

With school about to start, parents in Winnipeg scramble to find child care as demand spikes ^[1]

Manitoba Child Care Association says more investment needed for school-age spaces
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Excerpts

With the start of classes for many students now less than a week away, some Winnipeg parents who don't have before- and after-school child care are scrambling to find spaces for their kids.

That dilemma is all too familiar for mom Lea-Anne Ritchot. A few years back, she was considering reducing her hours at work before she found a last-minute spot at a child-care centre for her now nine-year-old daughter, who was headed into Grade 1 at the time.

"It was very tight and we were very lucky, and we honestly don't have options for daycare," Ritchot said. "There's no such thing as supply and demand. There's just demand."

There are currently 14,000 licensed spaces for children ages seven to 12, but the Manitoba Child Care Association says that's not enough to accommodate families.

The demand is growing for spaces at Fort Garry Child Care Centre, where executive director Jennifer Couillard said changes to bell times in the Pembina Trails School Division have prompted more parents to seek out a spot.

"I found our wait lists have probably increased by a good 10 per cent since that announcement," Couillard said.

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Start and end times are changing at 17 schools in the division to deal with a growing student population and an increase in the number of students who take the bus.

Students in 12 schools will start their day at 9:20 a.m. and end at 3:55 p.m. Class at the remainder of schools will start at 8:25 a.m. and end at 3:00 p.m.

All 110 of the licensed school-aged child spaces run in Pembina Trails schools by Couillard's centre are full.

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A lack of daycare and before/after-school care availability presents "ongoing challenges to parents and caregivers across Manitoba," Pembina Trails School Division superintendent Lisa Boles acknowledged.

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The division has been working with providers to provide additional space for child care wherever possible, Boles said.

"In the last five months of the school year we were able to provide additional space for before and after care providers in eight schools in preparation for this fall," she said.

Spike in demand after \$10-a-day care

It's not only an issue in Pembina Trails.

Charanjit Singh, a director with Huron Child Care on McPhillips Street, said there are around 200 people on a wait-list for 15 licensed spaces available in its school-age program.

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The centre is expanding to a second location with new spaces for 52 infants and 68 preschoolers, because the wait-list for spots for those ages is even longer.

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Manitoba is planning to introduce 23,000 new child-care spaces by 2026 under a federal-provincial agreement, but those spaces are specifically for children under seven.

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Jodie Kehl, executive director of the Manitoba Child Care Association, says expanding school-aged care needs to be a focus.

"Families that have children in young primary school years need child care very much, particularly during the school year, but then also on non-school days when the family still has to go to work but there's no school for their child," she said.

"It would take the investments and the political will of a provincial government to also then expand child care spaces for the seven- to 12-year-old children and fund those spaces accordingly."

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The province has announced some spending on creating more school-age spaces, including a project to help schools develop new spaces on-site.

But Ritchot said as a parent, she feels more needs to be done.

Ideally, "schools would have in-house daycares that would have enough spots for every child in their school," she said.

"It was super hectic" when her daughter went into Grade 1, "and we weren't sure if we could even keep our jobs," said Ritchot.

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