

School-based daycare squeezed by full-day kindergarten^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

A school-based daycare has refused to sign a contract to provide before- and after-school care to new full-day kindergarten students because it says it has no classroom space to house them.

Sunnyside Garden Daycare, at Garden Avenue Public School near Roncesvalles Ave., has been negotiating with the Toronto District School Board for months to find room for the 39 new students, on top of the 80 children it already cares for.

The school board said Wednesday it would provide two alternative classrooms for the new kids, but parents and daycare board members say overcrowding woes will continue.

"The problem is that, like many of the daycares in schools in Toronto, we're jam-packed. There are simply not enough classrooms in the building," said Chris Leafloor, a parent and board member.

Experts say that school-based daycares across Toronto suffer from a lack of adequate space, potentially violating regulations and endangering kids who are moved to unlicensed spaces such as hallways or outdoors.

However, the board says it hasn't heard any complaints from daycares and would "absolutely" work to provide more space if requested.

"Wherever there is a need, and sufficient number of kids to warrant it, we would always work with providers," said spokesperson Ryan Bird. "I don't think there's a one-size-fits-all solution."

About 2,330 children are enrolled in 181 new before- and after-school programs beginning in September, according to Toronto's Children's Services division.

The TDSB has asked Sunnyside to provide supervision lasting "15 minutes or more" to full-day kindergarten students, before classes begin at 9 a.m. and after classes end at 3:30 p.m.

But the daycare already struggles to find space during these periods, when they are typically kicked out of shared classrooms by teachers who have prep work or marking to complete, said Leafloor.

The school board said teachers are asked to share classrooms during these periods, but there are times the school needs the rooms. At those times, the TDSB said, alternative classrooms are available.

Lisa Hickey, a Sunnyside board member, said this is not always true. Her son attended daycare in the school gym for a week about two years ago, until the small K-6 school - attended by about 250 students - added an extra classroom.

"This year, the school's at capacity. So, he has obviously had to go outside, when ideally it would have been better if he was in a classroom," she said.

Under the Day Nurseries Act, daycares can provide care for children only in licensed, rigorously inspected spaces. Unprotected outdoor areas and hallways are unlicensed spaces.

For now, the daycare still refuses to sign the contract, until the TDSB proves the two alternative classrooms will be available. With only a few weeks until Labour Day, parents with children slated to attend full-day kindergarten are panicking.

"Any time your child care is put into question, it causes a lot of stress," said Stephen Rouse, whose 4-year-old son Jackson will start kindergarten in September.

Rouse works full-time, while his wife is a freelance writer who could care for Jackson and their 10-year-old daughter in the short term. But a lot of working parents don't have that option, he pointed out.

Andrea Calver, of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, said her group has heard from many Toronto school-based daycares facing similar crises, especially since full-day kindergarten began.

"They're not allowed to use certain rooms, even if those rooms would be ideal for programming," she said.

The larger issue, said Calver, is that the TDSB tends to think of daycare - contracted to outside providers - as separate from its mandate.

"There's a sense that the school board's responsibility is 9 to 3:30," she said. "It really is time for school boards to catch up with the reality

that these are exactly the same children, and to make all of these spaces available."

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Ontario ^[2]

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