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Parents push for more supervisors, less chaos in school lunchrooms

A growing chorus is calling on school boards and the province to put supervision standards in place that ensure kids are safe and nourished during chaotic lunch hours where there are few rules and regular ratios of 100 students to one adult.



Krista Wylie, co-founder of Fix Our Schools, says the furor over lack of lunchroom supervision has led to the largest surge of people joining the mailing

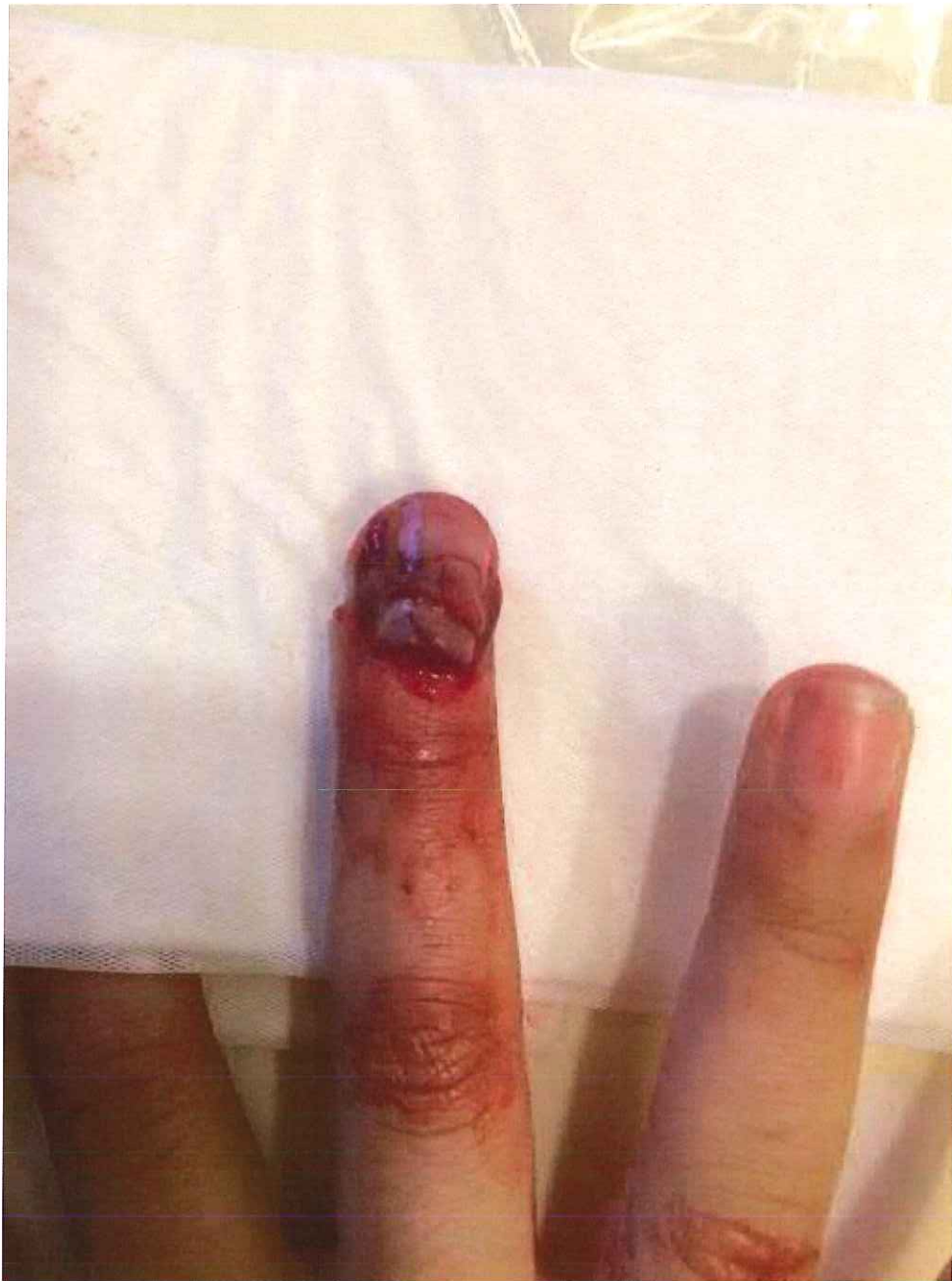
list for the grassroots group since it was launched four years ago. (VINCE TALOTTA / TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO)

By **ANDREA GORDON** Education Reporter

Sat., April 7, 2018

Tammy Prasad's stomach turned when she unwrapped the gauze from her 6-year-old's mangled finger and saw the blood.

She was equally shocked by her next discovery: that no adult was in the classroom when a closet door crushed and fractured Olivia's finger during lunch-hour horseplay. Prasad hadn't realized that midday supervision at her daughter's Toronto public school amounted to one supervisor in the hallway monitoring several classes and leaving them intermittently unattended.



