

Fees may double as Manitoba's new funding model pits nursery schools against each other, administrator says ^[1]

End of enhanced funding grant means some schools will see dramatic cut, while others get funding boost

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EXCERPTS

Hundreds of Manitoba parents could end up paying twice as much to send their children to nursery school starting this summer, under a new funding formula.

Laura Burla, the director of St. James Montessori School, says her school will have no choice but to hike prices, likely to the daily maximum of \$10.40 per child, because of a shortfall in government funding.

The province unveiled details this week of its new funding formula for nursery schools, which comes into effect in July. The province says it's intended to create "equity in the system," but there are clear winners and losers in the shift.

The winners are the 96 nursery schools that will receive more government money than before — but the remaining 66 schools, such as St. James Montessori, will be losers, as they'll see cuts to an enhanced grant that allowed them to charge as little as \$5 a day for a spot.

Those schools currently receive \$4,180 per space each year.

The new universal grant can range from a low of \$1,045 per space each year to \$2,090, depending on how often children attend.

In a letter on Monday, a provincial official said schools facing a funding decrease could offset it by boosting parent fees.

Families will miss out: director

Burla said parents at her centre, who currently pay \$5 a day for care, will struggle to pay twice that.

"There's an entire demographic of families that can't afford \$10 or more per day, but they also don't qualify for subsidy" for cheaper rates, she said.

"They're going to go back into a child-care desert, where their child has no opportunity for early-years interventions."

Samantha Milne isn't sure if her four-year-old son can keep attending nursery school.

"Maybe he stays home with me and I don't go back to work, because child care is very expensive."

As an early childhood educator at St. James Montessori, her wage is hardly enough to live on.

"We don't really make enough money to put kids through child care, which is crazy."

Milne said her family will have to make sacrifices. They may delay enrolling their newborn in daycare, or put a stop to extracurricular activities like soccer for their four-year-old.

"You shouldn't have to take from one area of development for a child to give to another," she said.

Meanwhile, the 96 nursery schools that have not received the enhanced grant will benefit. They get just \$528 per child per year, which will at least double under the new formula.

One of those centres is Oak Street Nursery School in River Heights.

"This operating grant change, while it could be devastating to enhanced programs, is quite overdue and necessary for the regularly funded programs like ours," said director Karlin Mann.

Wage boost expected

She will finally be able to increase her staff's wages — which average out to \$16 an hour — and tackle projects her nursery school couldn't afford before.

"I think this operating grant increase will offer us the opportunity to ... not necessarily get ahead, but at least do a little bit of catch-up," Mann said.

The province says it wanted to rework the formula because it wasn't fair some nursery schools received more money than others. The enhanced nursery school grant created a two-tiered system, it said.

"Despite being labelled as a program for low-income families, there was no income-testing to ensure that these 66 enhanced grant recipients were providing service to low-income families," Families Minister Rochelle Squires said in a statement.

"We are increasing the grant for all nursery school programs in the regular stream and creating equity in the system."

Her office didn't provide an answer on why all nursery schools won't receive the current enhanced level of funding.

Burla accused the province of pitting nursery schools against each other. Those facilities with higher funding may be able to offer more services, ranging from free snack programs to periodic visits from a speech language pathologist or occupational therapist.

The province has created "tension between the two types of nursery schools to make it appear as if the only way one could get proper funding was at the expense of the other, when we all know investment is the obvious answer," she said.

The previous NDP government vowed to expand the enhanced grants to more and more centres over time, before being booted from office in 2016.

The Opposition party's status of women critic, Malaya Marcelino, said axing the enhanced grant "feels like an attack on families, especially to low-income and working families."

The Manitoba Child Care Association said the government's funding changes aren't enough to fix a sector that remains historically underfunded. Provincial grants for child-care centres have been frozen since 2016, and parent fees since 2013, the association says.

Region: Manitoba ^[3]

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