

## **Town Hall on Before and After School Care in Huron County**

January 30, 2026

### **Attendance:**

- Marnie Van Esbroeck, organizer
- Hannah Field, Owner of The Trees & Me Forest School.
- Avon Maitland District School Board: Graham Shantz, Director of Education, Michael Bannerman, Chair of the Board, Robert Hunking, School Trustee for Southwest Huron, and Cheri Carter, Superintendent of Corporate Services.
- Huron Perth Catholic District School Board: Karent Tigani, Director of Education, Mary Helen Van Loon, Chair of the Board, and Mary-Ellen Ducharme, Superintendent of Business.

### **1. Opening remarks & welcome, Marnie Van Esbroeck.**

- The meeting is for parents to share feedback and ask questions about before and after school care programs in Huron County.
- Meeting minutes will be shared on [extendtheday.ca](http://extendtheday.ca).

### **2. Update from The Trees & Me Forest School (TAM), Hannah Field, RECE.**

- Policies and procedures are being submitted to the ministry for approval.
- Insurance has been approved for all schools, and health unit inspections will occur next week.
- Follow Trees and Me on social media and share hiring posts @tam.forestschool or contact [Hannah.forestschool@gmail.com](mailto:Hannah.forestschool@gmail.com)

### **2a. Plans for Program Improvement**

- Educators will receive higher wages and more support.
- All educators will receive mileage pay and benefits after a three-month probationary period.
- Programs will have a non-negotiable two-staff policy.

### **2b. How the Community Can Help – ECE's are needed**

- Spread the word about job openings, specifically for RECE, OCT or CYW qualified professionals who are needed to meet Ministry of Education requirements to get the program running.
- There needs to be at least one ECE for Bluewater Coast because they had one program. Precious Blood had one program. Exeter Elementary had four programs.

- Laurel Mitchell, Facilities Supervisor with AMDSB has offered to extend the opportunity with staff on their supply list.
- Other registered professionals who work with vulnerable populations (RPN, PSW, etc...) may be considered to fill these roles and may be eligible for approval.

## 2c. Questions from Parents

- TAM has applications started with Bluewater Coast, Exeter Elementary, and Precious Blood Catholic School.
- **Anticipated start date?** In the next few months if possible, but will depend on licensing and staffing.
- **Will children who were in the London Bridge program be automatically enrolled?** For privacy reasons, TAM does not have a list of names that were enrolled in the program but would like to honour spaces that were previously in the London Bridge program.
- **How many spaces will be offered?** The plan is to offer the same number of spaces that were offered by London Bridge.
- **What will the cost of the program be?** TAM plans to keep the fees similar to the London Bridge program for both BASP and non-instructional day care. They have been approved for CWELCC funding.
- **Is there any difference in timeframes for approvals between the public and Catholic school systems?** Approval time frame should be on the same timeline from the ministry.
- **How is the wait list being managed?** A new waitlist with TAM has been started. Please contact Hannah to be added to the waitlist. TAM cannot be added to OneHSN until the licensing approval has been finalized.
  - London Bridge was supposed to share an email with previous clients and families on their former wait list, but it seems that many parents did not receive that communication.
- **Will summer programs be offered?** Yes, that is the plan currently and can be somewhat easier to staff with college and university students in related programs.
- **Are there opportunities for creative staffing solutions with the school board?** AMDSB has shared the TAM opportunity with staff on their supply list.

## Additional Staffing Considerations

- Chair Bannerman stated that the board is looking at how to help with immediate and long-term solutions for systemic issues like staffing.

## 3a. School Boards Opening Remarks

- Karen Tigani, director of education with the Huron Perth Catholic District School Board, thanked everyone for the invitation and stressed the importance of partnerships with third party providers. Both boards have empathy for the situation that parents are currently facing and are committed to finding solutions. HPCDSB is aware of the interest at St. Boniface School and will continue to promote the survey and information related to the potential opportunity if there is demand.
- Graham Shantz, director of education with the Avon Maitland District School Board stated that TAM is moving through the certification process quickly, attesting to her commitment. He empathized with the challenges of raising young children and wants to ensure that childcare providers are supported so that they can be part of the community long-term.
- Both boards have been working closely with TAM to expedite licensing.
- Creative staffing discussions have been happening and will continue to take place.
- The boards will promote the pathway of becoming an ECE among students, including experiential learning opportunities.

