachers said she'd take him, and she tried, but all the resources, all the plans that had been laid out for him over the years, were suddenly gone.

Public school was not easy. He was called racial slurs, hit, and bullied, and not just by students. He hated it, and it was a daily fight to get him there.

We had to keep him out of school when COVID started. His pediatrician told us to do whatever we needed to, to keep him from getting COVID. So, we literally hid at home. Come last September, the school sent home their version of online school. It was terrible. My son could not do it. None of it had been modified for his needs. He had no EA, no support. When we realized COVID may be here for the long haul, I started contacting Distributed Learning programs. I honestly cannot tell you how many I contacted, but I went down the whole list. NOT ONE, would take him, because of his visual impairment. A school needs a vision teacher in order to offer him enrollment. Well, they are very few and far between. The vision teacher he had, had been travelling through several districts in order to visit students, but she had taken a new position near her home. Then we were done. I had gotten a, "sorry, no," from all. Now thinking my child will be denied an education, and literally bawling my head off, I found our current IDL listed under Independent DL schools. I had nothing to lose, so I emailed them. This was the end of January 2021. I got a response stating they were full, but could possibly take him for September. I cried optimistic tears of joy. These people wanted to help him. I sent them some information that they requested, his IEP, diagnosis, and last report card. About 2–3 days later, I got an email from them, they were offering him enrollment, right then! They managed to hire his old vision teacher, as she apparently had worked for them in the past. Everything fell into place. The school is amazing. The teachers, the staff, are extremely kind and supportive. There is no problem having his work modified for him. He loves his school, and has made really good, good friends. He builds video games with them online, they chat daily, and help each other with school work. He is HAPPY and he is learning.

Bill 8 states that come September 2022, the NDP government is changing things so that DL will now be Online learning. School districts will offer online learning and you have to use the online learning in your district. Well. I contacted our local board office the day before yesterday to ask if they had online learning and if they were going to offer it for next year. The response I got was;

"Good Morning -----,

I am emailing you this morning to respond to your question below.

Currently SDXX does not offer online learning and at this time is not considering offering it in the 22/23 school year either.

Wishing you a great week,

-----"

It doesn't really matter, as I will never put my kids back into our local district, no matter what. If the BC NDP government takes away my son's ability to attend his independent OL, he no longer has a school to go to. And I don't think it's fair to traumatize him and make him have to move to another DL (online) school. Besides that, no one will take him. So then what? The BC NDP's take away his right to an education in CANADA.

I find it very strange that none of the parents of these students were consulted on this decision. Or the students. Why would someone make such a huge decision for someone else's child's life, their education, without consulting with them first? I find it incredibly disrespectful to dismiss these children and their parents' feelings and opinions.

I have read story after story. So many kids who have found their place with their DL and Independent DL schools. Every one of these kids has a story. No one starts out wanting to go to DL school. Every kid has been traumatized, ignored, bullied, etc., in brick-and-mortar public school. Now the NDP Government wants to do it to them, too? For God's sake, leave it be. It works. Leave these schools, leave these kids, who are finally thriving, alone!

STORY 57: He is Living Proof That Accurate Intervention Works

We showed up to kindergarten with mountains of paperwork saying our child needed to continue OT and SLP from his preschool program. He was offered ZERO OT time ever at public school (we were allowed to pull him from school once a week and pay for our own OT) and he didn't get SLP until Grade 1.

We did public school until the Grade 2 teacher literally lost our child, not once, but twice in the same day while he was in hypoglycemic psychosis, AND the school didn't call me - his Grade 1 teacher did. He was in hospital for a week and a month

sick at home once we were finally informed he was having a medical emergency and was incoherent in the office with burnt hands. He was 7 years old and has been missing for over 30 minutes without anyone reporting it or calling us.

We did public DL first but they took his SE funding and offered no services until I begged for help. Then he got one hour a week of EA time from Jan - June. Total. While the school still expected mountains of grade level work from a severely dyslexic child, that of course wasn't diagnosed because tests are expensive. He also had SLP in his former public school but his new public DL SLP said he "wasn't bad enough", so we paid out of pocket for SLP to continue, and incidentally he was "that bad". This was age 8 and he was in SLP EIGHT MORE YEARS.

We moved to a supportive IDL (now IOL).

Our current IOL supported kiddo right through to early graduation at age 16, while his first public school had a meeting with us at age SIX and told us he'd never graduate.

He's in a commercial pilot program now at age 17.

It was only possible for him to achieve so much because his IOL had him properly diagnosed and supported him with EA time, tutors, OT and SLP for many years... The investment in his education paid off. He is living proof that accurate intervention works!

