

School boards offer update on daycare (Kenora) ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Parents and staff caught up in the debate over the Castle of Learning daycare in Kenora aren't getting the guarantees of service they're looking for from either the Keewatin-Patricia or Kenora Catholic district school boards this morning.

At last night's council meeting, Kenora council voted 5-2 to close the daycare. In his comments, Mayor Dave Canfield said he'd received assurances from both boards of a seamless transition. It was his understanding the city-run operation would close December 31, and the new service would begin under the umbrella of the Ministry of Education January 1. In a follow-up conversation Tuesday morning, the mayor said his assurances had come from senior staff at both boards.

"The school boards had contacted us -- actually yesterday -- that they have full intention of taking over the opportunities. It is being transferred to the Ministry of Education and that they would pick up the spaces up. So, basically, the people who are looking for child care services should have no problem transferring over to the school board services," he said.

"We feel quite confident the services will be there. There will be no gap in the service, and we just encourage the parents to contact the other providers and make sure it is a seamless transition January 1," he said.

When contacted this morning, neither board was able to elaborate on such assurances. The Castle of Learning currently operates out of King George VI school, with the Keewatin-Patricia District School Board acting as the landlord. The director of education for Keewatin-Patricia, Jack McMaster, said they'd only recently heard about the situation. While he confirmed a confirmation between senior staff at the board and the city Monday afternoon, he wasn't sure where the assurances offered by the mayor had come from.

"Of course, when we're looking at doing something that's best for kids, we will put out some tender and we'll work with Kenora Catholic to try and ensure that we cover any space that requires before and after school or during the day daycare," he said.

He noted the board would be acting more in the role of a landlord, rather than a provider, so it wasn't up to the school board to manage wait lists. He referred to the situation at Lakewood, where they're working with partners, in an effort to reduce wait times. Further, he added the addition of full-day kindergarten was complicating the issue, since the loss of some of these students from daycares was making it more difficult for providers to make ends meet. Still, he remained hopeful agreements with third parties could be reached.

When contacted this morning, Kenora trustee Bob Onysko said he was confused by the debate. The information he had received was about the seamless transition for the before and after-school programs being offered.

"The information that's being presented to the public is a little bit confusing," he said. "My understanding as a trustee is our primary interest in ensuring there's child care in the community is to ensure the before and after-school components of child care are running. That's where we're looking at the seamless transition. Should a daycare close in a particular location, there would be provision for before and after-school programs for parents, not necessarily the taking over of a child care operation. Those are two separate operations," he said.

Phyllis Eikre is the director of education for the Kenora Catholic District School Board, and she says they only offer an after-school program in partnership with the city. She added they were hoping to begin discussions with a new provider this fall.

"Our plans are to work to do our very best to have something in place for those children by the end of December. We're going to work together with Jack McMaster at the Keewatin-Patricia District School Board to do what is best for all of our students," she said.

After last night's vote, the city is expected to move to close the Castle of Learning daycare program at the end of December. There are roughly 200 families involved in the program through before and after-school programs, as well as during the day. Unionized staff at the site are expected to file for a court injunction this week, in an effort to stop the closure.

-reprinted from Kenora Online

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