### 3b. Staffing Challenges

- The school boards are having discussions with the local ECE union.
- Dialogue is needed regarding staffing, which is a systemic challenge even in kindergarten classes.
- There are not enough ECEs in the school board to fill vacancies within the school boards.
- Creativity and long-term solutions are needed to attract people to the profession, benefiting school boards, families, and economic development.
- Meredith Bayley asked **what could be done to attract people to the profession of being an ECE?**
  - Director Shantz states that conversations with local SSMs reveal a province-wide shortage of ECEs, particularly in rural areas.
  - Increasing the number of college positions is crucial.
- Chair Bannerman advises the ECE shortage is similar to the PSW shortage that occurred situation in healthcare, where the pay did not reflect the investment in education. He recognizes the benefit to children when ECE support is in the classroom.
- One idea considered has been running programs through the school board to educate and qualify ECEs, similar to what was done with PSWs (in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health).
- **Scott Harris, Hensall ward councillor** comments that wages and benefits are key to attracting and retaining ECEs. There is some animosity between kindergarten teachers and ECEs due to respect and wages, which could lead to TAM poaching staff from the school board.

- Director Tigani responds that comments are understood and that staff are supported and compensated to the best of the board's ability. The board pays attention to the work environment for all staff.
- **Tammy Harris, RECE** proposes job sharing between the board and the third party childcare providers. This could involve working morning or afternoon shifts with third parties, and then day shifts with the board to provide support for the third party operator and give alternative working options for ECE's.
  - Director Shantz thanks Tammy for her honesty. The board's note that the unionized work environment operates under a collective agreement negotiated provincially and locally. The board can discuss possibilities with the local union to see what opportunities may exist.
- Marnie Van Esbroeck asked if there is **opportunity to extend hours to ECE's, such as 37.5 hours?** Tammy advises that the standard AMDSB workweek for ECEs is 35 hours a week. All full-time ECE positions within the school board are 35 hours. Director Shantz advises there may be some part-time roles in the board.
- A parent who is also an RPN comments that she works with many educators who are experiencing a high degree of burnout. She notes ECE's and EA's are leaving the profession due to this, as well as poor wages and disrespect from colleagues.

### 3c. Board Operated vs. Third Party Child Care

- Heidi Klopp recognizes the two ECE's covering her child's kindergarten class in the absence of a teacher. She asked **what research has been done with board operated school care in other areas** and why have you come to the conclusion that third party operated care is the best solution?
  - Director Shantz shares that in Ontario, out of 70 school boards/authorities, only four have board-operated programs.
  - Positives of board-run programs:
    - Continuity of programming throughout the day.
  - Challenges of board-run programs:
    - Higher costs for school boards compared to third-party providers – estimated to be nearly double.
    - Staffing challenges.
    - School boards with board operated care are in large urban centres and don't face the same staffing challenges.
  - Chris Van Esbroeck expresses **frustration that the discussion has focused on the challenges of board operated before and after school care and instead passing responsibility to third-party providers.** Families want to focus on solutions that will work for the community long- term and the positive effect this can have on the

community. He states that trustees have not reflected the voice of parents' in their solutions. Trustee Whitaker suggested parents start a childcare co-op, passing the task onto people with fewer resources. Trustee Armstrong referred to before and after school care as "babysitting" which was insulting to both parents and ECE's.

