

New rules threaten already-stressed Toronto daycare options ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Two summers ago, as the school year approached, Brenda Vanderhoek was getting anxious. The Toronto mother of two had secured an after-school daycare spot for her older son, but there was no space for the younger boy, who was about to start kindergarten.

“What are we going to do now?” she thought.

Ms. Vanderhoek did not bother contacting the school daycare, knowing full well it already had a waiting list. She talked to other working parents about their after-school child-care plans. She researched local programs that would care for her children until she was done work.

Leah McLaren: Child care affects all of us. It's time our politicians took notice

In desperation, with just a few weeks before the beginning of the school year, she called a local martial-arts studio. Justin, the older boy, was already enrolled in classes at the studio.

She heard the owner had started a program that included picking up children from area schools. Ms. Vanderhoek was thankful to learn it still had room and could take both boys.

“I felt very lucky. It was the right time, right place,” she said.

Whether it was luck or good timing, Ms. Vanderhoek’s struggle to find an after-school spot for her children is shared by parents in many parts of Toronto. Waiting lists at school-based daycares are not uncommon, and some observers say school board officials have failed to make them a priority.

The scramble to find spaces has grown so dire that an entrepreneurial industry of martial arts schools and art studios has flourished, offering after-school care to meet the demand.

But new provincial rules coming in September threaten to alter the landscape, forcing new challenges onto families and already causing anger and confusion in a sector that provides care for school-age children.

The provincial government is expanding the duty of school boards to provide before- and after-school programs for students from kindergarten to Grade 6 where there is sufficient demand – a politically astute move for Premier Kathleen Wynne, who is facing an election next year. But the changes come with a strict deadline and no financial supports. School boards will have to turn to licensed child-care operators, who will be left to negotiate classroom space with principals and teachers and look for qualified staff willing to work split shifts.

Furthermore, the government is limiting authorized recreation providers to caring for children 6 and older, meaning families with children in kindergarten will have to fend for themselves and find spots in daycares.

Heather Irwin, a spokeswoman for the Ministry of Education, said the government would monitor the changes and could consider revisions.

But the new rules are not sitting well with the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), daycares and after-school child-care providers.

Currently, school boards are mandated to provide before- and after-school care to just full-day kindergarten students. Some Toronto child-care operators extend care to grade-school children where there is demand, staff and space, but the system is hit-and-miss. Others say they are already at capacity with infants, toddlers and kindergarteners and are struggling to expand their centres to accommodate children up to the age of 12, as required by the new provincial rules.

Toronto is one of the most expensive cities in Canada for child care, with fees as high as \$1,800 a month for full-day licensed care for an infant. Even before- and after-school daycare spots for schoolchildren can cost more than \$700 a month.

The TDSB has about 300 child-care centres in its schools, of which 250 offer before- and after-school programs for kindergarten students

and serve almost half the population of that age group. The board typically surveys parents of kindergarteners this month on whether they'll need before- or after-school care and is now figuring out how it will accommodate grade-school children.

Space is already scarce, and waiting lists can be long. Many parents are forced to look elsewhere.

Victoria Wickett, the owner of Bomb Fitness on Danforth Avenue, runs an after-school program with about 40 children. She has another 70 on a waiting list. Her staff pick up children from four local schools. Half the children in the program are in kindergarten, and under the new rules Ms. Wickett's studio, considered an authorized recreation provider, won't be able to accommodate the four- and five-year-olds.

"I think it's a little bit crazy, to be honest. I don't know where these kids are going to go," she said.

Similarly, Owen Charters, head of the non-profit Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada, said the new rules limit what his organization can do to help families with children in kindergarten looking for after-school care.

"We could provide significantly more support to four- and five-year-olds in the city if we could also bring them into our authorized recreation programs," he said.

"We hope," he added, "that some of the new rules ... will not cause hardship for families with younger children or vulnerable families living in high-needs communities."

In social-media chat rooms and on playgrounds, parents are sharing their tips for finding child care not only for babies and toddlers but, lately, their school-age children as well.

Toronto mom Joanne Emery realized this past summer that her older daughter, who was not old enough to walk to and from school alone, would no longer receive before- and after-school programming at her school daycare. Her younger child was still at the school daycare, but Ms. Emery did not want to separate them and rush through two end-of-day pickups.

The panic and stress set in.