Tammy Prasad's daughter, Olivia, 6, had to undergo surgery after her finger was mangled during horseplay at lunch hour while the children ate in their Grade 1 classrooms with someone periodically checking in. (SUPPLIED PHOTO)

“Even if Olivia was not injured we would find this completely unacceptable and unsafe,” says Prasad, who was called to the school and took her daughter to hospital for minor surgery and stitches to save the fingertip.

Since the incident last year, the principal at Dallington Public School in North York has hired an additional lunch supervisor and moved primary students into the gym where they are more closely monitored while eating, says Prasad.

Read more:

[Tales of school lunch chaos hard for parents to swallow](#)

[School lunch served with side order of chaos](#)

But she is still alarmed that, like many parents, she assumed rigorous supervision standards were in place, and she worries about what could happen in the event of a fire, or a child choking or having an allergic reaction.

She had no clue the typical ratio is one adult for every 100 elementary children and is concerned that many other parents are in the dark.

“That was us,” says Toronto parent Elizabeth Ledbrook, whose 6-year-old was recently discovered [eating lunch picnic-style](#) in the boys’ bathroom at his Toronto school with no adult in sight. The following week, he went missing, arriving half an hour late for afternoon class at Regal Road Junior Public School.

The Ledbrooks and Prasads are among a [growing chorus](#) of Ontario parents, educators and lunchroom staff calling for stricter rules and more resources to ensure students are eating, playing and interacting safely during what can be a chaotic period of the day.

One worried trustee at Toronto’s Catholic board asked staff to present a report on lunch supervision at a committee meeting last week, which revealed that 82 per cent of money set aside to pay for supervisors in 168 schools is used for that purpose, while the rest goes to cover other non-teaching supports.

Lunchroom chaos

What do you think school boards can do to provide better childcare in the lunchroom?

- Review spending and be certain 100 per cent of allocated funds are going where they need to be.
- Recruit more parent volunteers to boost the ratio of children to adults during lunch.
- Petition the provincial government for more funding and clearer legislation with stricter guidelines.

Vote

View Results

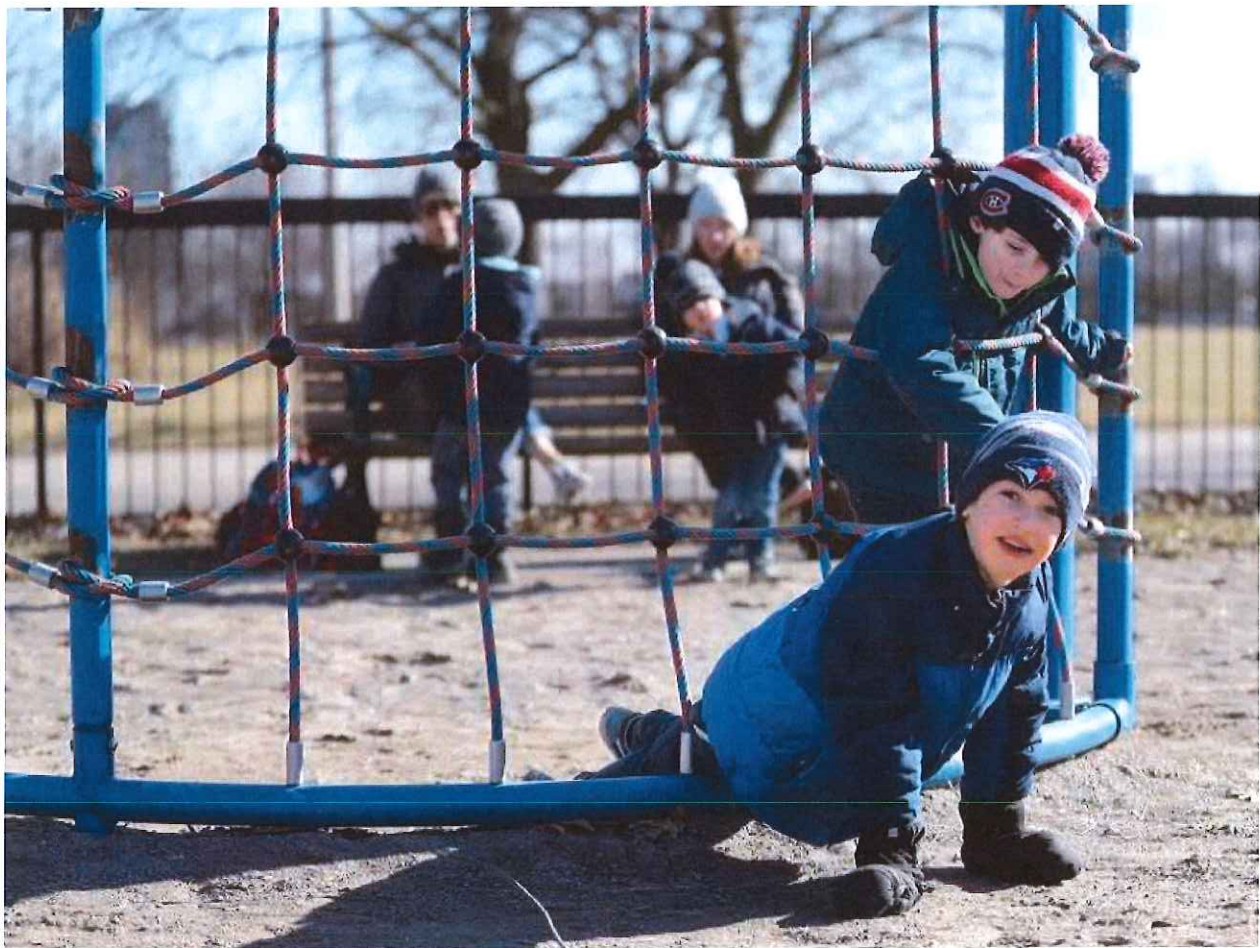
“I just want to get to the bottom of it and make sure that if there are any improvements we can make we will make them,” says Maria Rizzo, a trustee with the Toronto Catholic District School Board.

