

Public school board scales back proposed child care rate increases ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ottawa public school trustees voted to scale back a proposed rate hike for before- and after-school care during the board meeting on Jan. 26.

As part of the early learning initiative by the provincial government, schools were told to offer extended day programming in addition to all day kindergarten, unless programming was already available through a third party.

That was great news for parents, but a logistical problem for the board, since the program is losing money.

The before and after school program has a deficit of \$1.7 million. In addition, the board needs to cut another \$11.9 million to deal with overspending in instruction, special education, transportation and facilities, according to a report from staff in the Jan. 11 committee of the whole minutes.

That means the 2016-2017 school year will start with a plan to reduce \$14.4 million in spending – thanks in part to a provincial requirement that the board have \$4 million in reserves for the 2017-2018 year.

The decision at the committee of the whole meeting to raise the childcare rate by up to \$29 per day would have meant that parents who only use a few sessions per week, rather than the full 10 sessions, could pay up to 32 per cent more. That would be an increase from \$22 to \$29 per day.

One of the reasons the program has issues with cost recovery is because while parents can pay per day, the program has to be staffed as if it was being used full time – Monday to Friday, both before school and after school.

But some trustees balked at the rate increase – worrying about the impact on parents and called for staff to look at other ways of finding the money.

The compromise was an option “B.” It was a motion introduced by trustee Shawn Menard, whose zone corresponds with the Rideau-Vanier Ward.

The alternative would mean \$27 per day for anyone using less than nine sessions per week. Nine sessions would be \$25 and full time would be \$22.50.

Menard said he thinks the role that Trustees play is very important.

“...that means digging into the numbers and representing our communities,” he wrote in an email. “After getting more information, the board passed an amendment which will see fees go up less than what was originally proposed and will receive a report in May of 2016 that will help with future accounting of the EDP.”

Donna Blackburn, trustee for the area that corresponds with the Barrhaven and Knoxdale-Merivale wards has said publicly – under risk of censure – that her colleagues need to deal with the deficit.

She expressed frustration that the board would “flip flop” after agreeing to Option “A,” the original rate increase structure.

She said she understands parents might be relieved now, she wonders how they’ll feel if programs or services have to be cut to make up the difference.

“The kids in the program still need access to things like social workers and psychologists,” she said.

Board chair Shirley Seward wrote in an email that the board had two options to consider, and after more information, decided to go with the second option.

“This option will go a long way towards resolving the financial challenges of the Extended Day Program, but does not generate quite as much revenue for the school district,” she said. “The Ottawa-Carleton District School Board runs an exceptional childcare program and has made every effort to ensure the program is accessible to as many families as possible, is affordable and offers quality programming. We can be very proud of our work and this most recent motion goes a long way to ensuring the financial stability of the program.”

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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