School district lessens challenge of blind student

WALLED LAKE

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STAFF WRITER

Kortney Kemezis is a bubbly second grader who enjoys learning and being around other youngsters her age.

But since the legally blind 7-year-old White Lake Township resident was 3 years old, she has been separated from children living in her area because she spent five hours a day on a bus riding back and forth to a Royal Oak school for the visually impaired.

When the school began integrating vicual and emotionally impaired students, Laura Kemezis, Kortney's mom, began looking into her options.

With the assistance of Oakland Schools, the county intermediate school district, Kemezis was able to enroll Kortney in the Walled Lake school district this year.

Kortney now travels two minutes by car each way to Dublin Elementary enabling her to sleep an extra two-and-a-half hours every morning and play with her friends after school every night.

"She's a normal kid. She's just visually impaired," Kemezis said. "There's no reason for her to spend half her life on the school bus and the other half with kids who are emotionally impaired."

Paraprofessional Re Danczyk is teaching Kortney through the use of a Brailler, a machine that allows the girl to type and feel the words she is typing. Braille is a series of six raised dots which are patterned to form different words.

STAFF PHOTO BY TOM HOFFMEYER

Reading by touch: *Kortney Kemezis, a visually impaired Dublin Elementary student, is learning in a traditional classroom setting.*

Adjustment period

Danczyk works with Kortney during homeroom to make lessons, based on sight, understandable for the second grader. Kortney can see a little. She can make out colors and shapes and even watch a few TV shows if she really strains her eyes, but she has no depth perception, Kemezis said.

Use of manipulatives helps Kortney understand the lessons. Danczyk recently made a drawing and used a special machine to raise the drawing from the paper so Kortney could feel the picture which was used for a word association lesson.

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Kortney Kemezis
—student

Oakland Schools provides all the equipment and materials needed for the girl's lessons, as well as an instructor to teach her Braille. Since Kortney is also hearing impaired, she wears an easy listener, a headphone speaker set with a microphone worn by Danczyk. This will be used until Kortney undergoes surgery next month and hopefully is able to get hearing aids.

"She actually does everything that the other kids are doing," Danczyk said. "When she Brailles, I write over it so the teacher can read it."

In preparation

To get her classmates acclimated to a visually challenged student, Kortney's teacher Beth Chapp discussed the matter with students and had them pretend to be blind, having some children serve as leaders while others walked outside with their eyes closed.

"They were kind of afraid the first day," Chapp said.

But the exercise helped them realize they could help Kortney, who Chapp described as extremely intelligent and creative.

When Kortney goes to lunch, recess and music class, she is not assisted by a parapro. Her classmates help Kortney through the daily transitions.

Kortney said she likes her friendly classmates.

"Sometimes when I meet people, I get a little shy," Kortney said, "and I've been meeting a lot of people here."

"They're very kind to her and they watch out for her and I think they really appreciate the fact that they aren't going through the same thing," Danczyk said.

Stephanie Johnson, 7, of White Lake helps Kortney get around the playground.

"I just take her around at recess and ask her what she wants to do," Johnson said. "I say 'step up' and then she can get over (play equipment)."

"She's real important to me because she's nice," said Katelyn Pickard, a 7-year-old Commerce resident. "She listens."

"I like her because she's the coolest girl in our class," said Chris Cyr, a 7-year-old White Lake resident who accompanies Kortney to lunch.

"I think she really likes having that little bit of independence," Danczyk said.

Kortney is one of some 20 visually impaired students in the district. And Kemezis hopes other parents whose children are disabled consider mainstreaming them if they are displeased with the program they are in.

"I'm sick I didn't do it long ago," Kemezis said. "I think the earlier you mainstream them the easier it is for a child to be accepted. It's better for everyone involved."

STAFF PHOTO BY TOM HOFFMEYER

Story telling: *Kortney Kemezis, a seven-year-old visually challenged student at Dublin Elementary, reads a story she wrote to her classmates by the Braille method. Kemezis is no longer forced to spend up to five hours on a school bus now that nearby Walled Lake Schools began integrating visually impaired students in the schools population.*