

'We are stuck': After-school care an extra worry for B.C. parents amid COVID-19 ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Margo Tafts' decision to send her two kids back to school is tough enough with the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, factor in a decision on after-school care.

"We won't be sending our kids to before- and after-school care," Tafts said. "We are concerned about the plan for schools. We are concerned about keeping our kids safe."

The mom from Cobble Hill outside Victoria is on the growing list of parents grappling with what to do come September.

Many parents rely on the school system not only for their kids' education, but also for childcare. Before-and after-school care programs can provide additional support for kids and allow parents to focus on work.

Adding to Tafts' anxiety is the province's decision to put students in learning groups. All kids will be in a learning group of up to 60 people in elementary and middle schools and up to 120 people in secondary school in order to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

Kids will spend the vast majority of their day in these groups, including gym, lunch and library time.

Lisa Paterson of Langley, B.C., said her daughter is going into Grade 2 and previously attended before-and after-care at a large centre that supports three elementary schools.

She said she's worried about the exposure risk of her child interacting with others from multiple different schools, in addition to the 60-person in-school learning groups.

"I would really like to see school districts work more closely with these programs to develop safety protocols because this feels terribly dangerous after months of being told to keep our bubbles small," Paterson told Global News.

"I'm tempted to pull her from the program, but I'm worried about the professional and economic ramifications of continuing to try and work while simultaneously caring for my children. We are stuck between a rock and a hard place and really not sure what to do."

Provincial health officer Dr. Bonnie Henry has said the province is not sure what to do about before- and after-school care yet either. The steering committee tasked with determining next steps around the back-to-school plan is still grappling with the issue.

"Parents will have to look at how do we maintain those important supports for our children if we're going back to work and the balance that we need to have," Henry said in a news conference on Tuesday.

"It's not an easy answer. We don't have all the details yet, but those are the things we'll work out."

Henry has advised parents to think about scaling back after-school activities like music, swimming or soccer, but still try to ensure children are engaged with their friends.

Longtime child-care advocate Sharon Gregson said many parents rely on out-of-school care to work.

She recommended that the province push school districts to reach out to child-care providers to make sure they have enough space and safety measures in place.

"It is so important that school principals are talking with their child-care providers to make sure there is discussion around how space is being cleaned, how space is being shared — and that even the cohorts are taken into account," Gregson said, namely which child is in which cohort attending which child-care program.

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