

# Equity, access, affordability targeted in 5-year regional child care plan presented Tuesday <sup>[1]</sup>

New plan goes before regional councillors Tuesday

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## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

Over the next five years, Waterloo regional officials will be working to address gaps identified in the local child care system to help boost experiences for children, caregivers and staff.

The region's newly released early years and child care service system plan for 2022-2026 sets that goal to improve operations.

"It's based on lots of research, analysis of data and a significant amount of engagement," said Barb Cardow, director of children services.

Officials surveyed almost 3,000 parents and guardians and 70 child care operators, among other stakeholders, in March 2021 to get feedback. Responses have helped the plan focus on four elements: Access, affordability, quality and equity and responsiveness.

The 2022 budget for regional children's service is more than \$70 million — \$63 million from provincial funding and almost \$8 million from the region. Of the provincial funding, more than \$4 million was redirected from five regionally-operated children's centres that have since closed.

### Gaps and solutions

#### Access:

The region's current system consists of licensed child care centres and home child care centres that offer 6,356 child care spaces. However, the report suggests that about a quarter of children up to four years old in the region have access to a licensed child care spaces.

Survey results show that child care spaces are not equally distributed across the region and 21 per cent of Black parents surveyed said they did not feel comfortable accessing regional programs and services.

People with high income and are born in Canada also have greater access to child care than those who are not.

To tackle this, the plan suggests at least 3,000 new licensed childcare spaces are needed and any expansion must work with sustaining the current system.

New strategies are also needed to ensure equal access that doesn't exclude marginalized families. The application and wait list process should also be improved.

#### Affordability:

At least 50 per cent of families surveyed said child care was not affordable. The region said child care fees increased faster than inflation by an average 10 percent between 2017 and 2020

"Parents often report that they decided they either didn't use licensed child care, a parent decides not to go back to work, and that's usually the mother, or they have to create some other child care solution using informal support or family or changing schedules," said Cardow, noting that more funding is needed to support the reduction in child care fees.

As well, she said the province must implement the federal government's \$10 a day child care plan.

"There is a significant amount of funding associated with that, that will help us to address affordability and access to child care ... those programs will definitely make a difference," Cardow added.

#### Quality:

The report suggests the pandemic has intensified staff stress and burnout, which has led to labour shortages and more people leaving the sector altogether.

The survey results show that two out of three parents and just under 50 per cent of child care operators reported the quality is

inconsistent across the board.

The plan lays out new strategies to recruit and retain staff as well as implement quality benchmarks.

Cardow said the region will also advocate to ensure early childhood educators are adequately paid.

"We are really advocating that we have a province-wide approach to addressing the low wages so that educators are actually compensated for the important work that they are doing," she said.

#### **Equity and responsiveness:**

The survey results identified significant systemic barriers for BIPOC and low income families, as well as families with children requiring special care.

People reported a lack of culturally responsive programs, diversity among staff and care for children with special needs. There is also limited data to understand the full scope of the issues.

So, the region is working on revisiting its policies and understanding current barriers by having conversations with impacted families. It's also working on implementing better data collection strategies and education.

"It involves training of all early childhood educators across Waterloo Region to help support them and being great educators or even greater educators who are practicing anti-bias, anti-racist curriculum and inclusive practices," said Cardow.

#### **Next steps**

The plan goes before committee of the whole on Tuesday and regional council later this month.

Once approved, the region will advocate for more funding from the province and develop an implementation plan.

**Region:** Ontario <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** child care expansion <sup>[4]</sup>

equity in education <sup>[5]</sup>

high-quality childcare <sup>[6]</sup>

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