

Daycare operator says mixing students 'basically negates' school plans ^[1]

Author: Flanagan, Ryan

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EXCERPTS

TORONTO -- Ontario's back-to-school plan could be undone by children from different classes and schools coming together in daycare spaces before and after the school day, one Toronto-based operator is warning.

Amy O'Neil, director of Treetop Children's Centre, told CTV's Your Morning on Thursday that Ontario's child-care sector is "scrambling" to figure out how to prepare for a safe return to school in September amid concerns about children being exposed to multiple peer groups.

"The cohorting piece ... with the before and after care programs, it basically negates the whole process," she said.

Ontario requires school boards to offer not-for-profit before- and after-school care for students between the ages of four and 12 in areas where there is significant demand for that service.

As of Sept. 1, these programs – like all licensed daycare in the province – will be able to resume operations at full capacity, provided they adhere to physical distancing, enhanced cleaning and other measures aimed at stopping the spread of COVID-19.

"The regulations are such that we are allowed, if we want to, to operate with up to 30 children in a classroom – and you cannot social distance [at that capacity]," O'Neil said.

Not every family uses these child-care services, which means children may find themselves with different classmates before school, during the school day and after school. Some of these classmates may even attend different schools during the day, as not all of the daycares are located at schools.

"There's really no clear direction as to how we should proceed, and with school less than two weeks away, we're all really scrambling," O'Neil said.

"The guidelines are very, very vague."

Other provinces are staying away from limiting daycare class sizes. Both Quebec and British Columbia are allowing child-care services to operate at full capacity. Alberta – where many parents have expressed concern about sending their children back to daycare – permits a maximum of 30 children and staff members in the same space, while Saskatchewan sets that number at 25.

The federal guidelines for child-care settings do not outright suggest maximum cohort sizes, but do recommend that operators "consider modifying delivery of programs (e.g. reducing the number of children/youth using the same space at the same time)" if physical distancing is not possible.

O'Neil said her company will be doing this, capping its before- and after- school groups at 15 children, which means many parents will have to make alternate arrangements for child care. That can be particularly difficult for parents whose jobs don't allow them to work from home.

"The families that will be hardest-hit are just those that have been hardest hit by COVID-19 – as we have seen, marginalized families, families with precarious work, single parents, recent immigrants," O'Neil said.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: school system ^[4]

health and safety ^[5]

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