

Can empty classrooms help solve the daycare crunch?

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When it comes to aligning family life with work life, school is behind the times, literally – starting after most parents are expected to be at the office, and ending hours before they can even think of leaving.

To bridge the child-care gap, lucky families snag a spot at an after-school program, if their school even has one – and even then may still have shuttle a younger child to and from separate care. But too many schools go quiet not long after the final bell rings, and in some declining neighbourhoods and rural areas, classrooms sit empty even during the day. With regulated child care in short supply – and community space in general at a premium – are we putting these valuable, centrally located, child-friendly properties to their best use?

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“We live differently and our schools have not caught up with that,” says Patti Bacchus, the chair of the Vancouver School Board. “We are still functioning as if we have all these stay-at-home parents.”

The Ontario government took steps this week to modernize the school clock, by introducing legislation that mandates school boards to provide before and after programs for all elementary student where “sufficient need” exists – an extended school day approach that is already catching on in Europe.

Many school boards have already headed in this direction, though access is patchy, and wait lists exist. But in Kitchener-Waterloo, for example, this policy is already in effect: the school board runs its own morning and afternoon program for students up to Grade 2, as part of full-day kindergarten, and currently contracts out a “youth development” program for older kids in half of its schools.

Parents pay fees, making “it totally revenue neutral,” says Scott Podrebarac, who oversees the program, “and the smart thing is using buildings that are already heated and lit.” Since the school board can juggle staff, predict numbers for its own program, and open up more space in the school when needed for the older students, wait lists don’t exist, Podrebarac says. The space is flexible to family needs, and school-board run program fees have actually fallen. By staggering shifts for early childhood educators, kindergarten students are able to remain in their classroom space with familiar faces.

Child-care experts suggest that schools are also ideal spots to locate child care, and other support services, for the youngest kids – a growing trend. Adding toddlers and preschoolers into the school environment better reflects the social and cognitive value of early childhood education, and supports an easier entry into grade school, especially for immigrant families.

That’s the thinking behind a three-year pilot project in New Brunswick, completed in October, to build five school-based family learning centres around the province.

The Step Ahead Family Learning Centre in Bath, N.B., for instance, has a daycare that starts at age 2 and extends into school-age, a breakfast program, parenting courses and a part-time public health clinic. The centre, operated by a non-profit third party, uses classroom space in the Bath Middle School and elementary school next door. Children travel easily back and forth between a half-day preschool program, classes and daycare. Grade 8 students, studying down the hall from the daycare, pop over to read or perform puppet shows for the two-year-olds. A school-based speech therapist walks over at lunch and sees some of her charges, so parents don’t have to leave work to drive them to an appointment. The middle-school cafeteria is used to teach family cooking classes. And by the time the kids first walk through the kindergarten door, says, the centre’s director, Rebecca Derrah, “nobody needs name tags.”

The pilot project, according to Ann Sherman, dean of education at the University of New Brunswick, showed that early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers often shared best practices, a partnership that helped children with learning delays to be identified earlier. Adding daycare also helps schools with shrinking student populations stay viable since they have a more diverse role in the community. Bath Middle School, for instance, has seen its class sizes drop by about half in recent years – now its empty wing bustles with families throughout the day. And what’s more, says, principal Gerald Sullivan, having little kids around has had a positive influence on the teenagers.

“They act like big brother and big sister, and try to be more respectful and understand that they are role models,” he says. “We really are just one

functioning school.”

Next spring, Nova Scotia is hoping to open four similar multipurpose family centres in schools, though not all will have daycare on-site, and Newfoundland is studying options for two possible locations of its own.

According to Julie Savage-Palmer, a single mom with four kids between the ages of 5 and 13, “you can’t put a price” on how much easier the school-based Bath centre has made her life. She works early mornings at a nursing home. The centre opens at 6:30 a.m., and all her children spend their days in the same place, settled in routines and close to their siblings. “We know everybody,” she says, “there’s a sense of family.”

Changing the school schedule to both better serve family life and provide extra activities to low-income children has become a policy discussion in Europe. Last week, Britain’s Labour Party said it would provide guaranteed child care at elementary schools from 8 a.m to 6 p.m. While that’s an easy promise for an opposition party, schools in Portugal are already required to stay open into early evening and offer extracurricular activities – and similar programs have been expanding in Germany. In the United States, low-performing schools that extended their learning time – often adding arts, music and sports, in addition to extra classroom time, have turned around their standardized test scores.

Most Canadian school boards have been reluctant to step directly into the daycare business even though, child care experts point out, they are well-positioned to provide it: They have access to families to determine need and can be more efficient with costs on a larger scale.

Still, there are signs that communities are trying harder to fill classrooms in creative ways. New schools are being designed with multipurpose space that can be converted into child care. Just five years ago, in 2008, when Patti Bacchus arrived on Vancouver’s board, a regulation prohibited classrooms from being used as daycares – that rule was quickly changed. The board has also created partnerships with non-profit groups, such as a theatre group that renovated a fire-damaged, heritage schoolhouse in exchange for a lease to use it, and offers drama classes to the students.

After all, says Bacchus, with urban property costs at a premium, “we have something that is really in demand in the city.” Along with, child care experts would say, the tools to build programs the modern family needs.

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