

# Low-income families lose award-winning nursery school <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Despite growing needs for its services, a small, award-winning nursery school that has served low-income and special-needs children in Regent Park for nearly 75 years is being forced to close its doors this winter.

Bond Child and Family Development is believed to be the oldest nursery school in the city. It offers an 8:1 ratio of students to staff and stained glass-windowed classrooms on the bottom floors of a neo-Gothic church. But a shortage of child-care subsidies for Toronto's low-income families has meant that more and more candidates on the school's waiting list have been unable to afford the approximately \$500-a-month fee.

Enrolment at the school has been declining in recent years and the introduction of full-day kindergarten last fall was the final straw. The school's fundraising efforts couldn't keep up and the board of directors recently decided they'd have to close their doors at the end of the calendar year.

"It's so hard to let this go, we've been fighting for so long," Rosemary White, Bond's executive director, said one recent afternoon as she stared out at the nursery's playground, a tree-lined oasis of colourful play centres she helped raised the funds to build.

Munira Khilji's four-year-old son, Yusuf, had delayed speech and motor skills when he started at Bond nearly two years ago. Now he is a chatterbox who can climb stairs. He commutes from Thorncliffe Park, but his mother says the trip is worthwhile because the program has been "life-changing."

"I am truly upset that it is closing because I've seen what it does for children," she said. "I feel like someone is dying, it's just wrong."

Since it was started in 1937 with a \$250 donation, Bond has provided free transportation and food to local children and assistance for those with special needs. There are currently about 37 children enrolled at the school, down from a peak of 64, and the staff are scrambling to find places for them to go after Bond closes.

That isn't easy. There are more than 19,000 families in Toronto on waiting lists for child-care subsidies, and even as it prepares to close, Bond has more than 20 families on its waiting list. Over the years, the school has admitted some children who were able to pay the full fee, but about 95 per cent of the children come from low-income families.

The nursery's board of directors explored a number of options including partnerships and becoming a daycare in order to keep the school going, but in the end they say nothing proved financially viable.

"To have all that interest and need and space and services available, but to not be able to marry those things up because of a lack of funding is disappointing and it's hard to accept," said Tracy Wynne, the board's president.

There are about 24,000 children in subsidized child care in the city, a figure that has remained stable even after the provincial government broadened the eligibility criteria and the wait list has grown.

"I think Bond is one of the very first tragic losses because they've serviced their community for so long and offered such high-quality care," said Katie Arnup of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care. "That's the kind of centre we've always warned we were going to lose. I think that we will see more closures ... and eventually we'll step by and realize we don't have child care."

Ontario would do well to switch to a funding model more like Quebec or Manitoba's, which fund child-care centres rather than individual children, according to Ms. Arnup.

The subsidies are jointly funded by the province and the city, and both maintain that they are pouring more money than ever into child care. Pamela Roberts, director of Children's Services said that between the city and the province, about \$300-million is being poured into child-care subsidies in Toronto each year, 80 per cent of which is supposed to come from the province, the remaining 20 per cent from the city.

"There is a shortfall of funding from the province even to meet the current spaces we're providing," she said.

A spokesman for the Ministry of Education, Mike Feenstra, said that since 2003 the province has increased funding for child care in the City of Toronto by 50 per cent.

"We are the only level of government that continues to meet and exceed its child-care commitments," he said.

While the province and the city point fingers, things are getting worse for the city's child-care centres: A committee will consider cutting funding to 2,000 child-care subsidies next month as part of Mayor Rob Ford's efforts to cut the "gravy" from City Hall.

-reprinted from the Globe and Mail

**Region:** Ontario <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** poverty <sup>[3]</sup>

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