

Not only classrooms are on chopping block ^[1]

Daycares could be forced to close along with five schools that house them

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EXCERPTS

Four-year old Tinsaye Hailu gets straight to the point when she walks up to a reporter looking around her day care.

"Don't close my school," Tinsaye says, displaying a fierce sense of ownership in McCauley School, where her new child-care centre opened just weeks ago.

Those four-year-old's worries are shared by many parents and children as Edmonton public school trustees grapple with the question of whether to close McCauley, Parkdale, Eastwood, Capilano and Fulton Place schools at the end of June.

Most of those schools also house day cares, out-of-school care centres for school-aged children or both.

And as much as parents have worried in recent weeks about the impact of school closures on their children's formal education, those who rely on the child care connected with those schools also have worried about messing with the relationship that exists between the two.

Some centres, like the 35-year-old Fulton Child Care Centre at Fulton Place, have a decades-long connection with a school. Others are much newer, such as the Multicultural Health Brokers Co-op which opened in a basement classroom of McCauley School on Feb. 1 -- eight days before district officials recommended the school be closed.

In each instance, the school's childcare connection became a flashpoint in the debate about why the school should remain open. It is one more issue trustees have to weigh when they decide the schools' fates on April 13.

"These systems are not integrated," said Jane Hewes, program chairwoman for Grant MacEwan's Early Learning and Child Care program, and someone who has participated in some of the school closure meetings. "From a family's perspective, they do operate as a system. You move one piece of it and all the others are affected."

Yet how much should decisions on school viability be based on connections with services like child care? Principals said some parents shop for schools based on the availability of on-site child care outside of school hours or a nearby day care for younger siblings. Such services, however, are not the formal responsibility of the school district.

Instead, child-care facilities are run by private operators or non-profit organizations and are licensed by the provincial government.

"Child care is not part of our mandate," said Lorne Parker, Edmonton Public's managing director of planning and student

transportation. "But the district really is very receptive to child-care initiatives. The direction for us is to support them wherever we can, as long as it does not compromise the space we need for instruction."

District officials did factor the child-care centres into the five closure recommendations, Parker said. Ultimately, they were outweighed by other considerations. "The biggest issue for us in the city centre is we're just spreading everything too thin," Parker said.

He said even if the schools close, the child-care centres could continue to operate in their current locations.

But at a time when Education Minister Dave Hancock is talking up the concept of schools with wraparound services -- specifically features such as day cares and out-of-school care programs -- critics of the proposed school closures feel Edmonton Public officials are being too hasty.

Having an out-of-school care program located in the school allows teachers to simply walk downstairs and pass on messages to parents through the child-care staff, explained Michelle Puffer, executive director of the Parkdale Out-of-School Care society, which opened in Parkdale School in 1984.

"We are the surrogate parents, the link between family and school."

At McCauley, families wanted the child-care centre in the building specifically because of those close connections.

The day care, which now serves 21 children, opened at the request of parents, many who wanted to take advantage of McCauley's intercultural early learning program offered for preschool age children.

By opening the day care in the school, staff can easily walk the children upstairs to the specialty program, while younger siblings continue to play at the day care and older siblings attend kindergarten to Grade 9 classes.

The day care also opens at 6 a.m., one hour earlier than most child-care centres, to serve parents who rely on transit and have to be at work at 7 a.m.

"We're dealing with high-barrier families and the relationships are so key," said Trina Keiver, operations manager for the Multicultural Health Brokers Co-op day care. "What's most important for these families is the relationships and small class size. That's more important than if they're going to get more courses."

Jessica Knoch, chairwoman of the board that oversees the Fulton Child Care Association and the Fulton After-School care program, said the relationship between schools, day cares and neighbourhoods must be considered. The Fulton Child Care centre serves 140 children.

"The synergistic relationship built between the school and our day care over the last 35 years as children move from infants to age 12 in a safe, smooth progression should not be underestimated," Knoch said. "It lays a strong community foundation that attracts families into the community and keeps it healthy and vibrant."

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