

Child care providers question plans for early kindergarten in rural Yukon schools ^[1]

'If you know anything about our school, it's completely overcrowded. It's not possible.'

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EXCERPT

Some child care providers are skeptical about the Yukon government's decision to introduce early kindergarten programs at schools in Dawson City and Watson Lake this fall.

Robert Service School in Dawson, and Johnson Elementary in Watson Lake are the territory's only two rural schools where the early kindergarten program doesn't exist.

Sarah Cooke, president of the board of directors for the Little Blue Daycare in Dawson City, says the principal at Robert Service School received an email regarding the plan and contacted the local child care providers for a meeting.

"We all sat down and the idea was they intend on rolling out an early kindergarten program at the school," Cooke said.

"If you know anything about our school, it's completely overcrowded. It's not possible."

Cooke says one concern is the lack of proper infrastructure to accommodate three- or four-year-old children.

"The only age-appropriate [play] structures in town are at the Little Blue Daycare and at Tr'inke Zho Daycare. Otherwise the children really aren't supposed to be playing on other play structures," Cooke said.

She's also concerned about the space available inside of the schools, and a lack of qualified staff to work with the younger children.

Yukon's child-care centres are governed by legislation that sets staff-to-child ratios for different age groups. That ratio is one staff to eight children, for pre-schoolers older than three.

Cooke is concerned that the ratio will be different in early kindergarten — with up to 13 children for one teacher.

"It's a significant number," says Cooke.

Angela Winsor, manager of the Watson Lake Daycare, says early childhood is vastly different from the ages of five and up, in terms of education and developmental needs.

That also means a different approach when it comes to training educators.

"Who will oversee this age group?" Winsor wrote in a letter to the Yukon government.

"Teachers? Putting a trained teacher with this age group is not appropriate. Teachers are trained to teach ages five and older, not five and under. There is a huge difference."

Winsor also questions the teacher's responsibilities when teaching kids in early kindergarten.

"Some of these children would not be totally potty trained. Are teachers trained to deal with this? Will teachers want to deal with this? I know kindergarten teachers that don't want to deal with a child that has soiled his/her underwear."

Accessibility and affordability

Winsor questions the government's reasoning for the early kindergarten program.

"If the reason behind this decision is affordability, why not make daycare free for all preschoolers in areas where there are licensed daycare centres?" Winsor asks.

Winsor says there are already three child care options available in her community and she doesn't see the point in adding another one.

According to Yukon's Minister of Education Tracy-Anne McPhee, early kindergarten is not going to replace services provided by the current child care providers but simply provide families with another option.

"It's not daycare in schools," says McPhee.

"First of all, it's optional. Second of all, it will be early-kindergarten programming, which is not the same as early childhood education-focused child care that is provided at a child care facility."

McPhee says she has heard the concerns expressed by representatives in Dawson City and Watson Lake and is committed to working together to ensure this initiative has a successful rollout.

"The [early kindergarten] options in other Yukon rural schools have achieved the options for families that we're hoping ultimately will be achieved in Dawson City and Watson Lake," the minister said.

"If that takes more time we will continue to work with them to determine what's the best solution for each of those communities."

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