

# Ottawa daycares in a state of flux<sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS:

Many local daycares say they're tightening their belts or changing the age groups they cater to after losing older children to the school system.

Ontario is nearing the end of the roll-out of full-day kindergarten, which will be complete by September 2014. Along with sending four- and five-year-old children to school all day, schools are providing care before and after class.

Child care operators say this implementation has been one of the biggest changes to hit the sector in decades.

Many report that enrolment among four- and five-year-old children has dropped significantly. They say they have lost qualified early childhood educators to school boards, which are able to pay better salaries.

"We don't make a lot of money here," said Julie Whalley, supervisor at the Orléans Child Care Centre, a non-profit daycare that has been running for 30 years in Ottawa.

"And what we do make goes back out into the programs. So we don't have a lot of spare money. We have to really tighten our belts and get back to basics, which is not what we're about. We want to give that extra."

## Daycares making adjustments

Some daycares told CBC they are trying to become licensed to care for infants and toddlers because there is a shortage of space in that younger age group.

But many also noted it is more expensive to care for younger children, given the caregiver-to-child ratios set by the province. Under the Day Nurseries Act, there must be three caregivers for every ten babies under 18 months, but for children aged four-and-a-half to five-and-a-half the ratio is one caregiver for every 12 children.

Operators of child care centres say labour costs make up most of a daycare's budget, often upwards of 80 per cent.

"It's more expensive to have an infant program than it is to have a kinder program," said Tina Carrière at The Little House daycare in Orléans.

"So usually the older programs end up helping with the cost of the younger programs."

Carrière said while The Little House does not have as many kindergarten-aged children in its care as it used to, it hasn't yet moved to add spaces for younger children.

"I've heard of some daycares having to close down, because their main target of children was pre-school and kinders, and it's affected them a lot," she said.

Global Child Care Services, which has several group centres and licensed home daycare providers, is faring well through this implementation because of its size, said executive director Arlene Ross. But she fears the overall impact if smaller centres are less able to weather the storm.

"Whether you're offering care to a four or five year old, or an infant, toddler or preschooler, we don't want to lose child care capacity in our city and in our province," said Ross.

## Provincial funding

The Ontario's Ministry of Education said it has taken several steps to help the child care sector adjust to these big changes.

In a statement, Minister Liz Sandals' office noted that it phased in full-day kindergarten gradually. It also offered up to \$51 million a year in "stabilization" funding.

Knowing that some child care operators are facing pressures as a result of full-day kindergarten, the province is also giving school boards \$113 million over three years to retrofit daycares within schools - adding small toilets and the like - so they can take toddlers and infants.

However, that move also sparks a discussion among school boards, which now have to determine who provides that child care: themselves or third-parties from the community.

Concerns about school boards taking on more child care

Ottawa's largest school board has already taken advantage of those retrofit dollars to make changes at Roberta Bondar and Robert Bateman public schools. It has plans to retrofit other schools and has been in discussions with the City of Ottawa about which neighbourhoods would be best suited for extra toddler and infant spaces.

The Ottawa-Carleton District School Board already runs four daycares for smaller children. On April 1, trustees will discuss whether the board should move further into the child care realm, taking care of toddlers and infants at in-school daycares at retrofitted or new sites.

"If there's none there and the school board wants to get into it, I think that's a great opportunity for the parents," said Shelley Bond, chair of the Child Care Council of Ottawa, and operator of the City View Centre in Barrhaven.

Bond worries for daycares already operating in neighbourhoods.

"Why put up an, 'I'm in competition with you?' That's what would worry the existing child care community. There's room for all of us, but we have to figure out how we're going to do it," she said.

Bond said talking about it will reduce anxiety in a sector already facing change on other fronts.

"Usually one at a time, you can strategize and do what you need to do," Bond said. "But we're faced with all these things at once."

Ontario has tabled a bill to dramatically change the laws governing child care.

The City of Ottawa is also planning how to distribute subsidies given to offset the costs of child care for some children.

-reprinted from CBC News

**Region:** Ontario <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** kindergarten <sup>[3]</sup>

full-day early learning <sup>[4]</sup>

infant/toddler <sup>[5]</sup>

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