

Students keep up with school work in hospital

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Justin Cooper, 15, does a math lesson with the help of his favourite teacher, Heidi Hughes, at the Stollery Children's Hospital school.

Photograph by: Chris Schwarz , The Journal

For many young people, it must sound like a real double-whammy: sick enough to be in hospital, but still going to school.

Fifteen-year-old Justin Cooper doesn't see it that way. A patient at the Stollery Children's Hospital, he's happy to be able to continue with his learning.

Justin has scoliosis -- an abnormal curvature of the spine -- and since 2006 he has been in and out of the Stollery. During each visit he has kept up to date on his studies at the Stollery school campus.

"At least I'm getting a little bit of an education, even if I'm sick," Justin said. "The teachers come to my room even if I can't make it to the classroom."

The school at the Stollery is made up of two tiny classrooms, which combined are smaller than a regular classroom. The rooms are filled with art decorations, stacks of textbooks, computers and stuffed "Great Root Bears" from A&W.

Justin wants to be a chef when he's older and has dreams of owning his own restaurant. In school, he loves learning about math and science and meeting other children who are fighting through similar illnesses.

"It's a typical fun and happy environment," he said of the school.

For the past 15 years, sick children from across Canada have been learning at the Stollery. Their stays range from days to years, but the average patient spends two to three weeks in a classroom. Last year, 267 children who received acute care or other medical treatment at the Stollery also continued their education at the hospital school.

The school, which serves students in Grades 1 through 12, is a partnership between Alberta Education, Alberta Health and Edmonton Public Schools.

"The program is funded by Alberta Education and they have been extremely co-operative and helpful," said principal Gabriel Mancini, who is also a psychologist.

"We've managed to blend medical, educational and therapeutic components to help students."

Assistant principal Richard Lowe said the school has a unique way of helping children learn.

"We contact their home schools and pick up right where they left off so they don't fall behind," Lowe said. "We teach them a regular curriculum, but we have to be flexible, creative and innovative in the way we teach."

Heidi Hughes, Kelsey McCready and Brian Aaberg are the teachers. They each have their own specializations, but teach an array of subjects.

Hughes said it's sometimes tough to accommodate every child who wants to learn, but they manage.

"Between wheelchairs, beds and IVs, we squeeze as many kids into the classrooms as we can -- there's no maximum," Hughes said.

"I love the opportunity to work one-on-one with these kids. Even though they're sick, they're excited to learn, want to do well, and it's amazing how resilient and optimistic they are."

Teachers, administrators and fellow students also act as listeners with whom children can talk to about anything.

Cole Derkson is also being educated at the school. The Grade 7 student is waiting for a heart transplant and depends on a Berlin Heart, which helps his heart pump blood, to keep him alive.

His father, Larry Derkson, believes school is helping motivate his son.

"The school is tailored toward his interests, but he's motivating himself and the teachers are invested in him," Derkson said. "Before he didn't care about school, but now he's doing what he's interested in."

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