

Child care crunch doesn't end when school begins ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Most Toronto parents know they have to sign up for child care the moment their babies are born if they hope to secure a licensed spot in time to return to work.

But many don't realize competition is equally fierce when kids start kindergarten and parents still need care for the beginning and end of the typical workday.

When Stephanie Nakitsas and her husband registered their daughter for junior kindergarten at Gledhill Jr. Public School in February, 56 others were already on the wait list for before- and after-school care.

The child-care centre in the school near Danforth and Woodbine Aves. has capacity to serve barely one-third of Gledhill's kindergarten students. The only licensed child-care centre in the area that walks children to and from the school is also full.

"We knew the early years were going to be really difficult," says Nakitsas. "We just expected when we got our daughter into school, that the juggle would end."

The only viable alternative, she says, is nanny sharing, an unregulated and more expensive option Nakitsas and her husband aren't keen on.

"It doesn't seem to make sense, especially when the government is investing so much to make full-day kindergarten work," she says. "I think they should really be making sure there is a regulated spot for every kid who needs one."

That was the vision in 2009, when the premier's early learning adviser Charles Pascal recommended full-day kindergarten and a "seamless day" of learning from 7 a.m. until 6 p.m., for families who need it.

The Liberals under then premier Dalton McGuinty began rolling out the program in 2010, and by 2015, every elementary school in Ontario was offering it. But problems with the extended-day portion persist.

Pressure is particularly acute in the city's east end, where high demand for infant, toddler and preschool child care has grown into a crunch for school-age children.

Mother Nadine Blum of Toronto East Enders for Child Care queried members of parent Facebook groups in the area last month and found that a majority of 21 local schools mentioned by parents were not able to meet demand.

"Every school seems to be different," says Blum, who struggled to secure a kindergarten spot for her son. "In some cases, it's first come, first served. Others use a lottery system ... and in some schools parents are being told there is insufficient demand. It's very confusing and causing a lot of stress."

Christine and Meaghan Davies considered taking their toddler out of a licensed child care centre near their work and hiring a nanny so their 4-year-old daughter Fiona would have someone to care for her before and after school when she starts kindergarten in September. Late last week, the couple made arrangements with a neighbour to pick up Fiona. But they consider themselves lucky.

"It's not like a few families are being left to find alternate arrangements. It's dozens of families," says Christine Davies.

Davies is particularly upset the province isn't allowing the local businesses that have sprung up to provide after-school programs for students in Grades 1 to 6 to also pick up children in kindergarten. Under provincial regulations, only licensed child care programs can serve more than five kids of this age during the school year.

For single mother Dawn Barclay who moved to an apartment in the area last month, the lack of licensed before- and after-school care for her daughter has put her in a serious financial bind.

Barclay has a child care subsidy for Layla at her downtown daycare, but will have nowhere to use it when the three-and-a-half-year-old starts kindergarten in the neighbourhood this fall.

"I can't use my subsidy on unlicensed care, and I can't afford to pay a neighbour," she says. A friend has offered to help for free, but Barclay says she needs certainty. "Informal arrangements can change."

Daycares say they are scrambling to add space to meet demand, but are having trouble attracting qualified staff for low-wage, split-shift work.

"We know that we need to do more to support Ontario's world-class early childhood educators, particularly as we expand child care and before- and after-school care across the province," said Indira Naidoo-Harris, minister responsible for early years and child care.

As a result, the government is developing child-care workforce and affordability strategies to help transform the system, she said in an email.

Earlier this month, the province announced \$1.6 billion to help create 45,000 new spaces in schools and the community by 2022. Another \$200 million this year will make care more affordable for 24,000 families, she added. Toronto's share is almost \$34.5 million, mostly for children under age 4.

A federal-provincial agreement signed last week will provide an additional \$100 million over three years and also "supports the expanded duty for district school boards (to provide) before- and after-school programs," Naidoo-Harris said.

At Earl Beatty Public School near Danforth and Coxwell Aves., Beatty Buddies Daycare is expanding its 26-space kindergarten program by 13 spots this fall and adding room for 30 more in its 45-space program for students in Grades 1 to 6. But the daycare still has a wait list of 15.

"It is not unusual for us to be sitting for half an hour with a parent who is falling apart because they can't find what they need," says Lisa Winters, the daycare's manager director.

"This was meant to be a program that was seamless ... that would move us away from a patchwork system," she says. "But they just created another one that is even more difficult to navigate. Not only for the parents but for the boards and for (child care) operators."

Jennifer Story, a Toronto District School Board trustee, thinks it is time to revisit Pascal's original recommendation that envisioned two early childhood educators and a teacher caring for children in the same classroom from 7 a.m. until 6 p.m., for parents who need it.

Boards in Ottawa and Waterloo adopted Pascal's model, but in the rest of the province, including Toronto, school boards chose to have on-site child care programs run the extended-day portion.

And if daycares can't find enough qualified staff willing to work split shifts, they can't expand to meet the need, Story says.

The trustee says she hopes a city-school board working group reviewing full-day kindergarten will come up with some viable strategies to address the problem when it reports in the fall.

Elaine Baxter-Trahair, general manager of Toronto children's services, wants the city to apply for provincial funding under a recently announced innovation fund to test new models for school-age care.

"I think we're really coming to a point now where to really achieve true transformation, we need to work with the province and the (school) boards to get back to that seamless day," Baxter-Trahair says of Pascal's model. "Because the split shifts are becoming an increasing challenge."

Beaches—East York Councillor Janet Davis, a longtime child-care advocate, says she thinks the province needs to earmark funding to support expansion of school-age child care. Starting in September, schools boards are required to provide care for students up to Grade 6 where there is sufficient demand.

"The introduction of before- and after-school programs for kindergarten and up has not been implemented with adequate funding," she says. "Parents work full-time throughout the year. They need and want good quality for their children outside of school hours and that means before, lunch and after school, all holidays and summer break. This has not been looked at holistically."

-reprinted from Toronto Star

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