

Public board trustees won't back 'unaffordable' rental rate hikes for Hamilton child-care operators ^[1]

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Excerpts

Hamilton's public school board has put the brakes on a plan that would increase rental rates, drastically in some cases, for many local child care operators.

In a unanimous vote Thursday evening, the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board finance and facilities committee moved to maintain "existing child care licence rates for 2023-24 and ...review the use of board facilities policies," contrary to staff's recommendations for new rates starting Jan. 1.

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"It buys us time," said Darryl Hall, executive director of the Umbrella Family and Child Care Centres of Hamilton, told The Spec.

Child care operators perviously told The Spec the proposed changes are "unaffordable."

The Ministry of Education says a new funding formula is under development, but gave no timeline for when it might be announced. But Hall says any increase is intended "for service expansion, not to pay for rent increases," Hall said.

At the same time, the board has also proposed a 50 per cent decrease in summer rental fees for programs like camp, but several operators have said the savings won't offset the losses. The changes to fee structures will affect each child-care centre differently based on the programming they offer.

Under the new child-care program, providers are unable to raise fees to offset increased rental costs from school board.

"We are under threat of closure in schools. This is what we're facing," sad Renée Wetselaar, executive director St. Matthew's House.

Child-care operators, many of whom say they already operate tight budgets, say they worry about the impacts of increases on families.

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Meanwhile, the city says a rollout of hundreds of new child-care spaces, prioritized by areas of the city with the least access, is on track. Hamilton is set to gain between 200 and 300 news spaces each year until 2026.

To date, 221 spots have opened in the city since 2022, with more expected before the end of the year.

Earlier this year, the city identified four historically underserved wards — Ward 6 (east Mountain), Ward 7 (central Mountain), Ward 3 (Hamilton Centre) and Ward 4 (east lower Hamilton) — which will get higher proportions of new spaces.

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But, amid a provincewide worker shortage, advocates are wondering who will staff those spaces. Under the child-care agreement, the province has increased the wage floor for early childhood workers, but it's unclear what, if any, effect it's had on hiring.

"Recruiting and retaining high-quality early childhood educators is a huge challenge, particularly as we think about expanding the system," Chase said.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: funding ^[4]

child care in schools ^[5]

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