

Daycare being squeezed out of Brown Junior Public School after 25 years ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

When dozens of pre-kindergarten children waddled into Unicorn Day Care on Tuesday they were a bit nervous, but mostly excited to explore the new place where they'll spend their days.

But come next year, the energetic tots will need a new spot to play and learn.

That's because the daycare - a non-profit facility operating out of Brown Junior Public School for the past 25 years - has been asked by the Toronto District School Board to seek alternative space if it wants to operate throughout the school day.

TDSB spokesperson Ryan Bird cites the school's growing population and lack of space, which means the board can only accommodate before- and after-school programs instead of the current day-long care.

"We are working with (the daycare) to offer before- and after-school care, but other than that, that is all we can do," Bird says. "Our first priority has to be to our students."

The situation has left daycare director Eric Mackey searching for a new space. The program has already given up one of the two rooms it occupied this year.

"Families in this ward already have a difficult time finding quality child care, so with programs full to capacity and huge waiting lists, it is critical that Unicorn Day Care find an alternate location that will allow the community continued access to quality child care," Mackey writes in a letter posted on Ward 22 Councillor Josh Matlow's website.

Matlow, who is trying to assist, says the situation is "symptomatic of a wider challenge that schools are facing" because the province's move to offer full-day kindergarten has led to new space demands and sometimes pushed out non-profit child-care programs.

Left in the lurch are parents fighting for the few daycare spots available elsewhere.

"We have very active storks in midtown Toronto," Matlow says. "There's a dearth of accessible and affordable childcare. Parents are trying to sign their kids up for daycare before they're even born."

If Matlow has his way, the program will find a new home nearby, where families with older children at the school can still find care. He's hoping facilities with extra space to offer will come forward.

"It's the magic of getting the word out," he says. "You get the word out and community often helps."

One person eager to lend a hand is Rev. William Tay Moss, of the Church of the Messiah near Avenue Rd. and Dupont St. He says the church wants to see a program like Unicorn Day Care in its space because religious institutions and daycares are both in the business of helping people.

"If we were merely interested in maximizing rental value we would have a law firm or office of some other lucrative tenant in our rental space, but we won't do that because we believe the tenant we choose needs to make life better in some small way for everyone in the neighborhood," he said in an email to the Star.

But Moss worries that licensing regulations regarding the size and quantity of windows at the Anglican church, which housed a child-care facility until August 2013, when low enrollment forced it to close, could stand in the way.

"If there is anything I can do to get rid of the red tape, I intend to do it," says Matlow, who's hopeful something can be worked out. "I'm going to bring everyone to the same table so this opportunity is not lost in bureaucracy and finger pointing, and so that we all work together."

Region: Ontario ^[2]

Tags: full-day early learning ^[3]

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