

Ontario's focus on all-day kindergarten ignores looming child-care crisis ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The only program the McGuinty government ruled out cutting among the dozens targeted in last week's Drummond report was full-day kindergarten.

Since he made it a cornerstone of his 2007 re-election campaign, Premier Dalton McGuinty has trumpeted the \$1.5 billion initiative as the most important development in public education in a generation.

But as school boards across the province begin kindergarten registration for next fall - when half of Ontario's 4- and 5-year-olds will be offered the full-day program - many parents and child development experts are begging the question:

What about the 0- to 3-year-olds?

Once touted as the most important developmental years in a child's life, Queen's Park seems to have completely forgotten them.

There has been virtually no provincial money to ease the mass exodus of kindergarteners from Ontario's chronically underfunded daycare system. And now many centres are teetering on the edge of collapse.

What's worse, the education ministry, which was handed the daycare file in 2010, has no long-term vision or plan for early childhood education and care in Ontario.

"If your position on why we have all-day kindergarten is that children do better in school, what about children who are 1 to 3 whose mothers need to be working?" says Martha Friendly of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

In the context of economist Don Drummond's commission on government efficiency, ignoring programs for the province's youngest children makes no sense, she says.

"Full-day kindergarten is nice, but it's not efficient," Friendly says.

"If you put it together with a real early childhood education and care policy for the younger children and include an appropriate program for school-age children at the edges of the school day - what we were supposed to have - now that's economically efficient.

"It is what allows families to work and contribute to the province's economic recovery," she says.

The situation is particularly bleak in Toronto, where some 21,000 parents are waiting for daycare subsidies and thousands more with some means to pay languish for years on wait lists for spots in their neighbourhoods.

Licensed care is available for just one in three city kids age 5 and younger.

About 40 per cent of Toronto daycares serving preschoolers will be dealing with the fallout of full-day kindergarten in September, when the popular program enters its critical third year.

It means about 320 child-care centres serving more than 20,000 children will be forced to scramble to convert space to serve younger children, to raise fees to cover the higher cost of caring for younger children, to manage staff turnover as early childhood educators leave to work in all-day kindergarten, and to cut service or even close due to lack of funds.

Without a plan and adequate transitional funds in this spring's provincial budget, many of those centres will be gone by 2015 and the city's 56,000-space child-care system will be in tatters, Toronto Children's Services officials warn.

Cash-strapped municipalities like Peel and Toronto have already been threatening to close centres and cut subsidies. At the same time, an Alberta-based childcare conglomerate - the first daycare chain to be traded on the stock market - is starting to buy up struggling centres in Ontario with a view to making investors rich.

The city has asked Queen's Park for \$27.4 million in one-time capital funding to help daycares renovate. So far, the province has given the city only \$1.1 million over three years.

Toronto also needs \$27 million in fee subsidies for younger children who are more costly to care for and transitional funding to ensure the system remains stable and affordable for families. To date, the province has provided just \$4 million.

"These mothers (of younger children) are working and their children are in all kinds of haphazard care arrangements that don't give them the best start in life," Friendly notes.

"It's not because the parents are neglectful or don't care or want to leave their kids in less than optimal circumstances," she says. "It's because they don't have any choices. They can't afford it, they can't find it and it's not good enough."

At a cost of up to \$1,200 a month per child, most low- and modest-income families struggle to afford licensed child care for toddlers and preschoolers.

Even for parents lucky enough to get a subsidy, it is still often difficult to find a spot.

At the beginning and end of every workday, single mother Aziza Yuldasheva spends one to two hours ferrying her two children to different daycares at opposite ends of the city.

When she left welfare for work a year ago, no centres near her home at Yonge and Finch had space for both a baby and a preschooler.

So she drops off her older daughter at a centre in a school near Finch and Bayview in the city's northeast end and then doubles back, through snarling rush-hour traffic to her younger daughter's daycare at Dufferin and Steeles.

The 26-year-old receptionist is desperate for her older daughter's daycare to open a toddler room when all-day kindergarten comes to the school next fall.

But that, too, may be up in the air with Finance Minister Dwight Duncan not ruling out Drummond's second-choice option of delaying the full rollout of all-day program to 2018.

"I don't know what I'm going to do if I can't move my daughter to this centre," Yuldasheva says. "It is so stressful."

The uncertainty is more than many parents and daycare operators can take.

"They said all-day kindergarten would free up space in child care for younger children and that money would be kept in the system for younger children," says Sharon Brayley, supervisor of Finch Flyers Child Care. "But it really isn't playing out as promised."

Finch Flyers has two rooms at Finch Public School, one serving 24 preschoolers, including Yuldasheva's 4-year-old daughter Oysha, and another for 16 kindergarten students. The daycare also runs an after-school program for 45 children from Grades 1 to 5.

Next fall, when the 4- and 5-year-olds move to full-day kindergarten, Brayley wants to convert that room to toddler space.

The renovation and new equipment will cost about \$100,000. But because the daycare is in a school, it isn't eligible for the limited capital funds earmarked by the province for the city.

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A staff report to Toronto councillors next week is blunt:

"As we approach 2012, Toronto's child-care system is in a precarious position with insufficient tools and resources to address the impact of the province's full-day kindergarten program," says Elaine Baxter-Trahair, general manager of the city's children's services department.

"Provincial investment, along with legislative and regulatory amendments to the Day Nurseries Act, are required to address historical funding pressures and to support the transition to full-day kindergarten."

The city has launched a public information campaign and is staging two community forums about the issue on Feb. 21 and Feb. 28.

At the very least, Toronto needs the province to commit to a new funding model and long-term plan for child care during the transition to full-day kindergarten, Baxter-Trahair says in an interview. Queen's Park must also increase child-care funding to municipalities by inflation this year, a mere \$6.5 million for Toronto, so the city can save 2,000 subsidies at risk, she adds.

Parents like Jurgen van Nimwegen are among thousands counting on the province to deliver.

The 35-year-old real estate agent had to take half a year off work to look after his 3-year-old son and 1-year-old twin daughters last year when his banker wife returned to work and the family couldn't find daycare in their area.

When their son Zining finally got a spot in the preschool room at Finch Flyers, van Nimwegen's 66-year-old mother-in-law came from China to look after the twins so he could return to work.

"The daycare situation was a big surprise for use when we came," says van Nimwegen, whose young family immigrated to Canada from the Netherlands a year ago.

"The waiting lists are enormous - more than a year. It's very difficult. You have to drive half an hour to get a space for a young child. It's crazy," he said. "We certainly didn't expect this in Canada, which is such a rich country."

When the daycare announced last fall it would be opening a toddler room, his twins were first on the waiting list.

"I am happy to pay whatever it costs," he says. "We just need a space."

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Ontario ^[2]

Tags: kindergarten ^[3]

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