

After-school programs an 'afterthought' in COVID-19 guidelines, advocates say ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The hours between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. have long been a challenge for many parents. Now, as the school year rears its head amid a global pandemic, it's all the more tricky.

Before-and-after school programs are being neglected, according to advocates. They believe it's a blind spot that could increase the COVID-19 risk among elementary students, in particular.

"Even if the kids in a before-and-after school program are all from one school, they're still funnelling in from different cohorts," said Martha Friendly, a long-time child care advocate and founder of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

"It's inescapable."

Before-and-after school programs are vital for many parents working hours outside the school day. But, since not every family uses these services, some children may be gathering with different classmates before, during and after school. And since not every school has its own daycare on-site, some kids may even find themselves with students from different schools at some point in the day.

"So the question is — where are the kids in that program coming from?" said Friendly.

"Cohorting" and "learning groups" will become the norm in many schools come September as educators abide by public health rules to avoid coronavirus outbreaks. The tactic aims to minimize the number of students and teachers in contact with one another while maintaining consistency in those contacts as much as possible.

Group sizes a concern

The size of these groups has drawn widespread concern. Advocates say the concern is even greater when before-and-after-school care is factored in.

"It's sort of being treated as an afterthought," said Carolyn Ferns of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care.

"We're trying to explain that these are the same children. This whole situation has made it clear that we can't keep treating child care and schools separately. They're the same children and we need one plan."

In Ontario, both schools and child care will be allowed to resume operations at full capacity in September. That will mean elementary class and group sizes of up to 30 children will be allowed, though there is some variation across school boards.

In British Columbia's schools, students will be placed in learning groups, meaning elementary and middle school kids will be in groups of up to 60, and secondary school students in groups of up to 120. It has also allowed child-care services to operate at full capacity.

In Alberta, where concerns about child care have been high, the province has permitted a maximum of 30 children and staff members in the same space — both in schools and child-care programs.

Federally, the guidelines for child care do not define grouping numbers but recommend that operators "consider modifying delivery of programs" by reducing the number of children in the same space at one time, if physical distancing is not possible.

Teachers in B.C., Alberta, Quebec and Ontario have all demanded smaller class sizes.

Child-care advocates say before-and-after-school programs should be smaller too.

"Schools and child care — the two interact," Ferns said.

Programs try to adapt

For the YMCA, which provides before-and-after-school care for more than 90,000 children between the ages of four and 12, adjustments have already been made.

Unlike many operators, the YMCA continued to provide programming throughout the summer, including child care for essential workers and some day camps.

“We’ve learned a lot, but obviously it’s a huge challenge,” said Peter Dinsdale, president and CEO of YMCA Canada.

“Of course there have been impacts to the ratios we typically have with staff and children, so we’ve expanded facilities, whether that means using classrooms we didn’t use before or being creative using outdoor spaces.”

There are “practical” challenges, as well, he said.

“In pre-COVID times, employees could go to a staff room to prepare snacks, but many staff rooms are closed now,” he said. “So we’ve had to find alternatives like bringing their own snacks or grab-and-go snacks, just different approaches to make sure we’re following all the standards.”

But while the YMCA has experience to lean on come September, there are many licensed and private operators who have been “left completely on their own” to navigate the already unclear directions, said Friendly.

Many provinces have faced criticism that service providers and community stakeholders were not properly consulted before guidelines were rolled out.

It’s been a particular sticking point in Ontario, Ferns said.

She said the directive has been vague, which has left many parents “rightfully worried” and feeling ill-equipped to make the best decision for their kids.

“A lot of parents are worried about those larger groups,” she said. “*And then you have to balance the decision to send your child back to group child-care programs.”

Financial troubles

COVID-19-related adjustments have brought along financial challenges for child care and program providers, including the YMCA.

Between enhanced cleaning protocols, changing ratios of child-to-staff members and expanded use of facilities, Dinsdale said there are inevitable operational losses.

“We have increased expenses and less revenue,” he said. “Cleaning standards costs more money, staffing changes costs more money. Staffing across the board is a challenge.”

But for some smaller child-care providers, the financial challenges have been too much to bear.

Fern said she knows of numerous facilities in Ontario that are closing for good.

“For child-care programs, financial viability relies on full enrollment,” she said. “There are a lot of child-care programs making their own decisions to try and keep group sizes smaller, but they’re going to pay a price for that. These are non-profit programs — it’s not about making money, it’s about keeping the doors open at all.”

The Trudeau government announced on Aug. 25 that an additional \$2 billion would be provided to provinces and territories to help them ensure kids can safely go back to school.

The money can be used to help adapt learning spaces, improve air ventilation, increase hygiene protocols and buy additional personal protective equipment (PPE).

However, the “financial burden facing childcare centres” hasn’t been addressed, said Ferns.

“We need some co-ordination. How can we have before-and-after-school programs that limit that cohort-to-cohort mixing without additional funding that can keep those group sizes low?”

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: before and after school ^[4]

health and safety ^[5]

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