

A YWCA program becomes the latest NWT childcare casualty ^[1]

An after-school childcare program in Yellowknife is set to shut down at short notice because it cannot attract enough staff to keep running.

Author: Williams, Ollie

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EXCERPTS

he YWCA NWT has delayed opening its after-school program at École St Joseph School and says the program is likely to be cancelled entirely before the end of the month.

The organization said a combination of staff unexpectedly leaving and an inability to attract replacements meant the program would have too few workers to meet the legal ratio of staff to children.

YWCA NWT president Kate Reid said the school's move to early dismissal on Thursdays had created an additional staffing demand that the after-school program could not meet.

"We've been looking at this since June," Reid said, when Yellowknife Catholic Schools advised the organization of the upcoming schedule change at St Joe's.

"There are associated childcare regulations where, if you are doing programming for longer periods of time, more stipulations apply. And it's hard to find folks who are available for one afternoon a week, too, right?

"We've worked hard to hire and train qualified staff within our financial means. We've reached out to the board of YCS to see if they could provide additional support or find other ways to avoid closure. We really do hope a solution can be found."

As things stand, the YWCA NWT told parents, September 29 will be the program's last day.

"We apologize for this late notice and we know cancelling after-school care programming at ESJS will cause concerns for parents and caregivers," a letter to parents read.

"However, YWCA NWT cannot jeopardize the quality of care and the safety of staff and children by operating with insufficient staff."

School district 'exploring solutions'

The shift to half-day schooling on Thursdays is not the only factor at play in the program's apparent demise.

A staffing crisis exists across the childcare sector and more broadly across the Northwest Territories, damaging services ranging from healthcare and social services to veterinary care and aviation.

Yellowknife's childcare system has long been under pressure, with fewer spaces than necessary to offer everyone the care they are seeking. The introduction of new federal supports has made childcare cheaper but also caused uncertainty in the sector, with several facility closures attributed to a program rollout that some operators felt was bungled.

While Reid did not attribute the problems at St Joe's to that initiative, a promised package of financial incentives to help operators attract and retain staff appears to be arriving too late to help the program stay open.

Reid – who said the YWCA's other programs at YK1 schools were unaffected – argued her non-profit cannot match the salaries childcare providers are able to earn elsewhere.

"Hiring and retaining staff that are qualified and willing to accept our wages has proven very difficult," she said, contrasting the \$40-an-hour wage available elsewhere with the average of \$25 an hour she said the YWCA was able to afford.

"We're trying to provide a service for families and guardians with limited means. The funding situation we're in means we can't pay our staff as much as we would like to."

If someone else steps in to run programming, Reid said, "we only hope that they keep costs affordable for families, because that's what we've worked hard to do."

One family affected by the threatened closure said parents were "being left to scramble without childcare."

Superintendent Simone Gessler of Yellowknife Catholic Schools is away from her office this week, an automated message stated when Cabin Radio attempted to reach her. Acting superintendent Pat Sullivan said he was in a training session on Thursday and was not available for comment.

In a brief letter posted to the school's website, YCS stated: "We are fully aware of how stressful and inconvenient this must be for you, especially receiving such news on short notice.

"Please know that YCS is meeting this morning to explore potential ways in which we may be able to support families and find a solution for the situation. We will be in touch with you shortly."

Reid said 45 children would be affected if the program at St Joe's closes.

"This is why I felt absolutely sick to my stomach all week," she said.

"It really is unfortunate. Our staff has nothing except nice things to say about the admin at St Joe's. It just is one of those... it's something that's completely blindsided us, in a way. And it's out of our control."

Region: Northwest Territories ^[3]

Tags: child care ^[4]

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