

Separated but not divided, St. Patrick's lives on

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Saint John * Grade 3 is rarely seen as a milestone year for students, but it's a different story at St. Patrick's School.

It's a grade Destiny Ryan has been waiting for since entering the west Saint John elementary school four years ago. This year, the eight-year-old was all smiles on her first day back from summer vacation.

"I get to be in more stuff," said Ryan, a St. Patrick's Grade 3 student.

"My mom said on the first day that we had school now you get to be in more stuff now."

The bulk of the K-5 school's extra-curricular activities are geared towards Grade 3 students and up, building a sense of anticipation in the younger kids, especially those with older siblings, like Ryan, who heard of all the fun her sister had.

From cooking to crafts, computers to Lego, the students at the community school love taking part in the clubs hosted by community members, Ryan said. The third grader is in the ever popular Lego club, where she and a friend are putting the finishing touches on a lovely home for some Hello Kitty figurines.

The older grades don't have all the fun though. The younger students also see plenty of outside support from community partners as well as those from the Partners Assisting Local Schools initiative, known as PALS, according to the St. Patrick's community school coordinator Krista Turnbull.

PALS is an initiative that partners the local business community and service agencies to give schools in the Saint John region educational opportunities. Through the initiative, the school was afforded a host of activities and ongoing support, financial and volunteer, for the past nine years, Turnbull said.

The future of the long-time community support - and the school itself - was thrown into doubt, however, after staff received some devastating news in August 2014. St. Patrick's School was closed that year because the school was no longer structurally sound. A long-lasting fixture of the west-side community was being shuttered, displacing students to two separate buildings - K-2 students are in their second year at Havelock School, while Grades 3-5 have an L-shaped wing around the corner at Beaconsfield Middle School.

The provincial government has unveiled plans for a large west-side school that will consolidate St. Patrick's, Havelock and Seawood. The new school is expected to open in September 2017.

With only three years before amalgamating, the community support St. Patrick's received was in jeopardy prior to the 2014-15 school year. Yet, the school retained its expiring identity, existing as a separate entity within the two schools, while continuing to offer much of the same programming prior to being divided.

Turnbull said it wouldn't have happened without the support from their PALS and community partners. Within weeks, she said, all their partners approached her to see what they could offer.

"Our partners really stepped up to the plate to support us at a time when I think they knew it was really going to be a challenge for us," said Turnbull.

Their partners emphasized togetherness in the early going of the first year apart, handing out school T-shirts and water bottles to the students and hosting a turkey dinner on the first Thanksgiving.

What could have been a taxing, painful transition was relatively smooth thanks to the "overwhelming support" shown by their partners, Turnbull said.

"That's the probably been the real highlight of the six years that I've been here is to see what could have been devastating to the kids last year, but with the support that we had from our PALS and community partners really pulled us through," she said.

And the kids have responded. Ryan is still keenly aware of the St. Patrick's identity and what comes along with it, as she described how the host of the Lego club, offered by T4G, is working with the kids on constructing the a massive Lego block tower.

Turnbull said the time spent with volunteers means a lot to the students.

"It's not so much what you are doing with the kids," Turnbull said. "It's that you're there with them and they love spending time with our PALS and community partners."

Lessons in partnership Each Monday, the Telegraph-Journal will profile one of 30 schools from Sussex to St. Stephen who participate in the PALS program

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