

Day care options scarce

By Kim Zarzour

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None of the York Region schools offering full-day kindergarten will offer their own before and after-school care in September as laid out by Ontario's Education Ministry.

The boards say there wasn't enough interest among parents for the in-house extended learning program that was part of the package rolled out by the ministry in October.

Instead, parents appear to be sticking with existing child care arrangements, at least for the first year of the multi-year phase-in.

Part of the reason may be cost.

The ministry is requiring schools that set up extended before and after-school care to pay their early childhood education (ECE) staff \$19.50 an hour which, in the public school system, could work out to parents paying a \$31 daily fee, board spokesperson Ross Virgo said. That hourly rate is expected to increase as it's bumped up with extras such as pay equity and other considerations once unions get involved.

Several federations are vying for representation of ECE workers. Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario, for example, has a new website www.youreunion.ca promising to "negotiate the salary, benefits, and working conditions that you deserve".

The other stumbling block is uncertainty, said Andrea Calver, co-ordinator for Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care.

The program has been rushed in, she said, and parents, who were surveyed when they registered for the program, had too little information at that time to commit to the in-house extended day.

School boards just received details of the early learning program last week and were told they have until the end of June to determine if they will offer their own before and after-school care.

"It's too short notice," Ms Calver said. "Very few boards will be offering it and it's too bad, but they were put in an unrealistic position to be able to pull it together."

Education ministry spokesperson Gary Wheeler said the ministry is confident boards and parents now have the information they need to make plans for September.

"We have worked hard to get information out to boards in a timely manner," he said.

In the regulations released last week, boards were told they must provide the extended day with two



All day kindergarten. Cathy Nielsen, of Thornhill, was pleased to learn the public school her son Jonah Nelson, 5, is attending this fall will be offering full-day kindergarten. As she is self-employed, she won't need before and after-school care, but expects many parents will require it. *Staff Photo/Kim Zarzour*

exceptions:

- If a minimum number of students are not enrolled;
- If schools have an existing written agreement with third parties to operate before and after-school child care on the premises. In that case, they can continue on with the agreement, but only during the one to two-year "transition" period, after which they will have to take it on themselves.

Across Ontario, the vast majority of schools have opted out based on those two exemptions, according to Ms Calver.

In York Region, all 14 Catholic schools that will offer full-day kindergarten in September have existing on-site care and, therefore, won't operate their own centres this year, although they will be using the ministry's extended day curriculum, board spokesperson Chris Cable said.

In the public board, 19 of the 25 full-day locations will carry on with their existing on-site centres at the current rates, Mr Virgo said. The remaining six schools did not show sufficient interest in establishing their own extended learning programs.

"It could be the cost," Mr. Virgo said. "I believe a number of parents opt for other arrangements."

Aurora's Mark and Brenda Lown will stick with their current arrangement with Watson's Family Karate, which will pick up their daughter Kate when she finishes the full-day kindergarten program at Holy Spirit Catholic Elementary School and transport her and her older sister to Watson's, where she'll be cared for until the end of the day.

While "continuity of care" would have its benefits, Mr. Lown the current arrangement works for them.

"For us, it's not a big deal, switching locations. They're used to it. Kids are pretty resilient," he said. "And kids like variety in the day."

As a single working mom, Thornhill's Cathy Nielsen is happy to be able to pull her son from his Montessori school to put him in full-day kindergarten at his local public school in September. While her workday doesn't require before and after-school care, she said parents may hold back because they are apprehensive, uncertain about costs, who is staffing the program and what activities will be offered.

Other parents are feeling the anxiety of the unknown.

"I feel like I'm in limbo right now," said Karen Zarr, a Thornhill single mom trying to determine where her children will be before and after school when she returns to work in the fall.

She's just learned the full-day kindergarten at Westminster Public School, where her youngest will attend, won't open its integrated extended day program in September and she's not sure if there will be room for him in the on-site YMCA daycare.

"It's extremely nerve-wracking and uncomfortable not knowing what will happen with my kids."

Whatever happens, she said she wants her son and her older child together before and after school.

Schools are taking it one step at a time, Westminster principal Lillian Lahe said. "It's a lot more complicated than any of us understood."

Eventually, all schools will be required to offer "seamless integrated learning" beginning each day at 7:30 a.m. and running until 6 p.m. for what the government says will be a "reasonable" fee. Some subsidies will be available for low-income families. Jim Grieve, assistant deputy minister of the Education Ministry has indicated the long-term vision is to accommodate children up to 12 years.

"We are confident that parents will see the value of having an enriched, integrated program that does not require their children to move between programs and locations," Mr. Wheeler said.

If parents could have continuity of care, for the right price, Mr. Virgo has little doubt the demand is there.

But it won't be a "cookie cutter approach", added the Catholic board's Ms Cable. The coming year will provide

valuable lessons on what works best where.

"In the end, we all want what's best for kids and we're working towards that," she said.

For more information, visit edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/kindergarten.html

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