

Parents worried by daycare's closing: City adapts to provincially mandated full-day kindergarten ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

The City of Ottawa is shutting down one of its daycares and turning over four others as full-day school programs are rolled out for younger children, a move that doesn't sit well with some parents.

Like private daycare operators, the city is adapting as provincially mandated full-day kindergarten is implemented at schools, along with before-and after-school programs where there is sufficient demand.

Across the city, some childcare programs are changing business models or closing as four- and five-year-olds spend more time in classrooms, and as children move to "extended day" programs operated in schools for a fee.

Parents of about 80 children between the ages of four and 12 received letters last month stating that at the end of August, the city will stop running its popular Fisher Heights School Age Program that operates out of the Villa Marconi building on Baseline Road near Merivale Road.

The children will have spots in five school programs starting in September, but the closure and how it has been communicated have caused frustration among parents who say they're very happy with the existing program and now have questions and concerns about what schools will offer.

"We take them to this daycare because we want the daycare to be as close as (possible) to home," rather than a school environment, said Andrew Ross, whose seven-year-old daughter attends the Fisher Heights program and would have been joined by her younger sister in a couple of months.

Ross added that he felt "railroaded" into the school program, which is also to cost him more.

"This amount of notice really doesn't leave us any choice," he said, especially since other parents might be competing for private caregivers.

Fisher Heights is the most complex transition the city has been involved in as care for school-aged children is transferred to schools, said Aaron Burry, the city's general manager of community and social services. (The city is also helping with transitions related to other agencies.)

Before setting a closing date for Fisher Heights, staff had to ensure that five schools across multiple boards would be operating extended day programs that the children could attend, Burry said.

Four other municipal programs that operate on school grounds are being handed over to be run by school boards or their third-party operators that meet certain criteria. The third-party agreement wasn't feasible for the city, Burry said, but because those programs already operate on school grounds, the changes are typically seamless.

The Fisher Heights centre is somewhat unique, however, as it's a leased space off school property and serves children from a number of schools.

The program has not operated at capacity for two years, after losing four- and five-year-olds, Burry said. Last year it ran a deficit of about \$275,000. That would increase next year because provincial subsidies equal to about \$90,000 would have to be transferred to the school boards, he said.

"Parents have had an incredible program. It's with very dedicated space, a lot of extras that aren't often in the (school) programs. But is it sustainable going forward? No, unfortunately, it's not," Burry said.

Parents said they're bothered by a lack of consultation, and believe they didn't receive enough warning about the change that would allow them to assess what schools are to offer and to arrange other childcare options if they want to.

"A lot of frustration from our perspective was primarily because there was very short notice," said Martin Holcik, who has two children at Fisher Heights and a third who was set to start in the fall.

Parents also want more clarity about what each school will offer, and have a list of concerns that include a lack of air conditioning in some

schools, security measures (parents have access cards at Fisher Heights), availability of proper food preparation areas, program availability when schools are closed, ratios of caregivers to children, and how children will be separated by age.

"What we're really looking for is time to do this properly, time to make sure that the school board has a safe offering that is acceptable for the children, time to give the parents a choice," said Ross.

Without getting into specifics about what each school is to offer, school board spokespeople said last week that programs will be safe and secure, and run as mandated by the province.

More information is available to parents through board staff or at specific schools, they said.

Parents were planning a petition and have also called for a meeting.

Burry said city staff have offered one-on-one discussions, because "the issues that come up are very specific to families, and they're specific to schools."

Holcik said the city should at least keep the centre open until its lease expires in July of next year.

-reprinted from the Ottawa Citizen

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