

MRFA Child Care Discussion Paper

Introduction

Over the course of the 2011 fall semester, the MRFA Executive met with departments across the university. Our goal was to hear from members what issues were important to them. Access to child care emerged as an issue for faculty in a number of venues.

The following document is intended to inform members of the current state of child care services at MRU, and to begin discussion around potential strategies for addressing issues of cost and accessibility for faculty. The MRFA Executive does not endorse any particular strategy outlined in this document – the examples provided are intended to spark discussion and are not assumed to be exhaustive. The MRFA Executive seeks feedback from the membership as to what strategies should be investigated and pursued by the MRFA going forward, if this is felt to be an issue of significant concern.

The MRFA Executive would like to thank Kari Roberts and Joanne Baxter for their contributions to this document in outlining the current situation at the Mount Royal University Child Care Centre. We would also like to thank the Centre's Board of Directors for allowing representatives from the Executive to attend the most recent board meeting to discuss the issues outlined below.

Current Situation – Joanne Baxter and Kari Roberts

The Mount Royal College Day Care Society and Board of Directors

The Mount Royal College Child Care Centre (MRCCCC) is a not-for-profit child care centre operated at arm's length from Mount Royal University by the Mount Royal College Day Care Society (name change pending). The Society is governed by a Board of Directors consisting of the Centre's Executive Director, a representative appointed from each of the Faculty of Health and Community Studies, Student Affairs and Campus Life, and the Finance Department, representatives from the MRFA (elected), MRSSA (appointed) and the SAMRU (appointed), as well as up to four elected parents of children presently enrolled in the Centre.

The University is currently considering having the MRCCCC operate as a department within Student Affairs and Campus Life.

Government Regulations for Staff

All child centers and preschool programs in Alberta are licensed under the Child Care Act. There are many regulations in place for the operation of child care centers and preschool programs and regulations are strictly enforced. Recently, Children and Youth Services developed an accreditation program in which child care programs need to meet an enhanced standard in order to be eligible for accreditation funding. At present, this takes the form of wage enhancement (e.g., \$6 per hour for Child Development Supervisors). Accreditation does not exist for preschool programs.

The only funding to child care centers is accreditation funding. Subsidies are paid directly to parents who qualify. This subsidy can then be applied to the parent fees. Accordingly, child care centers are funded primarily on parent fees.

Child Care Costs and the MRU Subsidy

MRU has a space rental agreement with MRCCCC; the space is leased for \$1 per year. In addition, the following services are provided:

- Utilities
- Cleaning / maintenance
- Insurance
- HR services
- Financial /payroll
- Grounds
- IT
- Security

As of June 2011 the per child cost of full time care at the MRCCCC for MRU Faculty, Staff and Students is:

Ages 19 months-3 years: \$1055 Ages 3-6 years: \$950

Calgary Community members pay \$45 per month per child more than MRU faculty, staff and students.

The MRCCCC added a preschool program several years ago that has provided one means to ensure sufficient funding; the preschool program helps to underwrite the costs of the child care center.

The MRCCC entered into an agreement with the CCSD (Calgary Catholic School District) to provide a half day program for kindergarten children. Five year old children spend the morning at the MRU child care center and are bused to St. James Elementary School for afternoon kindergarten. The CCSD pays the cost of busing. The program had 17 children in its inaugural year and will likely attract more children next year. Given the initial success of this program, MRCCCC developed an onsite Before and After School Program at St. James School.

Comparison to Other Centres

To provide some comparative context, the MRCCCC is fortunate that such a significant portion of its operating costs are subsidized by the University. Other private child care centers would need to pay the full cost of rental space and all other services required, including staffing, which is so important. When parent fees must stretch to pay for these services, this often means fewer resources are available to hire staff with appropriate educational qualifications. Typically, private centers have a higher staff turnover and diminished quality of care as a result. This is not the case at Mount Royal; the MRCCC has been able to maintain staff on a long term basis and has a solid reputation for quality care in the city.

