

Step Ahead program caught in school reno limbo



Rebecca Howland | Bugle Observer

For the first time since its inception, Step Ahead Learning Program in Bath might have to raise funds to keep the program going. The innovative early education program had to slash enrolment and revenue waiting for the Bath Community School renovations to be completed.

The cramped quarters and smaller enrolment was only supposed to last a year. But with that work in limbo after asbestos was discovered in the renovation, Step Ahead is falling behind financially.

"We've never had to do fundraisers before," said Somer Drost, board chair. "At our last board meeting we said OK, we need to start thinking of fundraisers or we're just going to keep falling further and further behind."

Since 2009, the Bath Step Ahead Program has offered more than just daycare services.

“A lot of people think of it as a daycare, but it's not just a daycare,” Drost said. “We're an early childhood development centre. So, the original mandate was to provide full-time daycare, after school, and pre-school, but [allow] families and children have access to services like public health, mental health, speech-language pathologists, and also things like parenting support. It's kind of an all-inclusive service access [point].”

Over the years, the government and the Margaret & Wallace McCain Foundation have invested in early childhood programs like Step Ahead. In 2008, the provincial government launched the Be Ready for Success: A 10-year Early Childhood Strategy for New Brunswick. The pilot project Bath's Step Ahead program was part of was a three-year pilot. The province invested \$400,000 to create Step Ahead and three similar programs across the province.

A 2013 study held by the Health and Education Research Group notes the program saw an increase in use over the three-year period and school-supported program expansion at Step Ahead resulted in "a second four-year-old preschool class, the addition of a three-year-old preschool class, and expansion in the after-school program"

Since having to move, the number of program participants dropped drastically.

"We used to be licensed for 60 [kids]." said Drost. "We are now licensed for 41. We knew. We knew for a year we were going to take a hit and we were going to lose money, but we thought we could do this for a year. It's really stressful financially to make ends meet."

The tender for the renovations of Bath Middle was issued in 2018 and the work came to a stop less than a year later due to asbestos discovered in the building.

Since they had to move into the Bath Community School to allow for the now-halted renovations of Bath Middle School, the program has had to cope with cramped quarters and reduced programming.

"Space would be one of the big ones [problems]," said Drost. "When we were in the bigger school [Bath Middle], we had the extra room. We had the space to do programming during the day. We used to have drop-in play groups, and parent-infant sessions. We just don't have that space anymore. It's more crowded. We used to have all of our kids in one great big room during the day, and now they are split up into two smaller rooms."

Drost said the situation is frustrating. In their old space, the bathroom was located in the same area. Now, workers have to take multiple children all at once to a washroom shared by middle school students.

"The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is working with the district education council and community to ensure educational needs are met," Tara Chislett, a department spokesperson wrote in an email. "The Step Ahead Program provides an important service to the community and the department will work with the licensed facility's operators to help ensure the continued success of the program."

Drost and many other community members presented to the DEC at a recent sustainability study meeting in Bath and they all agreed -they want Bath Middle renovated and reopened.

"We need back in our school."

If they are forced to continue in the current space, Drost is worried about the future.

"We won't be able to survive financially much longer," Drost said. "The thing is, the government that put out the proposal for these four pilot projects, I mean, it's great, but, it's almost like we've kind of been forgotten. Even though everyone is saying...we need to invest in early childhood development. Do you really mean that? So, we kind of feel like we've been forgotten."

When asked about the Step Ahead concerns, the Department of Early Childhood Development and Education said they were working with the Anglophone West District Education Council.