

TDSB to consider extended-day programs for kids 4 to 12 starting this fall ^[1]

TDSB staff are recommending a fee-based “extended-day program” to be offered in classrooms from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. and staffed by full-time early-childhood educators employed by the board.

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After years of pressure from parents scrambling to find care for their children before and after the bell rings, the Toronto District School Board is considering a plan to run extended-day programs starting in September.

The TDSB has been relying on school-based child care and recreation programs to provide after-hours care for children from kindergarten to Grade 6.

But a staff report, to be debated by a board committee Wednesday, says many child-care programs are unable to meet demand because they don't have enough space and can't find enough early-childhood educators willing to work split shifts. About 23 per cent of schools offer no before- and after-school care, the report adds.

Toronto mother Dawn Barclay is among scores of parents in the city's child-care-challenged east end who have been unable to find after-hours care for their kindergarten-age children because school programs are full.

“I hope this will help me,” said Barclay, who moved into the area last spring unaware of the child-care crunch.

“When I called the centre at my school to get on the wait list, they just laughed. And there is no room in any of the community daycares in my area,” she said.

As a single parent, Barclay can't afford care without a subsidy, so she is relying on a friend on maternity leave to look after her 4-year-old daughter Layla after school. But it's not an option beyond June.

“I am grateful for my friend,” she said. “All I want to do is work, but I can't do that without care for my daughter.”

To address the need, TDSB staff are recommending a fee-based “extended-day program” for children age 4 to 12, to be offered in classrooms from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. and staffed by full-time early-childhood educators employed by the board.

If approved by the full board in February, the TDSB would introduce programs in schools without before- and after-school care and in those where daycares are unable to meet demand and are willing to partner with the school board.

“An extended-day program would give us greater flexibility than we have right now and relieve some of the pressures that our third-party operators are facing,” said Colleen Russell-Rawlins, executive superintendent for early years.

“We focused primarily on where we might create a new program, where none exists,” she added. “However, there certainly is a possibility if a third-party was interested in working co-operatively with us, so that our programs could exist seamlessly and be supportive of families, we would enter into that conversation.”

Fees will be \$36 per day and would be eligible for subsidies, Russell-Rawlins said.

Unlike the current arrangement where children in full-day kindergarten attend separate child care and school programs, the proposed extended-day model would integrate both. The TDSB-run program would also allow more flexibility for parents to choose part-time after-hours care, the report notes.

That was the vision in 2009 when Charles Pascal, the premier's early-learning adviser, recommended full-day kindergarten and a “seamless day” of learning from 7 a.m. until 6 p.m., for families who need it. But to date, few Ontario school boards have adopted the model.

Pascal welcomed the TDSB report for “finally doing the right thing.”

But the goal should be “proper full-day kindergarten with extended-day programming in all schools,” he said.

Schools should continue to be the primary location for non-profit child-care expansion for older and younger kids, Pascal added.

TDSB Trustee Jennifer Story, a member of the committee that will discuss the report, said the proposal is a start.

“It’s not going to solve every issue we have with respect to parent demand. But it’s certainly a major step in the right direction in my view,” she said in an interview.

“Third-party operators will continue to operate in our schools. We’re not replacing or supplanting existing programs. We’re filling in gaps where they don’t exist,” she said.

Beaches-East York Councillor Janet Davis, who has been fielding angry calls from frustrated parents about the problem for years, said the current situation has created more fragmented programs, more part-time jobs and fewer qualified staff.

“The child-care system has been taxed to the limit in terms of accommodating growth for kindergarten and school-aged children programs. They cannot do it. It was never intended as the model,” she said.

“So I’m very excited the TDSB is going to move forward with a directly operated, seamless-day model,” she said.

Jane Mercer with the Toronto Coalition for Better Child Care, which represents non-profit child-care programs in the city, is also pleased the board is “stepping up” to address parent need.

But she said the board must ensure the new program meets the same quality standards as licensed child care.

“For child-care providers and the existing child-care sector, it’s still going to be a dog’s breakfast because in some schools the full extended day will be delivered by the school board and at other schools it will be delivered by the child-care (centre),” Mercer said.

“And will the school program have the quality and expectations of child care?” she asked. “That will be a question.”

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