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News / GTA

## Autistic boy and mother sue Peel District School Board

Karen Thorndyke claims her 12-year-old son was, among other things, isolated for long periods and denied access to food, water or a bathroom.

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Christian Thorndyke and his mother, Karen, seen at their lawyers' office in Brampton, are alleging in a statement of claim that he was abused and tormented by staff at several Peel schools.

By: Jacques Gallant Staff Reporter, Published on Tue Mar 10 2015

When Christian Thorndyke was an elementary student, he spent some of his school days alone in a room without access to food, water or a toilet, pleading to get out, the 12-year-old Mississauga boy with autism and his mother allege in a multi-million-dollar lawsuit against the Peel District School Board.

Christian and his mother Karen are seeking almost \$16 million in damages from a lengthy list of defendants that includes PDSB superintendents, principals, teachers and staff at the various schools he attended over a period of seven years.

The defendants have 20 days to file a statement of defence once they have been served with the statement of claim, which was filed in court on Monday.

"As this is a private matter between the Peel District School Board and the family involved, we are unable to disclose any information about this case," says a statement from Louise Sirisko, superintendent of special education support services at the PDSB.

"We remain deeply committed to supporting this child and his family, and believe this goal is not well-served by talking about this very personal matter in the media."

The allegations, which have not been proven in court, include:

- A support worker would "place him in a chair and hold his arms tightly behind the back of the chair for certain periods of time" as a form of punishment when he was in kindergarten at one school;



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- Christian was “placed in a solitary isolation room for several hours, sometimes for the duration of the entire school-day” at another school where he completed Grades 1 to 3; the school referred to the room as “Mexico.”
- The room was “approximately the size of a small walk-in closet” and “the defendants ... would alternate sitting on a chair against the door to prevent Christian from exiting the room.”
- He was placed alone in a room at another school on several occasions, and that at both schools, he was denied access to food, water or a toilet while in the room, and forced to clean up after urinating.
- Another school made “false and misleading” reports to Children’s Aid “with the intent to destabilize Karen Thorndyke’s custody of Christian, and with further intent to intimidate Karen Thorndyke from subsequent involvement with the school.”

Christian told the Star in an interview he felt anxious in the schools and was having nightmares.

“I felt awful,” he said. “When I used to go home, I was scared to go to school the next day.”

Karen said that as a child with autism, Christian can sometimes have outbursts when he feels he’s in a difficult or uncomfortable situation, but that unprovoked outbursts are rare.

His mother told the Star he is doing much better now in his new school. She described the last few years as “emotionally draining and scary” and said the goal of the lawsuit is to see change happen.

“It’s a huge problem and one that needs a spotlight,” said Karen Thorndyke, speaking from the office of her lawyer, Rhyan Ahmed. “This doesn’t end with Christian. These kids are autistic, some are non-verbal. The use of these cells, as I like to call them, is very detrimental to their well-being.”

School board spokeswoman Carla Pereira, speaking generally and not about this case, said schools make use of what the board calls “alternate learning environments” for students with special needs, to de-escalate their behaviour if it presents an immediate danger to themselves or others.

“The guiding principle is that the length of time spent in an alternate learning environment should be as short as possible,” she said.

“A principal or vice-principal is typically consulted in situations in which a student has failed to settle after a period of 30 minutes. If a student remains unsettled, we would generally call parents and ask for their support in picking up the student from school.”

Pereira said the use of the room would be written into a student’s safety plan, which is shared with parents.

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