

Dozens of families 'left in the lurch' as staffing issues delay opening of Etobicoke before/after school program ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

After more two years of pandemic disruptions, Etobicoke mom Jessica Robinson was expecting this school year would get off to a smooth start.

Instead, Robinson, along with dozens of other parents whose children are enrolled in the before and after school program at James S. Bell Community School, found themselves searching at the 11th hour for alternate care.

"It was a last-minute scramble. ... and paying \$35 a day was out of my budget," Robinson, a single mother whose nine-year-old son Austin has attended the affordable program at the south Etobicoke school for six years, told CP24.com.

"I had no idea there were staffing issues. If I had known I could have found something else."

On Aug. 30 PLASP Child Care Services, which operates more than 680 before and after school programs and 30 early learning and child care centres in Toronto and Peel, informed parents/guardians that their programs at James S. Bell Community School would not be opening on the first day of school as planned.

In an email, the charitable organization said that it was dealing with "shortages of staff" and does "not yet have the staff in place" at their James S. Bell site in order to meet the provincial requirements to offer the program.

It's believed to be one of a number of PLASP locations where before and after school care has been put on hold due to staffing shortages.

"We know this news is going to be the cause of stress and anxiety for you and your child, and we are so sorry to be the cause of disruption to your family's smooth transition back to school," PLASP wrote.

"We assure you that we're doing everything we possibly can to remedy this situation and to open the program. We are continuing to work around the clock to recruit and hire qualified ECE staff and to work with the Ministry of Education to have these new staff in place as soon as possible."

In the note, the child care operator said they are unable to provide "exact date" when the program will open, but would give parents weekly updates. The latest one sent to parents on Friday provides no reopening date.

Robinson said not knowing when her son will have before and after care at James S. Bell School is "stressful."

She said that she tried finding a subsidized spot at other similar programs in her area, but was ultimately unsuccessful.

Fortunately her employer is understanding of her situation and has agreed to allow Robinson to temporarily carve out a few hours of her day to pick up her son from school along with four other children until their parents are done work.

In the mornings, Robinson, who starts work at 8 a.m., drops Austin off with another parent who accompanies a few kids to school.

But not every family is so lucky, she said.

"Some parents are in a bad position," said Robinson, noting that her son has ADHD and thrives on routine. "I know of at least two parents who could face losing their job because of this sudden change in child care. Others could be forced to get their child to walk home alone and be home alone. They shouldn't be forced to make that kind of choice."

Toronto District School Board Trustee Patrick Nunziata, who represents Etobicoke-Lakeshore, said he's been in daily communication with about two dozen impacted families and is trying to help them find solutions.

"I really feel for the families that are left in the lurch because of this shortage of child care staff," Nunziata said, adding he's hopeful this situation will be resolved in a timely way as typically before/after school programs can be in flux for the first week or two of school until final headcounts are determined.

“Situations like this vary year by year per school. ... There’s just a huge shortage of ECEs right now,” he said.

Nunziata said he’s also trying to find ways to make available additional childcare subsidies at other nearby childcare sites but he conceded it “might take some time for that to happen.”

Further, the Etobicoke trustee said he’s talking with the TDSB about how to increase the availability of more before and after school programs so these recurring stressful situations can be avoided.

In a follow-up email to CP24, PLASP said staffing shortages have resulted in the delay of five per cent of their school-age programs. The organization, which said its 30 child care centres are open and operational, has yet to respond to CP24’s request for elaboration on this point.

“Like many sectors, the child care field is currently experiencing a shortage of Registered Early Childhood Educators. The shortage is especially prevalent amongst part time workers of whom represent 100% of our before and after school programs,” they wrote.

“This is the unfortunate and challenging situation we are currently facing at PLASP.”

The organization went on to say that they are doing everything they can “to open impacted programs as quickly as possible, while meeting licensing requirements and maintaining the high program quality that our families expect and that children deserve.”

“We have called each family personally to speak with them about the situation – and we are committed to keeping families informed of our progress. As soon as we have qualified staff in place we look forward to providing child care to our families again,” PLASP added.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: child care ^[4]

before and after school care ^[5]

staff shortage ^[6]

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<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/9128> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/9187>