

Toronto school daycares fight eviction ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Parents and child care advocates are welcoming \$120 million in new provincial funding to create up to 4,000 new daycare spaces in schools over the next three years.

But in Toronto, which is slated to get about 1,200 new spots under the **provincial budget initiative** ^[3] announced last month, some parents are scrambling to hold on to what they already have.

“It is good to have more daycares in schools, but I don’t know why they are trying to close our centre,” said Venus Mawirat, whose 3-year-old son Galen attends **APS Daycare** ^[4] at North Preparatory Junior Public School which is facing eviction in June.

The centre, near Spadina and Eglinton Aves., is among at least three school-based daycares in the city that are being squeezed for space by schools that are bursting at the seams. Another 30 daycares are at risk due to **provincial pressure on the Toronto District School Board to close schools** ^[5] with low enrolment and to sell those that have already been closed but are housing other community uses.

APS Daycare, which serves 85 preschoolers, kindergarten and school-aged children, has operated at the Forest Hill-area school for 28 years.

But most of the parents who use the daycare’s 20-space preschool room are like Mawirat, who lives in a nearby apartment building on a relatively low income and relies on a daycare subsidy.

Mawirat, a former live-in-caregiver from the Philippines, sponsored her husband and older son, Ian, in 2006, and now cares for the sick and elderly as a personal support worker.

She was thrilled when she got a spot for Galen at the daycare last fall because Ian, a Grade 9 student at nearby Forest Hill Collegiate, can help with daycare drop-off and pickup.

“If I lose that spot I don’t know what I will do,” Mawirat said.

The school has said it needs the daycare’s preschool room for students and has offered alternative space elsewhere in the building, said daycare supervisor Debra Deonarine. But the move would cost the daycare \$100,000 in renovations, including washrooms, a kitchen and office space, Deonarine said. Even then, there would only be enough room for 16 children, she noted.

“It would be much cheaper for the school to use that other space as a classroom, because all they would need to do is take down a wall,” said Deonarine. The daycare’s architect has estimated it would cost about \$20,000 to remove the wall, a cost the daycare has offered to pay, she said. “But so far, they have said no.”

If the daycare loses its preschool room, it wouldn’t be able to sustain its kindergarten and school-age programs and would have to close, Deonarine added.

The city actively works in partnership with school boards to ensure child care space isn’t lost when there are enrolment pressures, said Shanley McNamee, director of strategic services for Toronto children’s services.

“I know city staff are working with the daycare and the school board on this site,” McNamee said. “We are certainly hoping the school board can continue to accommodate the centre.”

School board officials sympathize with the daycare’s plight, but say they need the preschool room to accommodate an additional 20 students expected next fall. They also think the \$20,000 estimate to take down a wall in the space the school is offering the daycare is low.

“The daycare has known about this for several years,” said board spokeswoman Shari Schwartz-Maltz. “It’s a school and students are our first priority. The kids are coming in September and we have nowhere to put them. We need the (preschool) room.”

Despite provincial policy promoting daycares in schools and this latest budget commitment, advocates wonder when the two systems will start working together.

“We really need the school board to understand that every single one of those child-care spaces is just as valued as any elementary school space,” said Jane Mercer of the Toronto Coalition for Better Child Care. “They haven’t got their head around the fact that child care has moved into the Ministry of Education. Child care has moved into the schools.”

Toronto Councillor Janet Davis ([open Janet Davis's polycard](#)) ^[6] said the problem won’t be solved until Ontario’s education funding formula is changed to include daycares in school.

“Schools are the proper place for child care to be. But it can’t be based on some ad hoc arrangement that changes from year to year,” she said. “Child care needs permanent, secure, ongoing space. And we’ve not yet been able to change the provincial (funding) formulas to make that happen.”

The Toronto situation is emblematic of the overall problem with child care in Ontario, said Carolyn Ferns of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care.

“We need a real child-care plan with targets and timetables,” she said. “It could start with the school system embracing child care as an equal partner in the education and care of our children.”

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Ontario ^[7]

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