

Toronto daycares in schools fear eviction if they refuse to run before- and after-school programs for full-day kindergarten ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Toronto daycares in schools say they are being told if they refuse to run before- and after-school programs for full-day kindergarten students, they risk being replaced by another operator.

Daycares are balking because they say it is hard to hire staff for split shifts. They add that they don't have enough money to refurbish kindergarten rooms to meet strict daycare standards and they can't raise fees to cover costs if children drop out.

They say they can't even bridge a worker's day by offering a lunch program, because full-day kindergarten students who previously were in half-day child care are now the responsibility of the school.

Daycare parents are angry about the loss of hot lunches, inadequate noon-hour supervision and the revolving door of staff their children will have to deal with during the day. They also worry they may be left with no care for their children during the summer if some kids drop out and the program has to fold.

The city denies daycares are being kicked out of schools if they refuse to run the program.

But city staff say they can't justify the additional administrative cost of dealing with two daycare operators in a school. It would also create too many transitions for families, they add.

Daycares outside Toronto are under pressure due to chronic underfunding and the loss of 4- and 5-year-olds to full-day kindergarten, said Andrea Calver of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care. But she hasn't heard of any that are being pressured to run before- and after-school programs.

Eighty-eight daycares in Toronto schools are offering before- and after-school programs this year and at least one-third are feeling pressured to do it, says Jane Mercer of the Toronto Coalition for Better Child Care.

"The province has downloaded this program onto school boards who have side-loaded it to community-based child care and said, 'here, you do it.' " Mercer said. "But daycares are left to cover all the start-up costs, scramble to find qualified staff willing to work split shifts and then charge fees that don't cover the real cost.

"We would like the city to stand with us and push back on the school boards and the province," she said.

"We want our city to be a champion of our child-care system."

One parent whose daycare is being pressured to start a program next fall wonders what is going on.

"Our daughter is going into kindergarten and we are really worried," said Rita Aydin, a board member of Lake Shore Community Childcare, in Seventh St. Public School near Islington Ave. and Lake Shore Blvd. W.

Aydin, whose daughter Aria doesn't turn 4 until November, is especially concerned about lunchtime.

"She is a picky eater and if she sees everyone eating the same thing, she will eat," Aydin said. "But if there is no lunch program, I don't know what will happen."

Money is also a problem for the centre. Even with a 5 per cent fee increase for the daycare's toddler, preschool and school-age programs, the non-profit centre is facing a \$25,000 loss, said director Lisa Tjernstrom.

"This has all landed on community child-care centres that don't have the resources and it's a mess," she said. "I'm furious."

The McGuinty Liberals introduced full-day kindergarten in the fall of 2009 mandating teams of teachers and early childhood educators to provide a seamless day of learning in schools from 7 a.m. until 6 p.m. for families who need it.

But when school boards complained about running before- and after-school programs, the government amended the legislation to allow them to contract out the service to non-profit child-care operators.

Under provincial regulations, parents are expected to pay the full cost of before- and after-school programs, with a limited number of subsidies available for low-income families. But the strict rules make it difficult for some daycares to integrate the program with their care

for older and younger children.

So far, demand has been low due to registration problems, high fees and program uncertainty. Of roughly 23,000 Toronto children in full-day kindergarten this year, fewer than 1,900 are registered in before- and after-school care.

In the city's east-end, Plains Rd. Child Care supervisor Cathy O'Toole is so upset by how her centre was treated last year, she has complained to Toronto City Ombudsman Fiona Crean.

"When we looked at the numbers and politely declined (to offer the program), the city threatened to cancel its purchase of service agreement with us," she said. "We felt really strong-armed."

The centre, located in Canadian Martyrs Catholic School, got a reprieve after only seven children registered for the program - three short of the minimum of 10 required by the Catholic board, O'Toole said. (The Toronto board is following the provincial minimum of 20 children.)

But O'Toole is not sure what she will do next year if more children sign up.

The city is planning another 113 before- and after-school programs for full-day kindergarten next fall, bringing the total to 199 sites, says Toronto's manager of children's services.

But so far, Elaine Baxter-Trahair, the city's general manager of children's services, says no daycares have refused to participate.

She is aware only of problems at Plains Rd. and a centre in the old city of York.

"We are helping operators and trying to give them the tools they need to manage this process," she said.

Issues around lunchtime supervision and the fees daycares can charge are provincial policies beyond the city's control, she said.

However, the city is offering grants to cover bag lunches for subsidized children in before- and after-school programs, if daycares request them. Eleven daycares are getting those grants this year, she added.

Daycare supervisor Lisa Winters says her 121-child centre, in Earl Beatty Public School near Danforth and Coxwell Aves., was forced to run the program last year and has received little support from the city.

"We keep asking for money and help and nothing happens," she said. "And we've been asking for at least a year."

She figures Beatty Buddies Daycare has lost "at least" \$25,000.

Earlier this month, provincial daycare licensing officials ordered Winters to repair peeling paint, replace a worn couch and deal with dirty radiators that run too hot in the kindergarten room where she runs the program. But she has no money to do the work.

"If the school boards are refusing to offer this program, the least they can do is provide a licensed space for us," she said.

Several other daycares expressed similar concerns, but administrators and parents from those centres did not want to be identified for fear of reprisals from the school or the city.

"Our pre-school fees have had to go up by 9 per cent," said one daycare supervisor, whose centre began offering the kindergarten program last fall. "We would have to have 90,000 bake sales to make up for the money we have lost."

Toronto received an additional \$8.3 million in provincial funds this year to stabilize its historically underfunded daycare system.

It is spending more than \$2.4 million to help daycares transition to full-day kindergarten this year. But staff say Toronto is still short about \$21 million in operating funds and \$26 million in capital funds to stabilize the system.

Toronto Councillor Josh Matlow (Ward 22, St. Paul's) met with concerned parents and daycare operators in his ward last week. He thinks the city needs a formal working group of councillors and school trustees to ensure children's needs don't get lost in jurisdictional warring and red tape.

"We need to work together to ensure full-day kindergarten is adequately funded and implemented properly," he said.

-reprinted from Toronto Star

Region: Ontario ^[2]

Tags: kindergarten ^[3]

integration ^[4]

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