

'Paying for nothing': A lawyer's crusade to end money for daycare wait lists ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Parents who want to secure a childcare spot in Toronto have to be patient. In some cases, they also have to have deep pockets.

Many daycare centres charge a non-refundable fee for a child's name to be put on a wait list, even though there's no guarantee of a place. Because of the scarcity of available space in the city's daycares, a child's name has to be added to numerous lists to give parents the best chance of a spot for their child.

That's where the exorbitant sums of money come in — up to \$150 administrative fees just to get on a list, in some cases.

Nadine Blum is a mother who was surprised at how much money was involved in daycare wait lists. She's also a lawyer with Goldblatt Partners LLP and is working on a petition to have such costs banned.

"I would estimate that I put my name on approximately 20-30 daycare lists," said Blum.

When the time came for her two-year-old son to go to daycare though, he only had two spaces to choose from.

So the overwhelming majority of daycares Blum was on the waiting list for did not offer her a space, but did take her money.

"Some places were more modest — about \$20 to \$30. But other places were charging \$120 to \$150 non-refundable fee just to be placed on a list," she said.

Part of the problem?

Most childcare facilities describe the non-refundable fees as an administration cost to manage the lengthy waiting lists. When parents like Blum add their names to as many as 30 lists, individual daycares must juggle names and it becomes a job in itself to manage the list.

"When the daycares are going down the list, there are a lot of people to call," Blum acknowledged.

But she also said she had no choice but to add her name to so many waiting lists — to be part of the system she said doesn't work.

"That's exactly the problem with our system. It's operating on a market basis," she said. "You have a scarcity so supply-demand allows these places to charge exorbitant fees."

She said parents are forced to "play the odds," and she was too.

Paying for nothing

Blum said the fee is a barrier for people who can't afford it. But the problem she described to Metro Morning goes deeper than simply pay-to-play.

She also said the wait lists are often not based on a first-come, first-served basis. She said this lack of transparency frustrates many parents.

"There's definitely tons of anecdotes out there about people who are late-comers to the list and for whatever reason — their connections — they show their face, they become first," she said.

She said the only reason parents do these manoeuvres is because they are desperate to put their child in daycare. That was evident, she said, in the fact that so many parents are essentially "paying for nothing" in waiting lists.

"It's really a broken system," she said.

'A public good'

Blum and her fellow lawyer, Kelly Doctor, are petitioning for an end to waiting list fees. They also want to bring transparency to the wait lists. She also has her sights on larger reforms in childcare.

"It's such a labyrinth of system. You have to have connections. It's not equal in terms of its access. And that's a problem," she said.

Blum and Doctor want childcare to be a "public good," since it is so fundamental to people's lives and ability to be productive at work.

Arthur Potts, a Toronto-area MPP, will bring the lawyers' petition to Queen's Park later this month.

Janet Davis, a Toronto city councillor, said charges will be banned in Toronto starting in 2017. That ban will apply to numerous daycares, but the issue remains a provincial issue.

"This problem of non-transparency and daycare wait list fees occurs across the province and actually across the country," Blum said. "If this is something our city can do, there's no reason it can't be done throughout the province."

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