

Daycare in funding fight with city over full-day kindergarten ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

When Shawna Curtis heard that she would have to move her 4-year-old daughter, Emilia, from her daycare to a school-based child care centre, she panicked.

"I just felt this pit in my stomach," said Curtis. "She loves it here. I would never move my child from a place where she's happy."

Emilia goes to Children's Circle, a popular daycare on Hampton Ave. near Danforth Ave., every morning, before being escorted by daycare staff to kindergarten at Jackman Avenue Public School.

Now, the daycare is under pressure to stop caring for 4- and 5-year-old kids due to the introduction of full-day kindergarten at nearby schools - a difficult scenario child care experts say is playing out across the province.

Toronto Children's Services is currently withholding a \$75,000 grant for an "infant room" at Children's Circle, until the daycare tells parents to send their kids to school-based care. The city expects the daycare to stop escorting kids to and from school by 2015.

"After they were awarded the grant, Children's Circle decided it wanted to build the infant room and continue to escort. That was contrary to the criteria," said Children's Services director Elaine Baxter-Trahair.

The daycare was awarded the funding in late 2012 under the Early Learning Transition Capital Funding program - provincial money distributed by the city to daycares to renovate spaces into those for younger children.

In June, the city told Children's Circle it would only release the funding if the daycare stopped providing before- and after-care to junior and senior kindergarten children by September 2013. The deadline has since been extended to September 2015.

Children's Circle board member Mike Baril said the daycare never promised to stop caring for kindergarten-aged kids when it applied for the funding.

"We see ourselves as being in line with the criteria. This funding will help us transition to a focus on younger kids while still being able to provide some before- and after-care to kindergarten and school-aged children," he said.

The daycare had planned to convert a room that had previously been used for kindergarten-aged kids to an infant room with 10 spaces. The projected \$100,000 cost included building a sleep area, a cubby room and a food preparation nook.

The infant room was set to open in September and had a full waiting list.

Baril said that many parents don't want to move their 4- or 5-year-old to a school-based daycare because they have other kids at Children's Circle, and don't want to do multiple drop-offs and pick-ups.

Still others like the hot lunch program at Children's Circle, which full-day kindergarten programs do not provide. And then there's summer and holiday care, he said.

"Really, parents have different needs based on their families. To us, what's key is that there are options within regulated care," said Baril.

Andrea Calver of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care said the city is being too rigid in the way it is distributing the funding.

"It speaks to the need, in a time of transition, to look at things on a case-by-case basis. The same rules are not going to apply to every centre across the city," she said.

Of the three local schools - Withrow Avenue Junior Public School, Jackman Avenue Public School and Frankland Community School - only Frankland has child care spaces available. The waiting list at Withrow is several years long.

"It's likely that if Children's Circle can't do this anymore, then those children simply won't have care," said Calver.

Elaine Baxter-Trahair of Toronto Children's Services disagreed, saying there was an abundance of care in the neighbourhood.

"There are other areas of the city that have applied for these grants, where they are in much more dire circumstances," she said.

The daycare will hold a community meeting Thursday night to speak to parents about their options. For Curtis, the issue is not whether there is room in a school-based program for Emilia.

"It's just the whole idea of moving, period," she said, watching her daughter play with friends on the playground.

"As you can see, she's pretty happy here. The staff is so affectionate and thoughtful and knows her. I don't want to see that change."

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

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