

Waiting for Godot

By Malkin Dare

You're the parent of Jason, a grade 3 student. One night, your phone rings and it's Jason's teacher saying that she's worried about his reading and thinks he should be tested. The nightmare has begun.

Jason's teacher tells you that your school board has a long waiting list for testing. If she puts Jason's name on the list right now, it could take as much as a year for him to be tested. "A whole year?" you think. If Jason is already behind and nothing is done for another year, then he risks getting so far behind he can never catch up. Jason needs help now.

This is an all-too-common scenario in much of Canada these days. Depending on the nature of a student's problem, he or she typically faces very long waits for testing in most school boards. And, even once the testing has been done and the diagnosis rendered, students are often placed on another long waiting list — this time for a special education teacher.

In the special education world in Canada, horror stories like Jason's abound. Most people caught in the coils of special education think that its problems are due to under-funding — even though Canadians already spend much more than the OECD average on education. I would like you to consider another possibility.

Finland is a country that spends near the OECD average on education, considerably less than Canada as a percentage of GDP. Yet there are virtually no waiting lists for testing in Finland, and its students do extremely well on international comparisons of student achievement.

Finnish educators, it turns out, take a quite different approach than Canadian educators. Their goal is to make sure that large learning deficits never have a chance to build up. The curriculum lays out the sequence of required learning very specifically, such that by certain dates, certain skills and knowledge are expected to have been taught and mastered.

If a child starts to have difficulty with something, the teacher can pick up on it right away and give the student extra help. If the problem can't be overcome by the classroom teacher, the student is referred to one of the school's specially-trained resource teachers. Because the student's learning problem is addressed before it can

snowball into something serious, usually the amount of special support that is needed is fairly minor.

In Finland, educators rarely see a need for testing to find out what is “wrong” with a student. Instead, they just provide extra explanation and practice in the area of difficulty until the student catches up. This approach seems to me much more humane and, of course, cost-effective than Canadian practice. For those of you who aren’t familiar with the play in my title, Godot never arrives.