

Upcoming changes to child-care rules create uncertainty for parents^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The City of Ottawa says it's now cautiously optimistic the Ministry of Education will allow it to continue to operate its day cares as they are.

The city had put out a notice saying that starting in September 2017, the City of Ottawa will only offer before-school or after-school programs to children aged six to 12, forcing parents with younger children to find programs elsewhere.

The city had said the change was in response to the implementation of the Child Care and Early Years Act, which came into effect in 2015 and replaced the Day Nurseries Act.

The new legislation stipulates that before-and-after-school programs that care for more than five children be licensed as child-care centres. Schools may provide up to three hours of care daily, without a licence, for children ages six and older.

The changes affecting such unlicensed children's programs do not take effect until September 2017.

According to a letter sent to parents in February, the city had said it will only be offering programs to children before or after school — but not both.

"The act now limits their participation to a maximum of three continuous hours once a day," said Dan Chenier, the city's general manager of recreation, cultural and facility services. "We will no longer be able to offer that two periods a day for the same child, irrespective of their age."

'We are all devastated'

Annie Muldoon, whose four-year-old daughter Charlea attends a city-run after school program at the Hintonburg Community Centre, said she had only found out about the changes a few weeks ago through a letter handed to her by city workers.

"It's surprising that a decision of that magnitude would be rolled out with no consultation," she said.

"The staff is devastated. We are all devastated," she said.

Muldoon said she registered her daughter in a recreational city-run program to broaden her experiences.

"We're not looking for an educational program. They've been in school all day. They're four years old. We wanted her to have a break, a change. New people, new location to refresh and relax her at the end of the day," said Muldoon.

"I'm a registered social worker so I do understand the value of certification. However, in this case, I want to be able to choose who looks after my kid.

"To limit my choices and say, 'This is the only option. We have decided,' when we have something that's working so beautifully, is very counterintuitive and against what this government says it's about."

But on Friday Chenier said the city has been in "productive" talks with the Ministry and the province might be willing to make accommodations to allow the city to continue providing full care.

"I think the message has been received ... from parents who are upset with the change and how it's going to impact them. I think there is an openness now to have a look at how we might work together to find a solution," said Chenier on CBC's All in a Day on Friday.

Strengthening the system to ensure safety

The province had previously noted in an email to the CBC the three-hour limitation for "authorized recreation programs" was part of a

"long-standing policy under the Day Nurseries Act [and] is not a change under the new legislation."

Indira Naidoo-Harris, the minister responsible for early years and child care, said the changes are the result of strong recommendations that came from then-ombudsman Andre Marin's report on child care in 2014.

Marin's report found that unlicensed daycares in Ontario were operating under lax and barely enforced rules.

"We don't want to put kids who are four or five years old in high-risk situations," said Naidoo-Harris. "We are saying that if you are essentially running a child-care centre — meaning more than three hours of care — you have to run your child-care centre according to the child-care rules."

Naidoo-Harris said that while some parents may have been caught unaware, recreational unlicensed child-care providers were aware the changes were coming.

"They're raising the alarm bells with parents about the situation, but this has actually been in place for two years," she said.

"The idea was to expand before-and-after-school care in the school situation. And when government moved forward to do this, we gave the rights to school boards to either do it directly or use a third-party team to do that. We ensured that taxpayers' dollars were going towards being able to ensure that those programs were licensed."

Adapting to legislation onerous and expensive

The city currently offers after-school programs at 34 locations in the capital, and 12 of them offer before-school programs as well.

Approximately eight per cent of children who use the programs are younger than six years old and would be affected by the changes, said Chenier.

Chenier said that while the city did consider licensing its recreational programs, in the end the option proved to be too burdensome and expensive.

"We use gymnasiums and public assembly halls and community centres to offer these programs," he said. "[Creating] the dedicated space to meet all the licensing requirements is onerous. The city already has licensed child-care centres. Our intent is not to turn community recreation facilities into child-care centres."

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