

Lack of before-, after-school spaces in Alberta: child care experts

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EXCERPTS

Members of Alberta's school-age care community met at a weekend conference in Calgary to talk about issues facing parents.

Around 400 delegates attended the fourth annual School Age Care Conference put on by the School Age Care Directors Association of Alberta on Saturday at Deerfoot Inn & Casino.

For many Alberta parents, including Shefali Geoffroy Chateau, finding quality before- and after-school care has been tough.

"It's been a real struggle and challenging, especially when my children were going into kindergarten and I had no care," Geoffroy Chateau said.

She was relieved to find a solution for her two children at Chinook Park School through the Adventures School Age Care program.

"I didn't want to leave my children just anywhere," Geoffroy Chateau said. "Even if it was within the school and convenient, you don't want to just leave them anywhere. So to have that qualified staff was really important. And I know that isn't everywhere."

Cody Topp said all of the nine programs he runs at Calgary schools with Topp Kids Out of School Clubs have a wait list. He said some parents are signing up before their kids are even in school.

"The biggest problem parents have is finding quality care for their children who are school-age, and there's just not enough spaces available," Topp said.

The chair of the School Age Care Directors Association of Alberta said the time children spend after school is critical to their development.

"It improves education outcome," said Staci Wilson. "It improves economic outcomes and it improves families as a whole in Alberta.

"I have heard of families picking up and moving out of communities to go into a location where there is care for them to be able to go. So they're no longer really concerned about their education. It's more like, 'Where can my child go during those off school times?'"

Wilson said she would like to see before- and after-school programs be included in the \$25-a-day pilot project for Alberta daycares. She said the education and children's services ministries need to work together to help come up with solutions, especially for parents who are struggling to afford care.

"We're supposed to be a village raising these children together," Wilson said, "but with everything that's in place right now we are all operating within our own silos."

Currently, there are 979 licensed school-age care programs in Alberta, which is more than the number of daycare programs. Their monthly cost runs between \$475 and \$900 a month per child.

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