

Winnipeg early learning providers scramble to find new spaces at the last minute ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Some early learning and child care providers in Winnipeg are uncertain where or if they're going to be able to operate when school starts, after learning the schools need the room to accommodate physical distancing requirements.

"I knew there was going to be some issues with school starting because I knew the schools are going to have rules they need to follow, but I never thought for a second that it meant we wouldn't be able to operate at all," says Tracy Cosser, director of Can You Imagine School-Age Care & Education Centre.

"If I would have believed that in any way back in June, I would have spent the entire summer finding alternate space to operate."

Cosser runs two such before and after school programs at separate schools with around 30 kids in each

She says she was told on Aug. 17 by the principals of each school that it was a mistake for her to have received the permits she needed to operate the week prior.

Since then, she and the administrators have been trying to figure out if it's possible for her to use the spaces after classes let out and the grade school students leave.

"Because it's too late. I can't find alternate space and get occupancy permits through the city and also be licensed in order to operate in this short amount of time," Cosser says, adding that would take at least six to eight weeks.

"It has put a lot of pressure on me to try to get these programs going for the parents who are relying on it because they work. People don't work six and a half hour days, so they need us and parents are scrambling."

All three spaces she has licensed to use — a library, a gym and a large classroom — are now earmarked for grade school classes, and it's unclear whether they can be switched over after class ends in the afternoon and again each morning.

"There's lots of logistical issues to make that happen while we're trying to care for children at the same time."

Meantime, Chantale Weber, who runs Ecole Guyot Pre-Kindergarten, is trying to find rooms in an entirely different building for her three pre-school classes.

"In the moment you're feeling panicked," Weber says, recalling last Friday when she learned the spaces she's been using for years would no longer be available.

"Here I am, I've spent a couple weeks trying to get in order, my curriculum, and all these new COVID procedures and protocols that we need to implement, and now I'm kind of starting over and having to focus on different things like relocating."

She says her programs normally start a few weeks after the start of school, but even then it's going to be a rush to find space, and then the appropriate permits.

"It's not as easy as just transplanting us in another room somewhere in another school."

Weber says despite the initial shock, she's grateful the Louis Riel School Division has been helping her identify classrooms in other schools in the division which could potentially work instead.

"There's no reason to get upset with everybody because everyone is dealing with the same thing in one way or another," Weber says.

"My goal is to get this program up and running so we can welcome our students and families back as soon as possible."

All this comes within a week of the province releasing guidelines that explicitly state "existing early learning and child care programs located in schools or on school property cannot be displaced from their dedicated space to manage physical distancing requirements."

However, it does say that if absolutely necessary, the division should try to find similar accommodations within the same building, or at the

very least ensure “re-location will not hinder the child care program’s ability to continue its operations.”

“The expectation and the anticipation would be that division and school administrators would be working collaboratively and in partnership with child care programs to ensure that the spaces that they were using pre-COVID and all summer long are protected spaces,” says Jodie Kehl, executive director of the Manitoba Child Care Association.

“There might be situations where due to physical distancing or some of the public health requirements a child care program may need to be relocated, but we would hope that would be within the school.”

Kehl couldn’t comment on any specific cases as none had yet been forwarded to her organization, but encourages providers to get in touch with her if they are facing similar issues.

If it ends up being more than a few cases, she says they would have to open up a dialogue with the province.

Region: Manitoba ^[3]

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