

Kindergarten expansion expected to cause space shortages ^[1]

some districts turning to portables to ease space crunch

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EXCERPTS

After years of declining enrollments, some Metro schools are now facing a space crunch as the province moves toward full-day kindergarten for all of B.C.'s five-year-olds.

The Education Ministry is promising new modular classrooms -- similar to portables, but with washrooms -- to accommodate some of the additional children but it's also instructing districts to make the most efficient use of existing classrooms, district officials said Monday.

In Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows, four child care centres in elementary schools have been told they must relocate, although the district's secretary-treasurer Wayne Jefferson said only one eviction is linked to the need for more kindergarten space. Two of the centres are being forced to move because they are in elementary schools slated for closure in June due to declining enrollments, which continue to be a problem in parts of the district.

The influx of five-year-olds will begin this September, when the province expects 50 per cent of them will be in full-day kindergarten while 50 per cent will continue with half-day kindergarten. By September 2011, all kindergarten programs in public schools will be full-day, with a total of 36,000 students.

Independent schools will also be required to move to full-day kindergarten if they want government funding.

Education Minister Margaret MacDiarmid wasn't available for an interview Monday, but said in a statement that districts have told her they will have no problem accommodating the first year of expansion. The ministry "is working with school districts to determine their capital needs for full-day kindergarten and for any new classrooms that will be needed for this program" in the second year, she added.

Vancouver isn't predicting difficulties this fall because almost all of the kindergarten expansion in the first phase is occurring on the east side, where student numbers have been falling and many schools have empty desks. But there will be a challenge finding sufficient space on the city's west side in 2011, a district spokesman said.

Richmond is also expecting problems in 2011 because it has rented spare classrooms to child care facilities in almost all of its schools and has been told by the ministry that full day kindergarten cannot displace daycares or StrongStart centres, assistant superintendent Nancy Brennan said in an interview. The district still hopes it will get approval to build some additions, but has also submitted a request for 21 modular classrooms.

Thus far, the ministry has agreed to provide 13.

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Surrey, one of only a few districts that has not experienced declining enrollments, is predicting a significant jump in its need for portable classrooms as a result of full-day kindergarten -- from 217 last September to 292 by September 2011. Portable classrooms have become a drag on Surrey's budget because their costs are pulled from operating budgets.

The ministry expects full-day kindergarten in public schools will cost \$129 million by the time its fully implemented.

-reprinted from the Vancouver Sun

Region: Ontario ^[2]

Tags: spaces ^[3]

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