

Despite recent expansion, long wait-list remains at French daycare in Summerside ^[1]

'It's sad that we can't accommodate every single child,' says association official

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EXCERPTS

A French early childhood education centre in Summerside, P.E.I., is celebrating the completion of a long-awaited expansion, one officials say will help them serve more families, but it won't be enough to meet demand.

Le Jardin des Étoiles can now accommodate 36 more children.

"It's a good feeling to be able to finally have these spots, to be able to accommodate more families that are wanting their child to learn the French language," said director Katera Arsenault.

She said she regularly receives calls from families wanting to enrol their children in French-speaking child care. But once the new spots are filled, there will still be more than 70 families left on the wait-list — and Arsenault said many of them could be waiting at least a year.

Arsenault said the expansion's design features open spaces and "the materials are very neutral, so it's not too overstimulating in the rooms for the kids."

Kathleen Couture, executive director of the Association of Francophone Early Childhood Education Centres of P.E.I., said planning for the \$1.9 million, federally-funded expansion started several years ago, with construction taking almost two years.

"When we started out, we knew what we wanted," said Couture. "We knew we wanted very low windows so that even the toddlers and the infants could see outside."

Other features include water taps and drains inside the classrooms, lots of storage space and ample room for kids to move around.

Couture said Jardin des Étoiles now has the capacity to serve 110 children daily: 80 in the preschool program for kids zero to five, and 30 in the afterschool program, Club Jeunesse, which now has its own designated rooms thanks to the expansion.

There's also new office space for the Association of Francophone Early Childhood Education Centres of P.E.I.

Couture said the centre's expansion has been needed for years because of a growing population in Summerside and increased interest in French education, especially among "rights holders."

"They may have grandparents or great-grandparents who were francophone who are assimilated into English," she said. "People are wanting to go back to the roots and get their children that French education."

Long wait-lists are a provincewide problem, said Couture.

"It's sad that we can't accommodate every single child, and we would like nothing less than to have every single child who wishes to have early childhood education in French to be able to access that service," she said.

"We're doing the best we can with what we have, but we know that in the future, we'll see more increases."

Additional space needed Island-wide

Couture said talks are underway to expand centres provincewide over the next several years. Next on the list is the centre in Evangeline, with construction set to get underway in 2023.

The most pressing need is in Charlottetown.

"We currently have 90 children, we have 60 preschool and 30 school age," said Couture. "We could easily open a second centre for another 80 preschool and 30 school age, and we'd still be full."

She hopes to work with the province and feds to improve access in Charlottetown.

Couture said recruitment for early childhood educators has been made easier. In the past four years, educators with a two-year diploma have seen their hourly wage increase by \$7 per hour, which has helped draw qualified staff to the Island.

"Our salaries are wonderful right now," she said. "We are one of the highest in the Atlantic provinces and almost one of the highest in Canada ... We're finally competitive."

Region: Prince Edward Island ^[3]

Tags: francophone families ^[4]

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