STORY 58: There is Simply No Way to Accommodate this Child Safely

My son is 15 years old. When he was Kindergarten aged, we went to a few different schools and districts. No one could, or would, accommodate him. He has non-verbal, high-needs autism, epilepsy, and severe allergies. The allergies plus the lack of impulse control that comes with his autism means he could not be safe in a room where people eat. All schools eat in their classrooms, which meant my son could not be in those rooms. No schools have lunch rooms anymore.

One school district rep told us to go to an IDL (and told me she'd swear she never said it), because: "There is simply no way to accommodate this child safely." Another told us that our son, who needs 24/7 care, could have 1 hour per day of SEA help. One hour. I asked about the other time, and they said they would "keep him busy." He is a

major flight risk. He would literally die if he were not personally attended to for 5 hours. They simply did not care. They told me they didn't have the money and I could take the hour per day or not. I chose not.

We are with an IDL now, and the first year was lovely. As it went on, the government interfered more and more, it got progressively worse, and now we are looking at the possibility of losing even that too. It is clear: my son is simply not important to the BC government, regardless of which party is running it.

STORY 59: Online Learning is Not a Choice For Us

I am a single full time mom of twin 7 year old boys - one neurodiverse (ASD, ADHD, SPD, severe anxiety), his twin brother neurotypical. I also look after my 80 year old step father who has medical issues, my 70 year old disabled mother, and have chronic cluster (suicide) headaches (which started one month after the start of the school year that I pulled him out of brick and mortar), as well as other health challenges both physically and mentally.

Up until two years ago, I was also working full time plus overtime and weekends to help pay for therapies, buy equipment, medication, and just the day to day necessities for a family and to try to make ends meet on a single income. Until I had my mental break, largely in part to the trauma, abuse, and atrocities my family experienced while dealing with my neurodivergent son's school in general (various teachers and "support staff"), principal, district and the system itself. I was sobbing on the way to work each morning, would burst into tears at work, get called to pick up my son after only two hours at work from school, putting my job in jeopardy and eventually being ostracized by my co-workers. This used up all my sick time, I had to take time off work without pay, my job suffered, my bank account suffered. I was having panic attacks, headaches, night sweats, was nauseous, had insomnia, night terrors, and started having cognitive issues. I finally had a mental break at work, and have been off on disability ever since, taking an 80% reduction in pay, loss of retirement savings, etc.

Unfortunately, I was in a remote town with spotty WiFi and limited internet access so was not able to submit my story via the website and I was finding it very difficult to put together, as I have found in the past as well when I have tried to advocate for change with our experience, as a 'side effect' of one of the medications is cognitive difficulties, word searching, trouble putting together sentences etc. I've felt

somewhat embarrassed to write/share our story due to this and unfortunately getting anything down on paper/online these days or even trying to record something verbally, takes longer than it should. I feel this is too important to not share despite maybe not being able to relay my words or the situation so eloquently, but the abuse, trauma, and exclusion we faced, no family should ever have to experience and if our choice of DL is taken away, I don't know what I'm going to do.

My son was locked in rooms, excluded from school, sent home daily. The school specifically and blatantly disregarded key safety issues that were noted and reiterated in meetings, via email, on safety plans, and then when incidents happened blamed my son and used the situation as a means to further ostracize and exclude us. Even though our district has a hands off policy this often was not followed. The principal actually personally called the district to ask if they would make an exception specifically for my son so that they could physically restrain him. She phoned me and asked me if he was on medication and if not he should be.

They tried to get us to enroll in a different school that would be a 'better fit' for him, and went as far as providing us pamphlets and finding out when their next intake was and what the process was to have him accepted there WITHOUT my permission. My son left the school grounds without anyone's knowledge on at least two occasions trying to run home. Once across a busy street and another time up the school field hill where he was only stopped because there were older children there who knew he shouldn't be leaving the grounds. The principal (in actual meetings with my team) stated that my child was doing things out of SPITE and WILFULLY, and that she knew all about autism as she had seen a movie about it. It got to the point where they were intentionally antagonizing him to get us to leave the school, which I refused to do out of principle, until my mental break, and the final straw of WHERE they told me he would have to learn, IF he was to ever be permitted to return to the school. This was to be his new classroom - to be taught by himself, at 6 years old, for only partial days, segregated from any peers, with only an EA present - welcome to what they told me they named this room just for him: The "ZEN DEN".

Online learning is not a choice for us, it is a necessity.