In some cases, organizations and/or corporations assist in subsidizing the cost of child care for employees; some examples of institutional or corporate supported programs are: the University of

Calgary, ACE Child Care at City Hall, First Edition at the Calgary Herald, Pumpkin Patch at Petro Canada and the new child care center at Newalta.

Cost Recovery

MRCCC must operate as a self sufficient, fiscally responsible unit. The current Executive Director has worked diligently to ensure fiscal responsibility. Accordingly, community users are needed in order to fill spaces that may not be immediately taken up by faculty, staff or students. Consistent with the need to be fiscally responsible, the MRCCCC Board of Directors recently decided to remove the exemption from summer fees. Previously, parents could remove their children for one month per year and pay only a holding fee, rather than the full cost of child care for that month. The MRCCCC offering this program was unique, but it was unfortunately not sustainable and was therefore discontinued in January 2011.

Existing Space Availability

There are currently 80 full time child care spaces for children ages 19 months to 6 years, not including the pre-school. Presently, approximately 30% of the existing spaces are filled by children of MRU faculty and staff, another 30% are children of MRU students, and the remaining spaces are occupied by members of the Calgary community at large.

The MRCCCC is currently in the process of opening an older infant care room (for children aged 13-19 months). Due to the unavailability of start-up grant money from the Province of Alberta and rent for the residence to be charged at the current rate, this room is likely to cost parents \$1500 per month. Currently the wait list for the infant playroom is triple its capacity; the new playroom would have the capacity for only 12 older infants.

Wait List and Holding Spaces

There are currently over 500 people on the wait list for full time child care. Because the majority of children in the day care remain there until they begin school, the turn-over of children is quite low, meaning the wait list moves quite slowly. Unless students and faculty leave Mount Royal, their children are likely to remain in the child care centre until they reach school age. Some faculty members who have been on the wait list since before their children were born remain so far back in the queue that they face waiting *years* before a space becomes available for their child.

Priority is given to faculty and students over community members; priority is also given to the siblings of children already in the day care centre.

When a space becomes available, the MRCCCC offers a spot to the person at the top of the list consisting of faculty, staff and students first (community users are called only if the first list is exhausted) and requires confirmation of the acceptance of the space generally within 24 hours. There is no provision for holding spaces for faculty over the summer months, or for new incoming faculty members. If a space is declined the next person on the wait list is contacted, and so on.

Due to the inability to hold spaces, if MRU members cannot accept a spot when it is immediately offered to them, the spot is then offered to a community member. In the event that a space becomes available before the parent can use it (e.g., over the summer months when day care may not be needed, or prior to a new faculty member beginning their employment at Mount Royal) it is up to the parent to pay the full cost of the space to hold the spot for later use, or they must decline the space. Should the space be declined, that parent returns to the bottom of the wait list.

It is this situation that has led to continued community usage. Faculty, students and staff are often reluctant to accept a spot that comes up in April, May, June or July since they are responsible for the fees even though their child may not use the spot until mid August. Community users are often willing to take the spot at any time.

Given the size of the growing MRU community, a child care center for 80 children is insufficient to meet the demand. With wait lists so long, the sad reality is that parents often do not even bother to put their name on the wait list. Given this, options such as part time care have not even been considered. Because the MRCCCC is filled to capacity with full time users, and because the wait list is so long, space is at a premium. Moreover, part time care is also cumbersome and costly.

Despite the demand for extra child care spaces, the realities of space demands within the University at large mean that the expansion of the MRCCCC (beyond the new older infant care room) has not been considered.

Possible Strategies - Cari Merkley and Gerry Cross

Sharing of day care spots

The ability to share a full time day care spot or part time spaces could provide faculty, particularly part time faculty, with greater access and flexibility. Currently, the Mount Royal College Child Care Centre (MRCCCC) does not offer part time or shared spots, but it is an option available at some day care centres. For example, the University of British Columbia Child Care Services system has a part time option for many of its child care programs including infants and toddlers that consists of 3 or 4 full days of care per week (half days are not available).¹ As noted in the previous section, offering part time or shared spaces would pose additional administrative and staffing challenges for MRCCCC. Any decisions on this issue would be made by the MRCCCC Society.

