

Full-day K. a blow to child-care centres ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

The implementation of full-day kindergarten has impacted child care centres across Ontario, and one local centre shared their frustration during a visit by government officials this week.

During a tour of several child care sites, Assistant Deputy Minister of Education Jim Grieve visited Heart of the Family - a 24-hour child care centre on Eighth Street - to talk with the facility's board of directors.

Board chair Roy Stepdenson said the visit was an opportunity for board members and staff to highlight the differences between the schools and day care centres, which have widened since the introduction of full-day kindergarten.

Now that kindergarten is free for families across the province, Stepdenson said the child care centre faces new difficulties that put a financial strain on the business.

One such difficulty is losing four and five-year-old children who would have spent a full day at the centre instead of going to school.

Stepdenson said the centre also lost a number of good early childhood educators, who are leaving to work for the school board.

With the opportunity to make more than \$20 an hour working at a local school, Stepdenson said child care centres are finding it difficult to compete to keep valuable staff and keep child care prices affordable for families.

Although the centre is feeling a pinch with staff leaving, he expects the system will correct itself in coming years as the school board secures enough employees to accommodate the influx of children.

"We don't have one parent that is going to choose us for 'x' amount of dollars a week versus free," he said.

Stepdenson said he also thinks legislation needs to change to make providing child care more equal across the board.

Under the Day Nurseries Act, child care centres, including Heart of the Family, are obligated to meet certain requirements that schools are not expected to meet.

These include space requirements and child-to-care provider ratios.

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"Day-care centres are trying to reinvent themselves," Stepdenson said, explaining that child care centres can vie for a contract to care for children in schools after hours.

"Smaller centres are taking advantage of that. That's how they're floating their business," he said.

But since Heart of the Family occupies such a large facility, he said it's not a realistic option.

Wanda Gareau-Hunt, program supervisor for Heart of the Family, called the differences between government regulations in the same group of children a double standard.

"For the same age group there are different standards," she said. "We feel we provide better ratios, better or as good as in programming, stricter guidelines as far as playground and nutrition goes."

Grieve said he was not allowed to answer any questions from media during the visit.

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