

Penticton chosen for B.C.'s first publicly-funded pre-school program ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

An elementary school in Penticton, B.C., has been chosen to pilot the province's first publicly-funded pre-school program for 4-year-old children.

Penticton's board of education said the initiative is part of the provincial government's mandate to integrate child care and early learning into the public education system.

"I think the district is a key stakeholder in doing this. It makes sense from a parent perspective: you're bringing your children to the same place, you're picking them up from the same place," said James Palanio, school district 67's board chair.

"We have the facilities, we have the educators, so I think we are a perfect fit for these sort of programs."

The new pre-school program, dubbed "The Just B4 Pilot Project," will be held at Columbia Elementary School in the existing StrongStart classroom.

Children and their parents or caregivers currently attend drop-in sessions each morning. The program will add three extra hours in the afternoons but caregivers will not have to be present.

Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) will run the play-based activities.

"This would open up a lot of spots for children to attend pre-school within a school setting and get used to the routine, it might help with child care issues for parents and I am so excited about the opportunity," said Chrissi Travers, a StrongStart educator at Columbia Elementary.

Penticton has long faced a child care shortage with families waiting a year or more for a coveted licensed child care space.

"I know that it's a struggle and they are on a lot of waitlists from the point that they find out they are pregnant and they still don't get into the programs," she said.

"They have to recruit nannies, share nannies, get an au pair, and I think it's a struggle for a lot of families to find the care."

Utilizing more school space for childcare is one of 30 recommendations endorsed by city council in a Penticton child care action plan.

"Some of the conversations that the city is having with the school district is around space that may be available in school district properties," said Adam Goodwin, a social development strategist with the City of Penticton.

"The school district is currently undertaking a facility review of all their spaces and assets, and once that is finalized with the city's amenity management plan that is in place right now, is it will provide a better inventory of spaces that may be available for additional childcare projects in the community," he said.

Allen Beckingham, the school district's director of instruction, said one of the challenges is ensuring it doesn't commit empty space to child care that may need to be utilized for school-aged children in the future.

"Part of it is a sustainability conversation. We don't want to commit to child care options when we are not 100 per cent sure of how that would look long-term and so that's why the board is doing their due diligence around a long-term facilities plan," he said.

A recent study determined Penticton has approximately 1,064 child care spaces, and it is anticipated that Penticton requires at least 722 net new spaces over the next 10 years to meet expected demand.

Region: British Columbia ^[3]

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