- Chair Bannerman apologized for the unacceptable comments made by the board member, emphasizing that it doesn't reflect the board's appreciation for the work done by ECEs. He acknowledges the challenges of providing quality services in rural areas of Huron-Perth compared to Stratford, especially with limited resources. He recognizes the need to support third-party providers to prevent them from leaving and to avoid the community being caught off guard again. They were caught off guard by London Bridge's closure.
- Tammy Smith asked, **what happens if TAM is unable to start her program and/or she can't maintain operations?**
- Director Shantz states there is a contract with adequate notice that a third party needs to provide so that the board can plan accordingly.
  - There is support from the school board staff and municipalities to support third parties. Director Tigani echoed these comments, that this is a priority for both boards.
- Marnie Van Esbroeck comments that there aren't large childcare organizations in our area with the loss of YMCA and London Bridge in Huron County, to fill the gap if/when programs close. **Instead of hiring a consultant as was proposed to the board on Dec 9, 2025, why not collaborate with school boards like HDSB who have already taken this journey?**
- Director Shantz has knowledge of the background on board operated before and after school care from his time with WRDSB. The purpose of the consultant would be to ensure there is a business model. The efforts so far have been to support Hannah Field, as this opportunity to work with her presented on very early. The main takeaway from today will be to focus on solving the staffing to ensure third party success.
- Marnie states this leaves us without a contingency plan. **What conversations took place in 2023 when YMCA closed their programs in central Huron?**
- Director Shantz states they have asked YMCA why they closed in 2023, and they've responded that the core challenge was staffing.
- Chair Bannerman states the climate for school boards right now is very difficult. He encourages parents to keep coming to board meetings to stress the importance of this issue to the board.
- Trustee Hunking recognizes that the board didn't realize there would be this ripple effect when YMCA closed in 2023 and were caught off guard.
- Director Tigani assures that they work very closely with third party providers to ensure their relationships were maintained, and the

experience with London Bridge closure has not been the typical experience. They are open to creative solutions such as the before and after program that operates in Mitchell that offers transportation from and to the program to 3 area Catholic elementary schools.

- Virginia Poss explains her children couldn't attend their home school because a childcare program closed the year she was enrolling her eldest child. Their family does not function without before and after school care. **Are there details you could provide around bursary programs for ECE training?** Virginia expresses the importance of sharing the career opportunity with high school students and helping to arrange co-op placements, as many high school students are required to find their own.
  - Superintendent Carter explains the history of the PSW program, and that that was not a college program.
  - Service System Managers within Huron and Perth Counties are the ones offering the initiatives for RECE and DECE education.
  - Perth County is offering a program through Conestoga College.
  - Huron County is offering a program with funding (details not exactly known).
  - Tammy Smith, RECE states this program is not widely known.
  - Director Tigani states that they do have guidance staff meeting regularly with colleges to help inform what programs colleges is offering students.
- Alysha Dowson appreciates how quickly the TAM forest school application is moving along. She worries as the needs of the community are being left to a small business, however **we are putting all of our focus on her program, and there is no back-up plan if the staffing challenge continues.** There has been no discussion on the plan for the schools that have no program and will continue not to have a program. She hopes collaboration between the school boards and parents continue.

### 3d. Municipal update from ROMA conference

- South Huron Mayor Finch spoke about his recent conversation with MPP Pang (Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Education), MPP Thompson (Minister of Rural Affairs) and MPP Lardi (Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Health). They have been provided with a number of documents.
- A physician in the area recently had to cut her hours due to the lack of childcare. Parents are burnt out.
- Huron and Bruce County have the second oldest population in Ontario.
- Mayor Finch asked **would the board apply for their childcare license in the contingency that the TAM forest school is unable to operate? Is there a cost for the boards to have a childcare license?**

- Director Shantz advises they wish to focus their energy on onboarding the TAM forest school. The licensing cost to the board is unknown.
- **Is it possible that a principal could be running the program themselves?** Mayor Finch advises of a school he was made aware of that is running their own program. The boards are not aware of this option.

### **Closing Remarks**

- Jeff Boyes asked **how can parents further advocate for change and to whom? Is there a call to action for parents tonight?**
- Chair Bannerman suggests leveraging current momentum by advocating to the provincial government as school board funding comes from the province. MPP Thompson would be an excellent resource to go to as her portfolio involves challenges in rural Ontario. He encourages parents continue to come to speak at board meetings.
- Director Tigani emphasizes that they are committed to working together with parents and want to solve this problem alongside parents.
- The school board members appreciate the opportunity to speak with community members tonight on this topic.

Thank you to the board representatives, local elected officials, ECE's and community members for attending.