

Day care plan isn't child's play ^[1]

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Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 26 Oct 2005

EXCERPTS

Toronto plans to create almost 5,300 new child care spots over the next three years, mostly for 4- and 5-year-olds attending kindergarten in the city's neediest neighbourhoods. Described as Toronto's most ambitious child care expansion ever, the \$125 million plan will see 1,668 new spots created in existing locations by next March. The city will add to that by building 57 new centres by 2008, creating 3,621 more spots, most of them in public and Catholic schools, according to a report awaiting approval this week by city council. Funding for the unprecedented expansion comes from Ottawa's \$5 billion national child care initiative and is part of the province's Best Start plan to provide school-based child care for children aged 4 and 5.

"We're just so excited about this," said Anne MacIver, program manager for Blake Street Child Care, near Gerrard St. E. and Jones Ave., an area with a lot of social housing and many recent immigrants. The new money means that by the new year, junior and senior kindergarten students who currently walk to the community centre for child care when they're not at class will instead be taken care of at their school, just like the older students. The 20 new spots within the school will open up space for 20 younger preschoolers at the community centre. At city hall, councillors lavished praise on the plan. "This represents an important investment in the children and families of our city," said Councillor Adam Giambrone, whose Davenport ward will get two new school-based centres and expanded space for 4- and 5-year-olds in two existing centres. One-quarter of the children in the ward don't speak English at home, and the area has few licensed child care programs to help kids make the transition to school, Giambrone said. Nestled in a back corner of the Davenport-Perth Neighbourhood Centre, Davenport Child Care has seen that need up close. When the city opened a day care centre with space for kindergarten students at the neighbouring Carleton Village Public School last year, the Davenport centre lost most of its preschoolers to the more convenient school site. "But our (preschool) space filled up almost immediately again," said child care worker Maria Faria. "For parents in this community, there is a real need." The city has 851 licensed child care centres, 324 of them in schools. But just two-thirds of the centres have space for children up to 5 years old. By 2008, 50 more schools will have child care centres, almost all including space for those aged 4 and 5. The expansion will bring the number of licensed child care spaces in centres to almost 53,000 and the number of subsidies to more than 27,000. But that still represents just one in five of all children in the city younger than 5, at a time when more than 70 per cent of Canadian mothers with young children are in the workforce. "The school boards have asked for twice as much child care (as) we can afford to provide with the money we've been allocated," said the city's children's services director, Petr Varmuza. "So even though this expansion is greater than anything we've ever seen in the city, it's still not enough to meet the need." Plans to add new child care spaces in existing school and community centres this year are well underway, Varmuza said. However, the 57 new centres are still considered only proposals until the construction details are ironed out, he said. And unless the province allows the city some flexibility in how it uses its \$125 million allocation, there won't be enough to build all the new centres, he added. Under the city's child care service plan, approved by council earlier this year, priority for new spaces and centres will be in areas of high child poverty and low service. The expansion plan includes hikes in program funding, wage enhancements for staff and money for minor improvements in existing centres. "I think it's fantastic that this opportunity has come to us," said Suzan Hall, whose Etobicoke North ward is getting five new school-based centres that will serve children from birth to age 5. "But it had better continue. You can't start something like this and then pull the rug out from underneath it," she said. - reprinted from the Toronto Star

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