

Child-care operators 'blindsided' by 'unaffordable' fee increase proposed by school board ^[1]

Author: McCullough, K.

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Excerpts

Hamilton's public school board is poised to increase rental rates for child-care operators by up to 64 per cent, a jump some say is "unaffordable."

Several child-care operators say Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board rates would jump by between 16 and 17 per cent for before- and after-school programs, and by 64 per cent for infants, toddlers and preschool care.

In addition, operators would be charged for 365 days a year, instead of what they use — weekdays from September to June. That concern, as well as others, was raised by Hamilton Child Care Advocates, a group associated with longtime former trustee Judith Bishop that has members on child-care boards throughout the city.

"Absolutely astronomical," is how YWCA's Sandra Parker describes the proposed increases.

"It will very much limit the number of spaces that can be made available within schools," said the organization's director of child, youth and developmental services.

Meanwhile, the new Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) agreement has promised thousands of new spaces across the province, lower fees for families at \$10 to \$12 a day, and increased wages for early-childhood educators.

"We don't know how we can accomplish those things if we have to swallow a (nearly 64) per cent rental increase," Parker said. "Those things don't add up."

In an email, school board spokesperson Shawn McKillop declined to share details, but said the board is in conversation with child-care agencies and is working with trustees as they "deliberate on the budget, which includes a review of child-care rental costs."

"This plan contemplates an increase," he said.

The YWCA, which operates six of its eight Hamilton locations out of Hamilton-Wentworth public schools, currently pays \$30,297.85 in rent for full-day child care and before- and after-school programs. Should rates increase as anticipated, they would pay \$48,440.15 for the same services, representing an increase of more than \$18,000.

Rates have also increased at other boards YWCA partners with, but "not to this magnitude," Parker said.

Last year, before- and after-school rates at the Grand Erie District School Board and the Brant Haldimand Norfolk Catholic District School Board increased by 2.5 per cent. For full-day child care at the Brant-Haldimand-Norfolk Catholic board, rates increased by 5.7 per cent.

McKillop said the review "is based on recovering costs and engaging in our annual review process that has been paused for a number of years" due to the 2019 strike and the pandemic.

But operators say they haven't been told what those costs are.

"Is it toilet paper and hand soap that's being used? Is it the caretaking? Is it utility bills?" wonders Duane Dahl, executive director of BGC Hamilton-Halton.

Dahl said operators had actually requested the board reduce "already unaffordable" rates before they became aware of the proposed increase. And it did — sort of. The board has also proposed a 50 per cent decrease in summer rental fees for programs like camp.

'Robbing Peter to pay Paul'

Hamilton Child Care Advocates (HCCA) say the school board "should not solve its problems by increasing revenue at the expense of child-care organizations."

Besides, child care and schools are funded through the Ministry of Education, and support the same children. It's "robbing Peter to pay Paul," the coalition said in an email.

“The school board has a funding problem ... and rentals of property would seem like an easy picking,” said Bishop, a member of the HCCA. “They’re thinking of child care purely as renters.”

In the past, agencies could boost revenue by raising fees, Bishop said, but under the new agreement, fees are frozen. Unless the ministry offsets increasing costs, operators will be forced to reduce services to families.

HCCA says operators are prepared to pay costs that are “solely attributed to their use,” and recommend future rents reflect true costs and are adjusted yearly for the cost of living index.

They also recommend trustees review the board’s partnership model with agencies.

“Our budgets are finite, and these costs are just something that we think is going to put us in a difficult situation to decide where we operate and how we operate,” said Brenda Ferguson, CEO of Today’s Family. “If we can’t afford to pay the rent, we have to decide what we’re going to do.” Ferguson said this situation isn’t “in the spirit of” the national agreement Ontario signed last year.

“We’re trying to to grow services for children and families in our community because there’s already not enough child care,” she said.

Operators say they want to be in public schools, which are required to have before- and after-school care. Families benefit from programs that are both affordable and accessible.

“Schools are hubs within communities ... it’s convenient for parents, especially if they have older children who are going to the school,” she said. “It’s a good model, but it’s not cost efficient.”

Dahl said BGC would rather not “shop around” for better rates.

“We’d rather be in the school,” he said. “But if it’s an unaffordable contract that’s being presented to us for the next school year, difficult choices may have to be made.”

A report including potential rate increases will be brought to the school board’s finance and facilities committee on June 8.

Region: Ontario ^[2]

Tags: child care in schools ^[3]

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