Rizzo said she plans to move a motion this spring when next year’s budget is being reviewed that would require 100 per cent of those funds to be spent on lunch-hour care.

Her concerns came amid reports through radio call-ins and social media of Ontario students as young as 10 being left in charge of other children, bullying episodes, and overwhelmed lunchroom supervisors scrambling to quell misbehaviour of kids throwing food and mouthing off to adults they don’t grant the same respect as teachers.

The issue sparked the largest surge of people joining the mailing list for [Fix Our Schools](#) since it was launched four years ago, says Krista Wylie, co-founder of the grassroots group. She and others say the situation reflects the province’s chronic underfunding of education.

The Ministry of Education does not set regulations on ratios and leaves it up to cash-strapped school boards, who in turn say principals must determine the needs of their schools.



Sebastien Ledbrook, 6, (in foreground), and pal, Henry, 6, burn off some energy in a park. The boys' parents have raised concerns about inadequate supervision at their school at lunch after the pair were found eating their sandwiches picnic style on the floor of the boys' bathroom. (RICHARD LAUTENS / TORONTO STAR)

As a result of collective agreements, teachers have limits on supervision duties, which means schools typically hire lunch supervisors for 90-minute minimum wage shifts in the middle of the day

A decade ago, the Ontario Principals' Council [proposed standards](#) including a ratio of one adult for every 50 to 100 children, a minimum of two supervisors in every room, and no students supervising other children. But they were never endorsed or adopted.

The Toronto District School Board has guidelines of one adult per 100 kids and two for every 224 students, with a sliding scale of more children for each as the numbers rise.

[Education funding](#) announced by the province last month could help address this, according to the Ministry of Education. It includes \$266 million for services of

“professionals and para-professionals” in schools, which include lunchroom supervisors, said Education Minister Indira Naidoo-Harris.

“It is our expectation that school boards are in the best position to know their local needs and will develop their own lunchroom supervision ratios to best serve the students in their community,” she wrote in an email to the Star.

But hiring another lunchroom supervisor means doing without a social worker or other important non-teaching staff from that envelope.



TDSB chair Robin Pilkey, left, with trustee Marit Stiles, said trustees hear many complaints, especially about old schools that weren't built to accommodate hordes of children staying for lunch. (BRIAN B. BETTENCOURT / TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO)

“What do you cut? I wish I had a magic bullet,” says TDSB chair Robin Pilkey, adding that trustees hear many complaints, especially about old schools that weren't built to accommodate hordes staying for lunch, and where hundreds of kids are crammed into airless, poorly-lit basements with decibel counts like rock concerts.

Some health experts warn such scenes — with children eating in shifts while wearing snowsuits and sometimes sitting on floors — undermine the province’s claims about the importance of well-being and mental health.

“The message is that mealtime doesn’t matter, it’s just a pit stop and, by the way, hurry up,” says [Carol Harrison](#), a registered dietitian from Toronto.

As a result of the stressful circumstances and din, “an otherwise hungry child may not eat,” which means they won’t be fit to learn.

Longtime advocate Theresa Pastore says what’s needed are supervision standards and designated funding for lunch staff, so it’s not up to boards’ discretion.

Until then, parents should ask their school councils and school board parent advisory committees to push for lower ratios and creative solutions, says Pastore, executive director of the non-profit [Parents Engaged in Education](#).

“We have to look at the whole day for our kids,” says Pastore, whose organization stresses the importance of students academic, physical and mental health and well-being.

TDSB trustee Marit Stiles adds that time out of the classroom is also a critical part of every student’s day and their school experience.

“You can keep tinkering around the edges, but fundamentally we have to decide as a society how much we value education,” she says. “If it’s critical and the health and safety of our kids is foremost, then we have to invest.”

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