

What about our kids? Thousands of parents, daycare operators want all sites shut down ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

More than 3,000 parents, early childhood educators and daycare operators across Ontario are urging the provincial government to “provide a clear public health directive” that all child-care programs should close in the wake of COVID-19.

“Since both schools and school-based child care are being temporarily closed in response to the pandemic, is social distancing not equally important for community-based child-care programs?” they ask in an online petition, organized by the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care and the Association for Early Childhood Educators of Ontario.

The petition is being emailed to MPPs, Premier Doug Ford, Education Minister Stephen Lecce, and Health Minister Christine Elliott demanding action, said coalition spokesperson Carolyn Ferns.

It is also urges federal leaders to provide financial support to parents and workers affected by the crisis and while they follow public health advice to help slow the spread of the virus.

On Sunday, Alberta, P.E.I and Nova Scotia closed all daycares in those provinces, along with public schools, as a precautionary measure.

“It’s hard to describe the level of frustration and sense of abandonment (Ontario) parents and ECEs are feeling around this,” Ferns said Sunday. “How are they supposed to practise social distancing in a child-care setting? It just doesn’t make sense.”

School boards have shuttered child-care centres in public schools following a provincial education ministry order Thursday to suspend classes until April 5.

The city of Toronto has closed its 47 municipally operated centres and Toronto’s Medical Officer of Health Dr. Eileen de Villa recommended Friday that all licensed daycares in the city should follow suit.

The YMCA of Greater Toronto, with 300 child-care centres, including 270 in schools and 30 in the community, has closed all of its programs.

George Brown College’s 12 child-care centres connected to its early childhood education programs are also closing for three weeks.

But many community-based child-care operators are taking their cue from a memo from the education ministry Friday that said the province is not advising centres to close.

A spokesman for Lecce said the government’s position hasn’t changed.

“Based on advice from Dr. David Williams, Ontario’s Chief Medical Officer of Health, our government ordered the closure of all publicly funded schools in Ontario for two weeks following March Break, in response to the emergence of COVID 19,” said Alexandra Adamo in an email Sunday evening.

“We will continue to rely on the medical and scientific expert advice of Dr. Williams,” she added. “Should Dr. Williams recommend further steps to protect public health, we will take immediate action to ensure the safety of students, education workers, and parents.”

But NDP child-care critic Doly Begum said with March break camps, sports and recreation programs for children also cancelled to protect the public, the province’s position on community-based child care programs is troubling.

“In many cases a decision on closure is left to a small volunteer board of directors, who face both significant liability and a financial and community pressure to remain open,” she wrote in a letter to Lecce Sunday.

“Without a clear directive for all child-care providers, there is a risk that the overall response is ineffective or that parents are opened up to exploitation,” she said.

In an interview Sunday, Begum said the official opposition party supports the “difficult” decision to close public schools and the resulting closure of child-care programs operating in schools.

“But there doesn’t seem to have been any planning around child care,” she said.

“Some parents have child care and some parents don’t. Some parents are being charged for child care when they feel they should be keeping their children at home. There is just so much confusion.”

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