

New Ontario daycare rules worry community after-school program ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

An Ottawa community group that provides care for students before and after school but isn't a licensed daycare is concerned it may not be able to offer the service to children six years and under when new provincial rules come into effect in September.

The changes are part of the next phase of the Ontario government's Child Care and Early Years Act, which first came into effect in August 2015. The legislation replaced the Day Nurseries Act and established new rules for governing child care in the province.

Mary Tsai, executive director of the Glebe Neighbourhood Activities Group, operates a recreational program for children from junior kindergarten to Grade 6, before and after school.

She said her staff have interpreted the legislation to mean they will no longer be able to offer care to anyone six years of age and younger because it's not a licensed daycare.

The Ministry of Education has not been clear about the new rules taking effect this fall, she said.

"It has been extremely confusing," Tsai said. "How we communicate this to families is critical and fall is just around the corner."

Ministry spokesperson Heather Irwin said in an emailed statement that the guidelines are coming.

"The ministry will be releasing guidelines, including programming requirement, in the near future. All before- and after-school programs will be required to meet the requirement set out under these guidelines and regulations," Irwin said.

Looking for answers at town hall

Last week, the Glebe Neighbourhood Activities Group sent a note to parents about the new rules, which was met with a lot of "anger and questions," Tsai said.

Tsai will be looking for answers Monday night at a provincial town hall about child care in Ottawa. The event is hosted by Associate Education Minister Indira Naidoo-Harris at the Shaw Centre at 7 p.m.

Tsai said out of the 250 students who attend the more popular after-school program, 35 are six years old or under.

If younger children can't attend the community group's programs, she said many could transfer to schools because the province requires them to provide that type of care for students up to the age of 12.

She said the province might believe that a school setting provides more pedagogical programs than a recreation-based program like the one her group provides. She encouraged the province to find out more about the programs that groups like hers offer.

"We've had a very successful program and I feel there's a lack of understanding of what community centres like ours offer," said Tsai. "We are a success and the proof is that families keep coming back."

Integration a 'win-win'

Tsai said the programs for younger children offer a lot of learning, whether it's counting during a cooking class, or developing fine motor skills and learning co-operation while playing a team sport.

Alison O'Connor, who runs before- and after-school programs for the Glebe Neighbourhood Activities Group, said it would be "devastating" if younger children could no longer be part of the program.

Young children often integrate with older siblings in activities and play, which she described as a "win-win" for everyone.

"You can mix age groups together and the older ones can be helpers with the younger ones," O'Connor said. "The little ones can also give

the older kids a wonderful new sense of play."

Tsai said recreational programs allow children to let off steam but also teach new skills, and added that many of the trained high school and university students who run the programs are graduates of the program.

"That's wonderful to see and it builds a strong sense of community," Tsai said.

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