

CHANGES TO PRE-K PROGRAM COULD AFFECT LOCAL CHILD CARE PROVIDERS

By: Virginia Terhune • Thursday, Feb. 17, 2011

Private Bowie and Mitchellville child care providers are expecting a possible increase in business if Prince George's County school officials decide to cut back on the number of hours the system offers free pre-kindergarten care for low income and at-risk children.

And competition for those students will likely increase with the opening of a privately run Goddard center that is currently being built in Bowie.

"It's the first Goddard school in Prince George's County," said franchise owner Nita Armstrong, who is building a 10-classroom facility on Old Annapolis Road at Woodcliff Road west of state Route 197.

There are about 200 home-based providers in the Bowie-Mitchellville area, according to Debra Walker, who runs a child care business in her home in Bowie and also heads the Professional Child care Providers Network of Prince George's County.

In recent years, home-based providers have lost customers partly as a result of the recession, when people who lost jobs stayed home to take care of their children.

But also a factor was a decision by Prince George's County public schools to set up — at no cost to parents — an all-day program for low-income and at-risk children ages 3 and 4 to better prepare them to enter kindergarten.

"I know some people who have gone out of business," said Walker, citing Cresthill Baptist Child Development Center and the Bowie Therapeutic Center that recently closed in Bowie.

Local market conditions could soon change again, however, because school superintendent William R. Hite Jr. has proposed cutting the full-day pre-K program to a half day to save \$10 million. The school board is set to vote on the idea on Feb. 24 as part of Hite's proposed 2011-2012 budget.

If going to a half day is approved, it could be a boon for local providers, Walker said.

"That's going to open it up for people who work all day, because they're going to have to find child care for that extra half day," she said.

However, some providers said they might not be able to benefit from the change, because it means they might have to pick up children midday and bring them back to their houses, something some providers are not equipped to do, said Mary Ellen Young, owner of Young Care Family Child Care in Bowie.

"I'm not one who is willing to wake up napping babies," said Young, who would be required by state regulations to bring the children she takes care of with her if she had to pick up another child.

Going to half day could also mean new expenses for low-income parents in the school system's free pre-K program, because they would now need to find and pay for private care for half a day.

Also affecting low-income families is the state's decision to temporarily suspend Maryland's Child Care Subsidy Program, which issues vouchers to low-income families to help cover child care costs.

Anyone who applies to the program after Feb. 28 will now be put on a waiting list, because of cuts in funding and an expected increase in applicants as parents find jobs in the improving economy.

"It's going to be a dilemma for parents to figure out what they want to do," Young said.

Headquartered in King of Prussia, Pa., Goddard centers offer care for infants, toddlers, pre-school and young school-age children and are operated by independent franchisees under license agreements.

The Bowie school will be able to serve a maximum of 141 children from 6 weeks old through 4 years old, said Armstrong, who plans to hire 20 to 25 staff members, including a director. She declined to disclose financial details about the project.

Because nearly 200 people have already contacted her for information, she is hosting an open house to meet residents, answer questions and accept enrollment applications from 4 to 8 p.m. on Monday at the CrossFit Bowie fitness center on Woodcliff Road across from the school site.

Armstrong asks that people RSVP by e-mailing BowieMD@goddardschools.com.

Although she lives in Montgomery County, Armstrong said she decided about four years ago to open a Goddard school in Prince George's County because she had heard through friends that there was a need for one.

She will be entering a Bowie-area market that includes a variety of for-profit child care operations, including other franchised centers as well as the network of providers who offer child care in their houses.

Home-based operators are licensed through the state and can receive free training in curriculum and child development from the state as part of an effort to better at-risk kids for kindergarten.

"When kids with readiness skills go to kindergarten, it puts them so far ahead of the game," Young said.