"We were talking about rearranging our whole entire work schedule," Ms. Emery said. "If we didn't get something for the kids, this was the other option."

She heard that a sports facility close to home had a program. She visited it, "made nice" with the co-ordinator and was lucky enough to sign up the minute the registration process opened so her children could get in.

"You can't brag that you got a spot. It was almost like you can't tell other parents that you got in because you just don't know what the situation [is]. We're all fighting for the same position. All these lovely families that we know are fighting for the same position, and the spots are limited," Ms. Emery said. "It's sensitive. It's a sensitive topic."

Some observers say the issue of finding child care for school-age children is unique to Toronto. At the Peel District School Board, for example, almost all schools offer after-school care for students in kindergarten to Grade 6. The Halton District School Board has also told child-care providers to take reasonable steps to ensure that space is available for families. But many schools in Toronto are reluctant to share space with child-care providers or have no after-school care facilities, forcing families to look at private options.

Linda Cottes, the senior vice-president of the YMCA's child and family development, said that while many school boards in the province have embraced the extended school day in their buildings, Toronto has been generally quiet on the topic.

"I would say they haven't said anything. I wouldn't say they have said, 'Don't do it,' but it's not first and foremost on their mind," Ms. Cottes said.

She added: "The new obligation that is being put into play is going to change some of the behaviour and embrace child care being in every school and expanding the space to accommodate."

That's easier said than done.

The Toronto board puts the onus on child-care centres, many of them small and not-for-profit, to expand with little assistance. In many cases, principals and teachers are not very accommodating and may create obstacles because they feel daycares are taking over their classroom spaces or gymnasiums.

Donna Spreitzer, the executive director at the Jackman Community Daycare, housed in the Jackman Avenue Junior Public School, said her staff need to go into classrooms to set up their program and prepare snacks for the children. But, she said, teachers also need to do their preparation work in the classroom.

"The difficulty is the overlap, and nobody has really worked out how that's supposed to happen," she said. "You have 30 kids leaving the room [when the school bell rings] at the same time as 30 new kids are coming in."

Ms. Spreitzer said the government is listening to parents by extending care right up to Grade 6, but the rollout needs to slow down so that daycare providers and school boards can work out the logistics of accommodating more children.

The Jackman daycare accommodates children up to the age of 12. It also has a waiting list, and Ms. Spreitzer is often giving parents a list of other centres to call.

"For me, I feel like I've already grown and I've already done it," Ms. Spreitzer said. "We're about as big as we can be right now without really becoming unwieldy."

Child-care centres also have a difficult time finding qualified early childhood education workers to work split shifts – a few hours in the morning, before school starts, and then a few hours at the end of the day – to accommodate a before- and after-school program.

Ms. Spreitzer said half her staff work split shifts. The daycare’s board of directors recently decided to subsidize their transit passes to help with staff retention.

Jane Mercer, executive co-ordinator of the Toronto Coalition for Better Child Care, said some programs may be able to expand by September, but it won’t happen across the city because there’s no extra funding coming from the government.

“Managers are going out of their minds trying to find good staff and keep good staff. It’s an uphill battle,” Ms. Mercer said. “We do not have the capacity to develop these programs this fast.”

Colleen Russell-Rawlins, executive superintendent of early years at the TDSB, said she appreciates the “spirit” of what the government is trying to do for families. But where there are insufficient resources or qualified staff to work split shifts, it will be a challenge, she said. The school board, she said, can also work with community centres and recreation providers for care.

“I would say almost everyone I have spoken to about the new policy and the new legislation agrees with it in principle. It’s about how we make it work across the diversity of communities that exist,” she said. “Everyone wants children who need it and families who need it to be able to access safe, quality child care, and schools are great places to host before- and after-school care. It’s working out the logistics of spaces, using the gym, who will offer the program in places where there isn’t a local child-care centre.”

Is the timeline too short? “We’d love more time to implement the policy and the regulation,” she replied.

At Dragonz Martial Artz Centre on Danforth Avenue, where Ms. Vanderhoek’s children attend the after-school program, staff are trying to understand what the ministry changes will mean.

The Ministry of Education has told Joanne Koundouros, the program co-ordinator, that Dragonz is considered a recreation provider and therefore would not be able to accept kindergarten students into its after-school program. She worries because the owner’s son, who is in junior kindergarten, is also part of the program and will not be able to participate come September.

“There’s a lot of confusion,” Ms. Koundouros said.

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