

# New public preschools threaten St. Louis private day cares <sup>[1]</sup>

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**Source:** St. Louis Post-Dispatch

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 20 May 2015

## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

On Friday, Lisa Jackson will shutter Les Beaux Enfants, the day care her mother Jeannett Cloyd founded 39 years ago and expanded into two storefronts on Union Boulevard.

She'll pack up hundreds of photos of young children displayed on the bulletin board of the lobby, some of them posed with their mothers who attended the day care when they were babies. She'll decide what to do with the surplus miniature tables, infant cribs and play kitchens stored in a classroom that has sat unused for more than a year.

She has already told staff who have been there for decades to find new employment.

The story of the center's decline is shared by many other licensed child care providers across the city.

Jackson and others say a drastic expansion of free early childhood education programs by St. Louis Public Schools has robbed them of hundreds of children.

The situation is exacerbated, Jackson said, by an increasingly slow application process for state child care subsidies that has made it easier for parents to send children to the school district's programs. Children from her center have mostly gone to Lexington Elementary School.

At Honey-Bee Plus, a child care center in the Dutchtown neighborhood, owner La Gwenda Sims said she's expanded her care to infants and night shifts to try to make up for the losses in enrollment.

And at the New Northside Child Development Center, attendance is down by more than a third despite an advertising campaign and other outreach efforts.

Rodrick Burton, pastor at the child care's affiliated New Northside Missionary Baptist Church, said parents are choosing to move their children to nearby Herzog Elementary School even though that preschool is neither licensed by child care regulators nor accredited by state or private organizations that focus on quality.

From June 2013 through June of last year, the city of St. Louis lost 500 licensed day care slots, mostly to center closures and downsizing, according to the organization Child Care Aware of Missouri. A survey of centers that closed indicated nearby public school early childhood programs had driven them out of business.

The child care providers say administrators at St. Louis Public Schools promised early on to work in partnership with the independent providers so this would not happen.

The providers said they wanted to develop collaborative models found in other cities between school systems and independent providers. Those models included sharing teachers or placing public school preschoolers in existing child care centers. At the very least, they hoped the city schools would send children they couldn't serve to private preschools.

"They have waiting lists," Jackson said. "They could have just partnered with the centers."

About a dozen child care providers are set to voice their concerns to invited elected officials at 7 p.m. Tuesday at New Northside Missionary Baptist Church's community center at 5939 Goodfellow Boulevard.

Providers also have extended an invitation to members of the St. Louis Public Schools Special Administrative Board.

Paula Knight, an assistant superintendent overseeing early childhood for the school district, said Monday she was surprised by the criticism, noting the school district commonly refers parents on waiting lists to its "neighborhood partners."

The school district currently has a waiting list of 700 preschoolers. It has free preschool programs in 44 neighborhood schools serving 2,200 3- and 4-year-olds.

Child care advocates say when licensed centers close, neighborhoods lose infant and toddler child care slots, and parents may be forced to quit their jobs or find less safe and reliable care.

"They just have to understand that it's really hurting the families in the long run," said Dawn Winkler, executive director of United 4 Children, an early childhood support agency.

The expansion of free preschool programs by the school district began five years ago. As early as 2012, independent centers such as the accredited Hilltop Child Development Center saw a 40 percent drop in enrollment, and began sounding the alarm that centers were at risk of failing.

The school district's preschool expansion was initially funded by a \$21 million settlement of a legal dispute over desegregation funds in the city schools. Soon the program will be funded through a new law enabling free preschool to be delivered through the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to underperforming school districts.

Knight said she's unsure if the city will receive more money through the new state funding and declined to speculate whether the district would further expand its free preschool classrooms.

St. Louis Superintendent Kelvin Adams has previously said that he hoped the district's new preschools would draw in children who were getting no other form of structured early childhood learning.

But advocacy groups such as United 4 Children and Child Care Aware of Missouri say the majority of children who went into the city schools were bled out of established child care centers.

On Monday, Knight said she could not track whether the district's preschoolers were coming from centers or from situations where they previously had no formal early childhood program.

But she said city public schools were by no means cornering the market - serving just 2,200 preschoolers of the 21,000 young children under 4 living in St. Louis.

"We're just one entity that's trying to provide a service for well over 20,000 children," Knight said, noting the children who have attended the program are scoring well on standardized tests as they move through elementary school.

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-reprinted from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

**Region:** United States <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** public management <sup>[4]</sup>

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**Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022):** <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/15/05/new-public-preschools-threaten-st-louis-private-day-cares>

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