Raise fees for community users, if necessary, so they are not subsidized

Currently, members of the community pay \$45 more per month than MRU faculty, staff, and students. The university indirectly subsidizes the day care through the provision of space, utilities, insurance, and administrative and other services. Questions have been raised if this amount adequately covers the amount of subsidies provided by MRU to the day care centre. The University of Calgary's Child Care Centre currently only accepts the children of students, staff and faculty members. Once an individual's

¹ See <http://www.childcare.ubc.ca/fees/fee-schedule>; personal communication, April 19, 2011

relationship with the University of Calgary ends, he or she has three months to find other child care options.²

Currently, spaces are only offered to members of the community after they have been offered to the students, faculty and staff members on the waiting list. Often spaces become available in the spring, when there is less demand from students, staff on 10 month contracts, and faculty about to go on vacation. Members of the Mount Royal community may turn down a space at that time of year because they are reluctant to pay child care fees over the summer months, even if it is necessary to secure the space for September. Because of this, the revenue generated from community members currently keeps the operations of Mount Royal Child Care viable, and the Mount Royal Child Care board indicated that the price is currently set in order to remain competitive in the market. Any decisions on this issue would be made by the MRCCCC Society.

Provide funding to subsidize the cost of holding spots over the summer

Openings at the MRU Child Care Centre often come in the spring and summer as faculty are about to go or are on vacation, and in order to secure a space for the fall faculty must pay full fees to hold the spot. In the past, one month's fees were waived in lieu of a small holding fee (see Current Situation section), but this is no longer sustainable for the Child Care Centre.

One strategy would be to set aside a pool of funds that faculty could apply for to help pay for the cost of holding a spot over the summer.

Provide funding to hold any open spots

Another strategy would be to create a pool of funds to be drawn on to retain any spots that are about to be offered to members of the community until they can be filled by a faculty member. This initiative could be tied to new faculty recruitment, holding spots for new hires.

Extend eligibility of scholarships for dependents

As per Article 16.7 of the Collective Agreement, the Board provides the Association with \$60,000 for scholarships for dependents. One possible strategy would be to negotiate expanded access to this existing funding to include those looking for reimbursement for child care costs.

Negotiate child care benefits into the collective agreement

A number of universities (Queen's, University of Alberta, and University of Toronto) have negotiated a pool of funds for faculty child care expenses. At these universities, faculty can submit reimbursement requests for child care costs for dependent children, subject to age limits.

For example, Queen's University Faculty Association (QUFA) has negotiated child care benefits into their collective agreement. The current agreement states that all members of the bargaining unit may apply

² See <http://www.ucalgary.ca/uccc/node/47>

for up to \$2, 225 per child per year to cover the cost of day care for dependent children under the age of seven or before/after school care for dependent children under age twelve.³ This benefit first appeared in the 1999-2002 agreement.⁴ Increasing amounts were set aside to cover these requests, with a total of \$351,714 available for 2010-2011.⁵ According to a 2010 message to QUFA members, demand on this fund necessitated that the amount awarded to faculty be prorated, although it was mentioned that excess funds from the child care fund had been transferred to other benefit funds in the past.⁶

Establish a joint committee to study and make recommendations on improving child care capacity

If directed by the membership, the MRFA Executive would approach university administration to establish a joint committee on child care. The committee's mission would be to investigate the current and future pressures on child care at MRU, and to explore ways of expanding day care access at MRU. The committee's work would take place during the 2011-2012 academic year, and the intended outcome would be a list of recommendations that, if implemented, would alleviate capacity issues.

³ See Appendix M of the 2008-2011 Collective Agreement, available at <http://www.queensu.ca/vpac/FacultyRelations/CollectiveAgreements.html>

⁴ See <http://qufa.wordpress.com/2010/03/29/top-100-myths-and-other-fables/>

⁵ See http://www.qufa.ca/ca/tentative_ca_2008-2011/CA_Summary_v4.pdf

⁶ See http://www.qufa.ca/files/2010/20100213_tuition_support_update.php