

'Too many different bubbles'? Child care centres serving kids from different schools risky, some worry ^[1]

As Ontario daycares get set to run at full capacity, some say province not providing enough direction

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EXCERPTS

Come September, child care centres will be operating at full capacity in Ontario and that has some worried about whether children and staff could be exposed to "too many different bubbles," increasing their risk of contracting COVID-19.

Paul Parker is the president of Brant Street Daycare, which provides before and after-school care.

But the children who attend come from different schools, leaving Parker concerned about the level of exposure they could have if the centres re-open at pre-pandemic levels.

"We'd be exposing people to too many different bubbles," Parker told CBC News, adding one of his two centres provides care to about 90 to 95 elementary students.

Parker says the province isn't providing enough direction, especially for childcare centres that serve several schools.

Education Minister Stephen Lecce announced on Friday that daycares will be able to expand their numbers to pre-COVID capacity on September 1, adding that there will be strict protocols including cleaning and requiring all childcare staff to wear masks at all times.

But those additional protocols don't address Parker's biggest concern of having children from one school mingling with those from another. If there were an outbreak, he says, that could affect a large group of people.

"It seems pretty contradictory to bring people from different bubbles or cohorts together. It seems to be against what public health is telling us to do," said Parker.

No guidelines on mixing students from different schools

Brant Street Daycare has two locations in Toronto, one at the Downtown Alternative School and a second one on Adelaide Street. When the centres are functioning at capacity, they're caring for 30 children per room.

If that's the number they can return to in the fall, Parker doesn't think it will be possible to keep the kids physically distanced in the classrooms.

"It's just not going to happen," said Parker. "We're asking parents how they feel about it and they're asking us whether it's going to be safe."

CBC Toronto asked the province about the guidelines for school daycares and whether it's safe for them to care for students from different schools while operating at maximum capacity.

In an email, a spokesperson for the Minister of Education said, "Local public health units have to sign off on any child care centre that reopens." The email did not address the issue of children coming from multiple schools.

Asked for its view, Toronto Public Health told CBC News it's "awaiting further guidance from the province, which is forthcoming."

The number of children in the daycare that Tia Vladi's daughter is set to attend this fall is something she's watching closely.

"If the numbers are too high, I'm not sure that I will send her. The announcement that centres can operate at full capacity is pretty concerning," said Vladi, who has a 15-month-old daughter.

Parents are weighing their options

Vladi is currently working full time, and her daughter is supposed to start daycare in November. But if there are too many children there, Vladi is considering other options for childcare.

"We're looking at maybe getting a nanny, but there doesn't seem to be many available," said Vladi.

For Tylar Bertie, juggling three children under the age of three during the pandemic, while she and her husband work fulltime, has been extremely challenging.

She's already sent her two-year-old twins back to daycare and will do the same with her one-year-old in January. Right now, she feels safe because her daycare is only caring for five children.

"As much as I am concerned about what's going to happen, it just doesn't make sense to keep them home indefinitely," said Bertie. "We have to get work done."

Courtney Kalina says the daycare she will be using in September is doing everything right.

"There's extra cleaning measures in place," said Kalina. "They also don't allow parents inside, you have to buzz when you arrive and staff come and pick up children from the front door."

Still, if the numbers at her Mississauga child care facility went up to 30 children per room, Kalina says she'd be very concerned.

"That would make me very nervous, I live with my mom and she's high risk. I had asked my mom about my daughter going back to daycare and she was fine with it because she knew how careful they are being," said Kalina.

\$234 million allocated to COVID-19 cleaning costs

During a press conference Friday, Premier Doug Ford announced the province has earmarked \$234.6 million for cleaning measures and other safety protocols at child care facilities. The government is also speeding up licenses in case facilities want to acquire another room so that children can better physically distance.

Renting out another space is an option for Parker, but the problem lies in the logistics of having it cleaned in time.

"The caretaking staff need to need to go in and prepare those rooms, or we have to hire extra staff to clean them. Right now, the principals in those schools are telling us there's not enough caretakers to get that done," said Parker.

If the province doesn't provide guidelines for daycares serving multiple schools, Parker says his board may consider implementing its own, which could mean limiting the care to students from a single school only.

If that happens, Parker is worried he may have to let go of some of his staff, and worries he'll leave dozens of families scrambling for care in the process.

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