

Full Day Kindergarten affects services in Peel Region

By Dely Farrace

Full-day kindergarten (FDK) is now upon us, in full effect after a four-year phase-in period.

What are its implications? The intended and most notable are the relief for working families. They no longer require full-time daycare in the kindergarten years, both junior and senior. Before and after school hours are covered by the PLASP or YMCA programs. There is a fee attached to these programs, but it is a small fraction of the cost of full daycare, an estimated savings of \$5,500 per year for Peel families, according to the Provincial government.

By 2012, the province was in the midst of phasing in its FDK plan. The Region of Peel decided to create its own strategy to ensure the continued high quality service it has been offering families in child care. Peel soon realized that a transformation was needed. All the Regionally run daycares were servicing, by a vast majority, four and five-year-old children. If something didn't happen, these daycares would be deserted.

The Region decided to build partnerships with existing non-profits, the YMCA, PLASP and Family Day to take over and run the centres. These agencies were already in the business of running before and after school programs. The Region also realized that all licensed daycares could find themselves in a similar situation once FDK was fully rolled out.

In designing a new model, the Region focussed on the main goals of eliminating waitlists and creating new opportunities for providers to support inclusionary practice for children with special needs.

Working with its partner agencies, Peel Children's Centre, Surrey Place, Brampton Caledon Community Living, Community Living Mississauga and Erinoakkids, the Region expects to foster confidence in the new system, ensuring continued service delivery to families for their infants and toddlers as well as three to five-year olds before and after school.

In January 2013, the Provincial government introduced the new funding formula designed to take into account population statistics across Ontario when allocating funds to the different regions, counties and areas. As a result, Peel, having been notoriously underfunded in every respect for the last 20 to 30 years, benefitted. Funding increased for Peel.

Together with the re-deployment of the daycare centres, the collaboration with partner agencies and the increase in funds from the province, the Region has been able to eliminate the waitlist for fee subsidy. Additionally, it has reduced by half the waitlist for servicing children with special needs. According to the Region's Director of Early Learning and Child Care Joan Kaczmariski, there are no children with special needs currently awaiting supports in Caledon. The expectation is the complete elimination of waitlists in Peel by the end of the year.

?The implementation of full day kindergarten had the potential to destabilize the system,? remarked Commissioner of Human Services Janet Menard.

But, according to Menard, the approach by the province in its funding and its flexibility in the process has enhanced the Region's ability to transition families and providers to a more supportive, more inclusive program than prior to full-day kindergarten.

It appears that these changes have certainly benefitted a greater number of children. More are now accessing an improved and more universally available system