STORY 60: I'd Like to Think That We Are a Success Story

Our now 11 year old son attended public school from Kindergarten to part way through Grade 3. Although my son came into the public school system with known giftedness and learning disabilities (twice exceptional), and a unique neurological profile (out of sync senses diagnosed as Autism), and with good intent from all staff and a full time education assistant, the experience was traumatizing for all involved. My son was overwhelmed at all times causing explosive behaviour and class evacuation numerous times, two of his three teachers left on stress leave, the rest of the class was not able to learn in a safe environment, and as parents it was difficult to work as we were being phoned almost daily to pick our son up. Part way through Grade 3 we reluctantly withdrew our son from our local brick and mortar public school - how much worse could home learning be?

Thankfully, we discovered something called “Distributed Learning”, now renamed Online Learning. Initially Online Learning was terrifying for so many reasons: most of all, as I could no longer work would we be able to make financial ends meet? With the support of our Learning Consultant we found resources that bolstered our son's challenges such as a reading tutor trained in the science of reading and an occupational therapist who helped to integrate his senses. We were able to also meet his giftedness and bring joy back into his life by engaging in his strengths and passions such as joining and competing in chess and taking advanced level math courses. In hindsight, this off-road parenting and educating adventure was exactly what my son needed.

Half way through Grade 5 my son said he wanted to return to the local brick and mortar school as living in a small town we were socially isolated. With the support from as high up as the District Superintendent we were able to return and my son is now enthusiastically attending Grade 7. We have miraculously been able to align all of the “ten stars” for in-class learning to work for our son. As parents we do not take this for granted (schooling is month to month) and feel great peace knowing that there is always Online Learning if needed.

Although I don't know the details of the change from Distributed to Online Learning, I would like to compare how the approximate \$20,000/year special education funding was used:

- Brick & Mortar: The funding did not benefit my son in the brick and mortar system as staff did not have the right training (administrators to teachers to education assistants) so it was money down the drain.
- Online Learning: The funding was used to hire the right professionals and programs that helped to lessen some of his challenges and bolster his learning and confidence.

In my perfect world the personalization through access to funding of the old Distributed Learning model would be brought forward into the proposed Online Learning model. I am curious and potentially in support of the 'regional' aspect of the new system if there is access to a social community.

Finally, I am thankful that as a family we have been able to just get by financially to do what is best for our son, and we realize that that is not an option for some. I dread to think where my son would be now if our only option was our local school... how many more teachers would have gone off on medical leave? Would he have been expected to learn in a way that he is unable to, given his disabilities and further lowering his self esteem? Would he be suicidal? I am also 100% positive that there is no way my son would have been able to return to the brick and mortar school if we had not been able to direct the funding support we received through the Online School.

I'd like to think that we are a success story due to our personal financial privilege, access to the funding offered through Online Learning, and being savvy and diplomatic enough to work through the bureaucracy of the school district. If interested in learning more about our story, I would welcome the opportunity.

TABLE 1: School Districts Departed

School District #	School District Name	Number of Stories
20	Kootenay-Columbia	1
23	Central Okanagan	4
33	Chilliwack	3
34	Abbotsford	3
35	Langley	2
37	Delta	2
38	Richmond	2
39	Vancouver	2
40	New Westminster	1
41	Burnaby	3
42	Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows	4
43	Coquitlam	4
44	North Vancouver	2
45	West Vancouver	1
46	Sunshine Coast	1
48	Sea to Sky	1
57	Prince George	2
61	Greater Victoria	2
62	Sooke	1
63	Saanich	1
68	Nanaimo-Ladysmith	3
69	Qualicum	1
71	Comox Valley	2
79	Cowichan Valley	1
83	North Okanagan-Shuswap	1

TABLE 2: Disabilities Shared

Disabilities	Number of Identified Learners Within the Stories
Autism	48
ADHD	22
Learning Disability	15
Anxiety	12
Gifted	9
Intellectual Disability	7
Depression	4
Genetic Disorder	3
DCD	3
FASD	2
Visual Impairment	2
Tourette's	2
Severe Allergy	2
Pediatric Arthritis	1
Cerebral Palsy	1
Epilepsy	1

Notes:

- Disabilities and/or diagnoses were not requested to be included as part of stories. Any mentions were made solely by those who submitted as part of their story.
- A number of stories indicated that the learner was awaiting an autism assessment. Those numbers are not included in the above table.

TABLE 3: Online Learning Schools Enrolled

School Name	Number of Students Who Enrolled
SelfDesign	15
HCOS	9
eStreams	7
Anchor	4
IDLC	4
PIE	3
TLA	3
STRIDES	2
RCOA	2
NIDES	2
SPIDER	1
Pathways	1
EBus	1
Ascend	1
KLEOS	1

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