

Plan aimed at improving access to child care in Waterloo Region

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Author: Rutledge, Lisa

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EXCERPTS

Finding affordable, available and quality licensed child care close to home is too challenging for parents in Waterloo Region, according to a new report on current child care resources in the region.

These four major concerns were among issues raised by many of the 1,500 families who provided feedback when surveyed about their thoughts on the state of licensed child care in the region.

The input from parents was added to the voices cited by the Region of Waterloo Children's Services in the development of a new road map and master plan to be used to guide early learning services and licensed child care over the next four years.

The vision for licensed child care in the region from 2016 to 2020, the first master plan in the region for early learning programming, also solicited feedback from child care operators and community partners involved in the delivery of child care services.

Although there were no shocking surprises revealed by parents, the reflective process gave officials at the region a sense that the new direction eyed for changes is on the right track.

"It was certainly very affirming to what we thought were the issues," said Nancy Dickieson, director of children's services at the region.

She said parents highlighted issues such as cost, location of child care operators, and a lack of availability of spaces, especially for infants.

Parents also expressed frustration from the get-go, when trying to use the OneList online system needed to locate licensed child care.

"The key things that we heard from parents was how difficult they find the system to navigate when they're trying to search for licensed child care," she said.

That usability of the system, which one parent labelled as "poor and incredibly frustrating", is now getting a hard second look by a working committee.

"We are looking at ways of simplifying that program and enhancing it so that it makes the experience easier for parents," said Dickieson.

Some of the issues to be tackled under the new master plan will be somewhat harder to address, notably the costs of child care, which are often fixed due to staff salaries.

About 67 per cent of parents, even those with good, stable incomes, reported that child care fees are too high.

According to the report, the cost of sending one child to full-time licensed daycare from age one to 12 would be between \$71,664 and \$110,320 (with full days up to age four and then before- and after-school days factored in).

Dickieson said new avenues are being explored to help relieve the costs of operating child care, including finding new ways of applying municipal funding.

"If we can maintain the current fees, it would be a starting place for sure," she said.

In order to meet needs of changing communities, the region will be poring over new census data to determine which areas of Waterloo Region are underserved for licensed child care. It will also work more closely with local school boards to find locations – and provincial capital funding for schools – to add child care centres.

The move to add child care where it's needed most, explained Dickieson, is in response to clearly identified preferences to access child care closer to home. The primary focus in the new master plan also places a top priority on adding more spaces for children under the age of four, something noted as severely lacking in the current state of licensed care.

Nearly half of the parents polled said more child care spaces are needed.

“We’re hearing from parents that it’s very hard to find a space for an infant and a toddler,” said Dickieson.

While this might be the first time a master plan has been drafted for Region of Waterloo Children’s Services, it’s a “doable” undertaking, assured Dickieson. At various states through the four-year plan, the region will be pausing to measure progress to see if any changes are needed.

-reprinted from Cambridge Times

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