

Decision on child care irks service providers ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

A coalition of child care operators says the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board has unfairly cut it out of a contract.

The YMCA, Today's Family and three other service providers have come together to protest a decision by board staff to award child care for the city's youngest public school students to Umbrella Family and Child Centres.

Umbrella was created in 1987 as an arm's-length agency of the board, and its volunteer board of directors is chaired by longtime trustee Judith Bishop. She didn't respond to The Spectator's requests for comment.

"When you make so drastic a change, it should be open to a more public process," said Wayne Powell, a board member for the Waterdown District Children's Centre, also part of the coalition. "At no level have parents been consulted about changing this."

In fact, the decision was made solely by board staff. It doesn't require trustee approval.

Child care in the city's public elementary schools has been offered on a school-by-school basis.

That means a single organization, such as the YWCA or Kiwanis Boys and Girls Clubs, typically provides a range of services to students under 12 at any given school.

Under the new system, however, Umbrella will run all before- and after-school programs for students in the most lucrative age range - kindergarten to Grade 2.

Although other providers will have to give up that group, the board expects them to continue programming for older and younger children in some schools.

The result, said Powell, is a fractured system that could have two, even three providers offering services at a single location.

"It goes against the whole philosophy of seamlessness," he said. "We're basically aghast over why they want to break it up."

Expected to be fully implemented by 2016, the change could also negatively affect the ability of organizations to tailor programs to the needs of individual schools and neighbourhoods, noted Today's Family CEO Marni Flaherty.

"It's going to fragment our system even more," she added.

School board superintendent Sharon Stephanian and Umbrella executive director Janis Webster both disagreed, saying seamlessness can be defined in multiple ways.

"When we talk about seamless education and care, we talk about a variety of partners who are working together to support the family so their experience is seamless," Webster said. "That doesn't mean the people involved are going to be the same."

The decision is a second hit for service providers already struggling to make up for the half- and full-day programs lost alongside the rollout of full-day kindergarten. The financial impact, noted Nicki Glowacki, vice-president of community operations for the local YMCA, is "huge."

"That's a prime age group," she added. "That's the age category that parents want their kids in child care because that's the age they can't be on their own."

This year, around 13,300 students are enrolled in kindergarten, Grade 1 and Grade 2 at Hamilton public schools - that's roughly 57 per cent of school-aged children in the system eligible for care.

But lost revenue isn't the only issue. The coalition is also critical of how staff's decision was made, saying it lacked transparency.

"Decisions were made and we were not consulted," said YWCA CEO Denise Doyle. "More importantly, neither were families and children - and these are the people we're providing services to."

"Why Umbrella?" added Flaherty.

When The Spectator asked that question, Stephanian said Umbrella was established in response to a need for child care. Its sole business, unlike the other providers, is offering child care to students in HWDSB schools.

"Umbrella has been our preferred provider for a number of years, this isn't new," she said.

Stephanian also noted the selection was "not meant in any way, shape or form to suggest that our providers have not been delivering high quality programming."

"In our model, we actually see a role for everyone, and all of the providers we're currently working with, we want to continue working with them," she said.

The arrangement, Stephanian added, isn't unique. Other boards in Ontario also have arm's-length child care organizations and follow a similar model.

For instance, Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic Child Care Services Inc. is responsible for administering programs in all but one of the city's Catholic schools. However, trustees do not sit on its board of directors and the agency has always operated independently of the school board - both financially and in terms of governance.

According to both Webster and Stephanian, the Umbrella decision was made by board staff, independent of trustees. Bishop wasn't involved, nor was trustee Lillian Orban - another member of Umbrella's board.

Umbrella's bylaws require at least two members of its volunteer board of directors to be either school board members or employees.

Board chair Tim Simmons said trustees were made aware of staff's decision at an information session last month. Neither Bishop nor Orban could be reached for comment.

The Ministry of Education said the decision was exempt from public tender and procurement processes, because the rules don't apply to school boards entering into a contract with a public body or nonprofit organization, including not-for-profit child care operators.

Umbrella and the other service providers are all not-for-profits.

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