

Home providers say EarlyLearn overhaul leaves them in the dark

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EXCERPTS:

On a cool Friday afternoon, 10 bright-eyed toddlers played outdoors, giggling and speaking Russian, before heading inside for a homemade lunch. During the week, they spend more time with Iraida Tkacheva, their child-care provider, than they do with their working parents.

Tkacheva has transformed nearly every room in her Bensonhurst house to cater to the children's needs: an area with tables and chairs where the toddlers eat, a library full of children's books, a nap area surrounded by walls plastered with educational posters, and a backyard that accommodates toys for playtime with security gates and enclosed circuit cameras to ensure the children's safety at all times.

Yet once the mayor's ambitious overhaul of the city's child-care system takes place on October 1, through a program called EarlyLearn, Tkacheva and hundreds of people who offer subsidized child-care in their homes are set to lose their jobs if funding falls through.

EarlyLearn – one of Bloomberg's latest education reforms before he leaves office next year – sets out to increase the quality of publicly funded early childhood education while distributing child-care slots to the neediest neighborhoods. It is, according to some advocates, the biggest change to the city's child-care services in 40 years.

Criticism of EarlyLearn has focused on the fact that it reduces the overall number of early childhood seats. But another major change – about who the city is hiring to provide child care in private homes – has some child-care advocates concerned. Until now, home providers who work with small groups of children have largely been part of networks that manage and oversee everything from the instructional activities that help children prepare for kindergarten to the meals that are served. Under EarlyLearn, they will become an offsite component of day care centers that, for the most part, have only served older children in a single location.

The EarlyLearn contracts that the city's Administration for Children's Services issued last month stripped existing family care networks of seats. And half of the day care-based networks that won contracts have never provided family care services before.

ACS officials said they preferred networks that offered both family care and center-based services so children can move seamlessly over time within the same program.

"Our goal in all of this is to have as little disruption to the families as possible," said Myung Lee, the deputy commissioner of the Child Care division in ACS. EarlyLearn restricts the age of children in family care – after a child turns 4, they are expected to attend a day care center.

But family care advocates said that the new contracts will introduce inefficiencies because inexperienced networks will have to do the work that existing networks have been doing for decades. Two of the networks that didn't get contracts, the Jewish Child Care Association and the East New York Family Child Care Center, have been providing family care more than four decades.

"We are devastated and perplexed over why the city would eliminate family child care networks, given the fact that they are a vital and essential part of the early childhood system in this city," said Andrea Anthony, the executive director of the Day Care Council. "The majority of care for children 3 months to 2 years old is done by family child care providers."

The changes to the city's subsidized child-care system could cost about 2300 family care providers their livelihoods if they aren't hired by the networks that received the new contracts.

"We've been in this business for over 40 years. I really don't understand the situation," said Almarie McCoy, the executive director at the East New York Family Care Center. Since finding out that the center lost ACS funding, McCoy has been helping the providers she works with fix their resumes and practice their interviewing skills. "We're trying to prepare the staff for employment elsewhere."

Carol Grant, who works for the East New York Family Child Care Center, said that she also has no idea what will happen to her once her network closes at the end of June.

"I would lose employment, which means I wouldn't be able to pay the bills. It's my primary employment," she added. "It's going to affect everything." Grant has a 14-year-old with special needs and is in the process of adopting a 2-year-old.

Grant said that she would be less concerned if she had more information about the transition.

"I reached out to ACS to find out what is going to happen to us, but no one gave me an answer. They're going to have a meeting to meet us," she said. "But nothing concrete has been told to us."

City officials said they expect a smooth transition because the new networks are likely to try to hire existing family care providers, who already have relationships with children and homes that are set up to provide care.

“It’s up to the providers to decide which network they’re going to affiliate with,” said Lee. An ACS official explained, in an email, that open houses to match family care providers with networks will take place late June through July. But the city hasn’t set exact dates or locations for the open houses.

For some, the information is streaming in too late, and getting high-quality family care programs up and running by the new contracts’ Oct. 1 start seems likely to be problematic.

“I have no faith that [the city] will do something in a very seamless, efficient manner,” said Tammie Miller, the Child Care Providers Chair in the United Federation of Teachers union. “I think four months is too short. When you look at the enormity of what the networks have to do, it will be shoddy at best in four months.”

In addition to hiring new providers, the networks will have to rework their curriculum and retrain providers for EarlyLearn’s toughened academic expectations.

“I feel uncomfortable. It’s not so easy to switch from one network to other,” said Tkacheva. “I don’t know their requirements, their rules, their regulations.”

Still, Tkacheva said she has high hopes she’ll find a new network during the transition period and continuing to serve just as many children in her home. But she said she’s not looking forward to the rocky months ahead.

“It wouldn’t have been so bad for ACS to meet with providers and ask our opinion about the transition and how we feel, and what we can improve,” said Tkacheva. “I know I do a good job. I help children to succeed in the future.”

- reprinted from *Gotham Schools*

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