

Facing the dearth of daycare [CA-ON] ^[1]

Most school spaces filled and wait lists are long. Many parents forced to arrange patchwork care

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EXCERPTS

Four-year-old Sydnie Stephens is excited about starting afternoon kindergarten this month in the new public school that is opening right around the corner from her Ajax home.

But her parents are nervous.

Since there has been no public money to build new daycares in Ontario for almost a decade, Eagle Ridge Public School is opening without a program to care for kindergarten students when they aren't in class.

So Sydnie will spend her mornings at a daycare down the road. And her parents will have to pay \$85 a month — on top of the \$580 monthly daycare fee — for a private bus company to take her to kindergarten after lunch.

When classes are dismissed at 3:10 p.m., Sydnie will join her 7-year-old brother Riley in an after-hours daycare program in the new school — three programs a day.

For parents of children younger than 12, September isn't just about preparing their kids to go back to school, it's also the most difficult time to find child care.

With just 173,000 licensed child care spaces in the province and only 35 per cent of those spots in schools, many parents of school-aged children are forced to arrange patchwork care as Flowers-Stephens has.

Ontario announced \$58 million in new federal child care money to help subsidize fees and expand facilities last month. But after almost 10 years of provincial neglect at the hands of the previous Progressive Conservative government, it will be years before the child care pressure eases for working parents of young children, officials say.

A report released yesterday by George Brown College and the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education says the province should use federal child care cash to turn the mishmash of daycare, parent resource and kindergarten programs into a single program for all 4- and 5-year olds.

And it calls for a single provincial ministry to set policy and regulations.

The need for change is particularly evident this week as daycare supervisors across Greater Toronto scramble to confirm enrolment, ensure adequate staffing and field calls from parents frantic for care.

While the child-care crunch for children in kindergarten may improve as new federal and provincial funds trickle into the system, for parents of older children, there's no relief in sight.

Ottawa's decision not to fund child care for children over age 5 means school-age programs are still getting no help or attention.

There is a longstanding assumption among policy makers that there are recreation programs and other activities in the community to serve children aged 6 to 12, said Petr Varmuza, director of child care services for the city of Toronto.

But they aren't available in every neighbourhood and most don't operate year-round during the hours when working parents need them.

Ideally, Varmuza thinks school boards should be funded to arrange free programming for school-age children during the school year.

But until that's in place, Varmuza said Ottawa should allow municipalities to spend some of the federal money on school-age child care.

Toronto Councillor Olivia Chow, chair of the mayor's new roundtable on children and youth, believes Ottawa can be convinced to be more flexible with its new child care cash, especially in light of its election pledge to begin building a national child care program.

The roundtable, whose members include provincial Children and Youth Minister Marie Bountrogianni and federal Infrastructure Minister John Godfrey, is slated to hold its first meeting in October.

"We've been talking for years about the seamless day where children move easily from school to recreation, culture and child-care programs," said Chow (Ward 20, Trinity-Spadina). "This is a perfect opportunity to do what is best for the kids."

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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