

Parents slow to embrace program

BY KIM ZARZOUR
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No 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 school 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 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.

The 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 Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care co-ordinator Andrea Calver said.

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.

'TOO SHORT NOTICE'

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 spokesper-



STAFF PHOTO/KIM ZARZOUR

Cathy Nielsen with son Jonah, 5, who starts full-day kindergarten in Thornhill in September.

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

The ministry has 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 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 current rates, Mr Virgo said. The remaining six schools did not show sufficient interest in establishing their own extended learn-

ing programs.

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

Whitchurch-Stouffville's Melanie Dixon was thrilled to learn the local public school her children would be attending, Whitchurch Highlands, would be offering full-day kindergarten in the fall.

The publicly funded program will save her hundreds of dollars in nursery school fees, she said.

As a consultant, she said her work schedule is flexible and she doesn't require before- and after-school care, but she understands that many parents who work 9 to 5 require that extended day. "Otherwise, they're scrambling."

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 work day doesn't require before- and after-school care, she said parents may hold back because they are uncertain about costs, who is staffing the program and what activities will be offered.

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.

The ministry's 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, ministry spokesperson said.

LESSONS TO LEARN

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", the Catholic board's Ms Cable added. 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.

St. Mark, 15 more schools to go all day

BY TERESA LATCHFORD
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York Region will have 16 more schools offering full-day kindergarten in 2011.

The list includes St. Mark in Stouffville.

Education Minister Leona Dombrowsky announced more than 200 additional schools across the province will offer full-day classes for four- and five-year-olds next year. The York public board will add 12 new locations and the Catholic board four, adding to the 39 schools that will offer the program this fall.

"We are taking a responsible and measured approach to implementing full-day kindergarten," she said at a media conference Tuesday. "By expanding this program to up to 50,000 children in 2011-12, we are giving more children and their families the opportunity for a seamless day of learning and play."

These second phase schools were selected according to ministry guidelines that included available space, no on-site day care centre and school performance indicators.

The provincial government is expected to fully implement the \$1.5-billion program over the next six years and plans to provide \$245 million to school boards to build new classrooms and renovate existing ones over the next two.

"There is certainly going to be a need to build because we have schools that have run out of room," York Region District School Board spokesperson Ross Virgo said.

"There are only a few schools left that have suitable space to accommodate the program without building or renovating."

The full list of schools offering the program is available at www.edu.gov.on.ca

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