

School-based child care gets the squeeze ^[1]

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The North Vancouver School District will apply for a half-million dollar grant from the province to expand the number of licensed child-care spaces available to local families, at a time when those spaces are in jeopardy.

The move comes at a time when space available within schools for child care has been shrinking, putting a squeeze on existing child-care providers.

Introduction of the full-day kindergarten program, plus increased enrolment in elementary schools means there are now fewer classrooms available for uses like child care and preschools.

Top Drawer Daycare, which operates at Brooksbank elementary in North Vancouver, knows that only too well. The child care used to offer a program for three- to five-year-olds as well as before and after school care. But two years ago, the school needed two classrooms back, so owner Lorraine van der Poel said she had to close the program for preschoolers.

The school district has extended her current lease until July, but van der Poel said she's been given notice that the before and after school child-care program will also have to move.

Van der Poel said she doesn't blame the school district. "They've really tried to work with us," she said.

But the move is leaving her business and the more than 40 families who rely on it in a difficult spot. Van der Poel said working parents appreciate having the child care at the school, which allows them to have a connection with their children's school community.

Meanwhile, she's continuing to search for a new space for her child care, but hasn't found anything yet.

"Some of the places are very expensive," she said.

Others have zoning issues or no outside play space for children.

"We've had meetings with the mayors," she said. "Everybody is aware that child care is really, really scarce in North Vancouver."

But the situation could get worse before it gets better.

In theory, all governments support the idea of having child care and early learning programs for kids under age five available on school grounds.

Back in the 1990s and into the mid-2000s, those initiatives were being actively encouraged and promoted by both the province and the school district, said North Vancouver schools superintendent John Lewis. It was a time when school enrolment was low and classroom space was available.

Programs like StrongStart – which provides play-based early learning for preschool children – have been very successful, and now operate at seven schools in North Vancouver, which means seven classrooms are dedicated to the program.

The introduction of full-day kindergarten instead of the half-day program meant a doubling of the classroom space needed for kindergarten students, said Lewis. That resulted in a need for 25 more classrooms, district wide.

Increasing school enrolment at the elementary level in recent years has also put the squeeze on space. In the three years between 2012 and 2015, elementary enrolment increased by more than 400 students.

Across the school district, schools operate at about 92 per cent of capacity, Lewis told school board trustees at their regular public meeting Jan. 19. "It's very tight," he said.

"It's a very challenging time and there's a very limited space available for (child care)."

When elementary schools like Ridgeway and Queen Mary were being rebuilt, the province allowed 15 per cent of space within those

schools to be designated as neighbourhood learning space which allowed room for child-care programs. But the province no longer provides for that extra capital funding in school construction projects, Lewis said.

The result is the school district is now having to take back some of the space that had been used for child care to provide classroom space.

The situation with Top Drawer Childcare at Brooksbank is emblematic of that.

Over a decade ago, the school district was able to provide four classrooms at Brooksbank elementary for child care, said Lewis. "Over time it was reduced to three, then two, then one. Now we're needing to reclaim that space," he said.

In addition to the seven StrongStart centres, 11 preschools, nine full-day child care programs and 14 before- and after school programs currently operate from local school sites.

Trustee Barry Forward said the situation puts the school district in a position of "dancing a balancing act" between competing needs. "We're responsible for K to 12," he said.

At the same time, everyone recognizes child care is "such a big need," he added.

Christie Sacré, chairwoman of the board of education, said the school district knows that parents like to have child care based at schools.

"We've seen how well it works," she said. "It's logical. I don't argue that at all."

But she said the space squeeze pits the needs of local students against child-care space.

"If you're telling a local student they can't enter their local school because there is no space, that's not fair either."

Dan Milburn, acting general manager of planning, properties and permits for the District of North Vancouver, said the municipality is aware of the coming space squeeze in local schools.

To help out, the district offers child-care space to daycare operators and preschools in a number of municipally owned properties, including several occupied by non-profit providers which pay only nominal rent.

Should the school district be successful in getting the \$500,000-grant from the Ministry of Children and Families, the money would be used to relocate a modular building currently sitting empty at the former Cloverley school site to another school site – possibly Ridgeway elementary.

The modular building has space for the equivalent of eight classrooms, which would allow for both child-care space and room for additional school students.

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