

Peel Region rushing daycare closings, parents say^[1]

Author: Monsebraaten, Laurie

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EXCERPTS:

Peel Region gave a consultant a year to study the future of child care in the region, but is allowing the public less than a week to digest its call to close all 12 regionally operated daycares.

Outraged parents say Peel staff who have endorsed consultant KPMG's recommendations are "steam rolling" a decision through regional council Thursday without allowing parents or politicians time to debate the issue.

If approved by council, seven regionally operated daycares in Mississauga and five in Brampton would close in September, robbing 756 children - many with special needs - of some of the province's most innovative and high-quality programs, they say.

"It is an attempt to short-circuit the democratic process and limit the mobilization of public support against these recommendations," said parent Stephan Edelman who moved his 3-year-old daughter, Jasmine, to the region's Ernest Majury centre in Mississauga a year ago. He took her out of a commercial daycare when he saw maintenance workers on ladders replacing fluorescent lights while toddlers played below.

"Parents' demand for quality has been completely glossed over by region staff," he said.

Edelman is one of hundreds of Peel residents who have been jamming councillors' phones, emails and fax lines this week with pleas to save the centres or at least delay the decision. More than 50 people have requested an opportunity to address council, which is unprecedented, the clerk's office says.

Peel has 445 licensed daycare centres with 25,600 spaces. The region commissioned the daycare study a year ago in light of chronic provincial underfunding made worse by all-day kindergarten, slated to be offered in all schools by 2014.

A staff report released last Friday recommends redirecting the \$13.6 million Peel currently spends on the regionally operated centres to struggling community-based daycares. The money will be used to enhance wages and provide an additional 582 subsidies for low-income parents.

Since there are more than 1,300 vacancies in Peel's non-profit and commercial daycares, staff say children affected by the proposed centre closings, including 393 with subsidies, can be easily accommodated.

But Mississauga parent Martha Ayim, whose 2-year-old son, Avery-Kodjo, attends the region's Streetsville centre, isn't so sure. She has called other daycares in her area and the only one she would consider has a waiting list of more than a year.

"Everything is moving so quickly. People are in shock," said Ayim, one of more than 300 concerned parents who attended a raucous rally at Mississauga Valley Community Centre Tuesday evening.

One commercial daycare Ayim visited put napping children in a basement room "that smelled of mold." In the daycare kitchen, she said, water was boiling on the stove unattended while children played nearby. Meanwhile, staff in a non-profit centre she also considered seemed "overwhelmed," Ayim added.

"If our centre closes, where will I put my son? And what will happen to the professional staff?" she said.

Councillor Bonnie Crombie who has two regionally operated centres in her Malton-area ward, said her office has been inundated with calls from parents this week.

"There really hasn't been enough consultation on the issue," she said. "Parents haven't been aware . . . I didn't know what the recommendation would be until last Friday."

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Ontario^[2]

Tags: public management^[3]

