

Boards defend kindergarten space ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Kindergarten students in Windsor get plenty of space to learn, say school board officials.

They were responding Thursday to a suggestion by the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario that minimum square footages be set for the province's full-day kindergarten classrooms.

"I think physical space in kindergarten is very important," said Sharon O'Hagan-Wong, superintendent of education for the Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board. "It serves as the third teacher. You might not have the sand or water tables out at the same time. We recommend teachers rotate learning materials."

Some Ontario teachers have complained that full-day kindergarten students are housed in classrooms that are too small for the kids and all the play equipment they use.

That prompted the teachers' federation to approve a resolution at its annual meeting this week urging minimum space requirements.

"Last year we had some concerns, the board investigated and relocated children," said Adelina Cecchin, president of the Essex County local of the ETFO. She said while there have been no serious problems yet, there are still three years left in the five-year full-day kindergarten implementation plan.

The province allows school boards to have up to 26 students in full-day kindergarten classes with a teacher and an early childhood worker, up from 20 students with one teacher.

Most traditional kindergarten classrooms are 300 to 400 square feet larger than regular classrooms. Kindergarten classrooms usually have several learning stations for arts and crafts, sensory discovery, reading and building blocks along with smaller-sized sinks, toilets and counters.

O'Hagan-Wong said the Catholic school board has done a variety of modifications to make sure students have enough space. In most schools, students are in a kindergarten room or two classrooms joined together. In one small school with only 16 kindergarten students, they use a regular classroom. Some schools have used small classrooms to store materials and sensory stations to free up space.

By September, 11 Catholic schools will have full-day kindergarten programs, with 30 more to follow over the next three years. The schools chosen for implementation over the past two years are ones that already had enough room to accommodate the program and are in neighbourhoods that would benefit most from full-day programs.

"We've had to be innovative," O'Hagan-Wong said.

The Greater Essex County District School Board has also rolled out full-day kindergarten in schools that already have sufficient space.

The challenge over the next three years is to put additions on schools that are too full or implement boundary reviews to geographically shift students to better manage space, said Clara Howitt, superintendent of education. The Ministry of Education is also providing funding for schools that need to expand.

"So far we've experienced great success," Howitt said. "We've been strategic. The roll out of full-day kindergarten is complicated, but it's the best thing that's happened to our students. We haven't met up with glitches with space."

The opening this fall of a new Tecumseh elementary school should ease space pressures on Lakeshore Discovery, which had 17 portables last year.

Cecchin said young children need lots of room because they are curious and want to investigate their surroundings.

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Region: Ontario ^[2]

Tags: kindergarten ^[3]

school system ^[4]

full-day early learning ^[5]

public management ^[6]

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[3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/kindergarten> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/school-system> [5]
<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8149> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8166>