

Peel Region report recommends closing daycares^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Parents in Peel are in shock after news spread Friday that staff have recommended closing all 12 regionally operated childcare facilities by September.

"I had no idea that September was the target date," said Lisa Martinez, whose child is in one of the centres.

Martinez, who does not get a subsidy and pays \$802 a month for full-time care, believes the move is simply "robbing Peter to pay Paul," adding that "kids will go from top-quality care to animal crackers, TV and hot dogs."

Peel launched a daycare study after the province announced it would introduce all-day kindergarten by 2014, which is expected to lower daycare demands.

The report does not recommend cutting the amount spent on daycare but rather says the region get out of the daycare business. Regional council is expected to vote on the recommendation next Thursday.

"It's a shock - streamlining or finding some efficiencies, I could have lived with that," Martinez said. "I was not expecting shutting all of them down by September."

If council passes the staff report, based largely on a commissioned study by KPMG, 756 children who attend the 12 centres would be uprooted. Of those, the 393 who receive a regional subsidy would continue to do so, but at a non-profit or commercial daycare.

There are 445 licensed daycare centres in Peel, accounting for more than 25,000 child care spaces.

Closing 12 daycares would save \$12.8 million in annual salaries and facility costs but the report recommends redirecting the savings into subsidies to non-profit and commercial daycares. As a result, 580 more kids would get a subsidy.

Regional councillors Elaine Moore and John Sanderson, whose Brampton wards each house one of the 12 facilities, are sympathetic to affected families and staff, but back the staff recommendation. "The facility in my ward is a beautiful place ... but the business case is that we can do more," Sanderson said.

The report, made public Friday, notes a subsidized child costs the region \$83 daily, compared to \$40 for a child at a private facility.

Moore and Sanderson stressed that the money the region spends on childcare will not change, but will benefit more families. They are confident in the report's assertion that almost all the 246 staff at the 12 centres would be hired by school boards in need of full-day kindergarten educators or by non-profit and commercial daycares.

Just 13 per cent of Peel children under age 6 have access to licensed child care, while the provincial average is close to 20 per cent, said Andrea Calver of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care. Families in Peel can't afford to lose the municipal daycare spots, Calver said.

Moore and Sanderson say the region will work with the daycare sector to ensure service is provided.

Meanwhile, Martinez said parents are mobilizing ahead of next week's regional council vote.

"I'm a voter and I have a long memory. Going after children is completely unacceptable."

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Ontario^[2]

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