

All-kindergarten school promises to relieve jammed Thorncliffe Park ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A north Toronto community is about to become home to what is believed will be the largest all-kindergarten school in the country thanks to a ballooning student population and the introduction of full-day kindergarten.

After some summer delays, architects and community leaders are anxious to get construction under way this fall so that the two-storey building will be ready to welcome more than 700 full-time kindergartners in September, 2012. The shovels were supposed to break ground in July at the latest.

"It's a wonderful thing for the community and I hope they start construction soon because it's going to take at least a full year of construction," said Gerri Gershon, the Toronto District School Board trustee who represents the area. "We can't begin the full-day kindergarten until we get the building."

The school will be located next door to Thorncliffe Park Public School, which as North America's largest elementary school is bursting with more than 1,800 students in kindergarten through Grade 5 who spill out into 20 schoolyard portables.

The kindergarten school will have its own principal but will be attached by a bridge to the elementary school. It has been designed as an early learning hub, complete with childcare and family literacy centres for parents and grandparents.

The elementary school was already overcrowded when Ontario announced it would roll out full-day kindergarten to every school over a span of five years. The first phase began last fall, and with Thorncliffe Park slated to introduce the full-day model in 2012, the pressure is on to build more space.

"We need to have 20-something more classrooms which we don't have," said Thorncliffe Park's principal, Kevin Battaglia. "The only possibility to get full-day kindergarten in our community is to build a kindergarten school."

The Thorncliffe community, near where the Don Valley Parkway meets Don Mills Road, is a dense pocket of mid-rise buildings that serve as a landing pad for many recent immigrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, China and elsewhere. As relatives arrive from overseas, residents often pack multiple families into a single-family apartment, and as many as 95 per cent of students speak a language other than English at home.

The geography and density of the neighbourhood mean that an unusually high proportion of the school population, about 98 per cent, walk to school. It was with this in mind that its architects designed a colour-coded building peppered with multiple entrances and windows that reach all the way to the floor.

"So kids can see outside, they can see their friends, they can see their mom approaching, they can see from the floor," said Martin Kohn, of Kohn Shnier Architects. "The heating system for the school is all in-floor radiant heating, which is more energy-efficient, but also means kids on the floor are warm and comfortable."

The staircases will be extra wide and shallow to accommodate short legs accustomed to life in Thorncliffe's elevator-lined mid-rises. In such a dense community, space is also a concern. "We're anticipating having parking and a play area on the roof of the school," Mr. Kohn said.

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Region: Ontario ^[2]

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