

Cornell professors question Bright Horizons daycare service ^[1]

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Source: The Cornell Daily Sun

Format: Article

Publication Date: 19 Nov 2012

EXCERPTS:

Some professors are questioning whether the University should retain ties with Cornell daycare provider Bright Horizons Family Solutions, a for-profit business that is expanding, despite having come under fire for regulatory violations.

Bright Horizons provides daycare services to Cornell's Ithaca campus and Weill Cornell Medical College. In 2010, faculty urged President David Skorton to cut ties with Bright Horizons for violating 56 state child care regulations, overworking its teachers and overcompensating its top management. Skorton, however, decided to renew the University's contract with Bright Horizons - a decision that some professors say they remain unhappy with.

Citing past problems with Bright Horizons, Prof. Sydney van Morgan, sociology, said she finds Bright Horizons' relationship with Bain Capital - which took the company private for \$1.3 billion in 2008 - problematic. The University should not use the services of a corporate company when there are several other childcare institutions in the Ithaca community, he said.

"Is that really the kind of company that Cornell wants to be working with, as opposed to IC3, the local childcare center, which is public, not-for-profit and run by a board of parents?" van Morgan said. "Why not have that model?"

Prof. Stephen Morgan, sociology, said that, after Bright Horizons was found in violation of several regulations, he withdrew his daughter from the Cornell Child Care Center, which is managed by Bright Horizons, and sent her to the Ithaca Montessori School. He added that his son, who was also enrolled in the Cornell Child Care Center at one point, has also been withdrawn from the center.

"We regretted our decision to send [our son] to the Cornell Child Care Center, rather than keep him enrolled at IC3," Morgan said.

Echoing the concerns Morgan raised, Prof. Gail Holst-Warhaft, European studies, said that she sent her children to Horizons, a downtown daycare facility, which was "a good decision for us."

Holst-Warhaft also said that she has heard "a number of reports of complaints" from parents about how Bright Horizons has managed the Cornell Child Care Center.

"The bottom line is quality, and that's what concerns the parents at Cornell," she said.

Like van Morgan, Holst-Warhaft said that she thinks "it's inappropriate for a daycare to be for-profit."

Questioning why the University has relied on the services of Bright Horizons, Holst-Warhaft said that "[Ithaca is] a fairly successful town in terms of childcare, [and the non-profit ones] we do have are high-quality."

Faculty at other colleges have expressed concerns similar to those of van Morgan, Morgan and Holst-Warhaft.

At the University of California at Berkeley, more than 80 parents are petitioning against the school hiring Bright Horizons to manage its child care center, according to the Daily Californian.

Prof. Janelle Scott, education and African American studies, U.C. Berkeley, said that faculty members at Berkeley were not been included in the decision-making process leading to the school sealing a contract with Bright Horizons.

"For the past few weeks, we have been engaged in a battle to get transparency for how this proposal was reached," Scott said. "[Finding out about Bright Horizons] caused great concern for us, because if the primary reason for bringing in the company was to address our [child care center's] safety violations, then why would we go through a company that ... has had its own safety issues in the very recent past?"

Scott's concern mirrors that of Holst-Warhaft, who said she thought Cornell's decision to continue using Bright Horizons' services "was made with insufficient input from parents."

Despite complaints raised by some professors, others said they fully support the University's relationship with Bright Horizons.

"A woman from Bright Horizons came to my home once and took care of my child, and it was fantastic to be able to do what I needed to do without having to worry about ... my child," said Dr. Rache M. Simmons, a physician at the Weill Cornell Medical Center. "It allows our faculty and our staff to have affordable childcare close to where they work, and that's really a huge deal."

Simmons said she is not concerned about the company's ownership, or its ties to Bain Capital, as long as her children receive proper care.

"Bright Horizons is an entity that does this all over the country, and it's something that they do very well," she said. "There's no reason that

we would want to go independent."

In a memo written in November 2010, Skorton said he had hopes that the childcare center would be "widely recognized as an excellent program."

"I believe we are on our way to achieving that aspiration [and] the campus now needs to come together," Skorton wrote.

Administrators have also noted that, since the Faculty Senate raised its concerns about the quality of care being provided by Bright Horizons, the company has sought to improve its services.

Morgan acknowledged that, after the Faculty Senate issued its recommendations to cut ties with Bright Horizons in 2010, the company "improved to a degree that they had the support of many of the parents who were sending their kids to the center."

Still, Morgan said he stands by the Faculty Senate's original proposal to cut ties with the company.

"I've paid very little attention to whether or not they're doing a good job or a bad job now, [but] they were doing a terrible job at one point and even they recognized that," he said.

-reprinted from the Cornell Daily Sun

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