

Parent Testimonial – Rebecca Atkinson

My daughter Meredith is in grade two at KCS. She is amazingly smart, funny, kind and very passionate. For those of you who know her, you'll know she is a walking animal fact book, and has plans to save the environment and all the animals in it when she grows up. However, Meredith also has Aspergers, ADHD and a generalized anxiety disorder, that's a whole lot of things going on for a little seven-year-old to handle.

When Meredith was diagnosed at the age of 3.5 by Dr. Paul McDonnell, one of his biggest concerns was school. He noted in her current state, the ability to function and thrive in a school setting was going to be one of her biggest challenges. We were encouraged to explore a smaller school setting where she would be less anxious by her surroundings and have less overall external stimuli.

You see, for Meredith, one of her best gifts and biggest challenges is that she doesn't see the big picture. Instead when she walks into a situation she sees all the details. For example, she doesn't see a store, a restaurant or a school, she sees every unique detail that makes up those buildings and everything in it. Every individual smell, sound and sight. All of these details immediately flood her brain at once and she has to process them without any ability to filter things out. Imagine if that was you, try going out to dinner and not hearing just the din around you, but instead every single word of every individual conversation happening around you all at once. Going to a store and not seeing the store, but every light, display, items within the store and the music or announcements all at once. Now translate that to school, it would be difficult to clear your mind to learn if your brain was constantly trying to process hundreds of little details for every stimulus in your environment. It would likely make you exhausted, you would have a hard time focusing, and your ability to retain/learn new information would be impacted. You would be anxious because your brain is in this constant sense of fight/flight or overdrive trying to make sense of all the information it was receiving. While not every person on the spectrum sees this way, many do, this is what life is like for them on a daily basis.

Imagine putting kids like Meredith in a larger school environment where hundreds of details turned into thousands of details, they would simply shut down. For kids like Meredith, their ability to thrive and grow is dependent on the environment that they are in.

When we first started school, even with 1.5 years of pre-school intervention therapy, even with their school readiness program, school was understandably a challenge for her. We had an amazing amount of prep ahead of time - in fact, the school and teachers started preparations in April and May. Her kindergarten teacher even made her a video, which was a tour of the school, and I swear she watched that thing more than a hundred times over the summer. I will be honest, she hated school, she begged to be home schooled for the first 1.5 years because as someone with Aspergers, she couldn't deal with the pressures of the social dynamic while trying to process all of the information coming at her. However, over time, this has changed, and I truly believe this is because of the environment she is in.

At Kingsclear, the staff and students are like family, the older kids understand when certain things might be too much for her on the playground, during events or even on the bus and they often go out of their way to make accommodations for her so that things are not as noisy. Every single teacher and staff member knows her needs – and it's not just Meredith – they know every student and every student's need – something that can't be replicated in a larger school environment.

We are often late or nearly late for school on mornings when there is some sort of routine change or anxiety-provoking setting event, and as we walk up the steps of the school, there have been a number of times when the teacher holding the door open – often Mme Mazerole can see us bringing up the rear. She takes one look at Meredith’s face, or we exchange a simple glance and in that moment, the grade 5 teacher – who won’t be Meredith’s teacher for a few more years, knows that Meredith needs help and what kind of help to provide. I remember the first-time this happened, she bent down on one knee and pulled Meredith close. Whispering in her ear about the days’ events – because you see, that’s the other benefit, with so many multi-age learning opportunities and a smaller school, every teacher knows exactly what is happening in every classroom. In just a few brief moments, I watched Meredith’s entire demeanour change and she walked into that school with a level of confidence she wouldn’t have had if Mme Mazerole hadn’t known exactly what she needed because she knows Meredith.

Meredith is now thriving at Kingsclear – not to say she isn’t still struggling with anxiety or trying to process all kinds of information – because she is. She’s thriving simply because of the fact that every teacher and staff member in that building is working together, like a family unit to support her. They do that not just for Meredith, but for every student. Again, this is not something that can be replicated in a school with 500+ kids. In this kind of environment, Meredith would need more one-on-one intervention, more EA time, more resources that simply aren’t available (since she currently only receives a few hours of EA support a week – and some weeks none at all). In a larger school environment, kids like Meredith would get lost and fall through the cracks because they wouldn’t have a ‘family’ looking out for them, guiding, supporting and nurturing them.

How can I say Meredith is thriving? Well, she no longer asks to be home schooled, and in fact is adamant that if she wants to learn French she can do so on an app, because she’s not leaving Kingsclear to go to French Immersion. She’s had many opportunities to visit Garden Creek and finds the size of that school even daunting for her. She recognizes that all the staff here at KCS are an important support system for her. Yesterday, Meredith took part in drama fest, yes, my anxious child performed in front of 100+ kids and adults. The time leading up to drama fest was rough on us at home, many sleepless nights and several panic attacks. In our communication binders, we could see she was taking more breaks on the exercise bike in class and other things as the day grew near, but instead of pulling her out, everyone worked together – resource/guidance, classroom teachers and drama club organizers to find a way to make her successful. Meredith asked for just a small part and had memorized her lines within 5 minutes of receiving them – and woke up at 3 am many nights afraid she would forget them, but yesterday I watched with tears in my eyes as she stood on stage and delivered those two lines so perfectly.

In a large school setting, I truly do not believe she would have been able to receive the same kind of support to be able to accomplish what she called last night ‘the most terrifying moment of my life’.

So as you make your decision, I’m asking you to think about kids like Meredith and to look at what viable options there really are for them currently, or in the future so they can continue to thrive, grow and learn to their full potential. As the saying goes, it takes a village and that’s what KCS truly is to this community and so many of the families that come through these doors.

Regards,

Rebecca Atkinson (PSSC Chair)