



Board of Directors Meeting

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Pinellas agency cuts child care subsidies for fourth-graders and above

By Keyonna Summers, Times Staff Writer

The Early Learning Coalition says a shrinking budget and more demand forced the change.

CLEARWATER - The parents of about 635 school-age children in Pinellas County must find different after-school services following cutbacks by the county's Early Learning Coalition to state child care subsidies for the working poor.

The group has been subsidizing child care for kids through age 12, or about the sixth grade. But beginning Aug. 22, the first day of school, the group will cut off services to children after the third grade. However, it will continue to serve older children who are under protective custody and whose families are on welfare.

The change comes after an emotional 11-4 vote Thursday by the coalition's board of directors. Board members say a shrinking budget and growing demand made the cuts inevitable.

"We're dropping the ball on 3,600 kids now," board chairman Ken Peluso said, referring to a waiting list of local children.

"We're the Early Learning Coalition. I'm not saying after-school care (for older children) isn't a priority. By all means, it is. We just don't have the money to fund it and it's not our function."

The coalition serves about 7,000 low-income families and pays child care providers subsidies of about \$3,700 annually per child, said executive director Janet Chapman. But its budget hasn't grown beyond \$30 million in at least a decade.

Peluso said the situation will worsen if the Florida Legislature adopts a subcommittee's recommendation to cut school readiness funding by 11 percent.

As it stands, nearly half of the coalition's funding - 46 percent - goes toward school-age kids, Chapman said. The remaining 54 percent currently benefits children from birth through age 5, the agency's target population.

"Ultimately the primary goal of the school readiness program is to prepare children to enter kindergarten ready," Chapman said.

That's why the coalition earlier this year formed a task force of education experts to research which age group that early learning has the greatest effect on.

Service-slashing options presented to the board Thursday included restricting services to children up to kindergarten or age 5; or through the end of first grade, about age 7; or through third grade, about age 9.

Heated discussion

The proposal rankled community members, who attended Thursday's meeting by the dozens to hear more or speak out against the cuts. One speaker was Pinellas-Pasco Public Defender Bob Dillinger, who noted that most crimes committed by juveniles occur after school between 3 and 7 p.m.

"I don't need any more business," Dillinger said. "I have more than I can handle."

However, after much emotional and heated discussion, board members settled on the third-grade option. The coalition's task force said providing services at least through third grade is crucial. That's because the gains made through early intervention services from birth through kindergarten might be lost without follow-through services to at least age 8.

Chapman said it's unlikely that the reduction in services will totally eliminate the waiting list of nearly 3,000 children age 9 and under currently seeking Early Learning services. But she said it will free up space for younger children who research shows need it most.

Some board members said they were torn as they reluctantly voted for the cutbacks because, they said, they had no better options. One board member couldn't decide and abstained from voting.

"For every infant or toddler we pull off the wait list, we're going to be pulling two (older children) out of after-school care," said board member and acting Juvenile Welfare Board chair Martha Lenderman. "I think we are going to end up with kids being left at home or even worse, looking after young siblings."

She voted no Thursday.

However, Peluso and other board members pointed to their task force's findings that other local programs are available for older children.

"The simple answer is the responsibility for what happens to those children is going to remain in the hands of the parents," Peluso said, adding that many school-age child care providers have other funding sources that might allow them to continue services.

"It's a tough decision," Peluso said. "I hate turning any parent away. But what I hate more is telling the parent of a 3-year-old we don't have the funds to teach their child."

"The earlier the intervention, the greater the dollar savings, money that does not have to be spent on the legal system and judiciary, et cetera."

"The better for everyone - not only the child, but the local economy and the state."

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College to buy old JWB headquarters

SPC will use the 3.7-acre Pinellas Park property for classes, labs and other health education uses.

BY ANNE LINDBERG
Times Staff Writer

PINELLAS PARK — The Juvenile Welfare Board has a buyer for its former headquarters — about 2 1/2 years after it put the property on the market.

The buyer: St. Petersburg College.

The purchase price is about \$2.5 million, which is about 42 percent less than the \$4.3 million market value listed by the Pinellas County Property Appraiser's Office. The JWB bought the 3.7 acres from Chase Manhattan Bank in March 1995 for about \$1.6 million.

The lack of buyer interest is a sign of the times, JWB executive director Gay Lancaster said. The property, at 6698 68th Ave. N., has simply sat on the market, she said, and the JWB has barely had anybody look at it.

"We are very grateful (for the sale). We think they are the perfect purchaser," Lancaster said. "This couldn't come at a better time for us to offset some of the losses we're looking at."

The JWB will use the money to help plug an expected \$5 million shortfall in the agency's budget for children's programs. SPC will use the property for classrooms, labs and other uses connected with its

nearby Health Education Center.

"It just works out wonderfully well. We're not losing it to a public purpose, and we're translating those dollars to service," Lancaster said.

The deal was expected to be final late Friday or early this week.

When SPC takes possession, it first will do about \$60,000 in minor improvements to the first floor and then lease it to National University of Health Sciences, which is in portables on the college's Pinellas Park campus, said Susan Reiter, vice president of facilities planning and institutional services. NUHS provides education in chiropractic, naturopathic and oriental medicine, acupuncture, massage therapy and biomedical science.

After that, Reiter said, the college will look at the top three floors of the 50,000-square-foot building to plan for classrooms and labs.

"We're jammed up for space in our existing health education center and have been for years. This will give us a little bit of relief," Reiter said.

Reiter said those renovations are expected to be substantial, but she could not estimate what they might cost.

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Archives Article View

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Judicial forum set for March 19

Article published on Monday, March 14, 2011

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CLEARWATER – Nine judges have confirmed their attendance at this year's Alpha Institute Judicial Forum, a program designed to inspire and motivate at-risk young men.

The 2011 Forum will be on Saturday, March 19, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., at Mount Zion AME Church Educational Building, 600 Jones St.

The judges won't be in robes. They want the at-risk young persons to see them as someone they can identify with and discuss the problems they face. When appropriate, the judges relate their own experiences, hoping to inspire the attending young men and women to overcome prejudices and to make good decisions when faced with difficult life choices, a news release from the 6th Judicial Circuit said.




The first forum was organized more than 10 years ago by Circuit Judge Michael Andrews, who recruited fellow black judges to help him address issues facing today's youths, particularly young black males, present the justice system in a positive manner and introduce himself and other African-American judges as role models that young people may choose to emulate.

The Alpha Institute – organizer of this year's forum – is a mentoring program that focuses on at-risk African-American males in middle and high school. The Institute's primary mission is to provide a sound structural program to mentor male adolescents, enhancing self-esteem, education, leadership skills, and cultural awareness.

Although the Alpha Institute's focus is on African-American males, the judicial forum is a public program that is open to the entire community. In fact, three female judges are on this year's program, which is a collaboration of the Youth Development Initiative, Inc., Alpha Institute, Inc., Pinellas County Juvenile Welfare Board, St. Petersburg College, Omicron Beta Lambda Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority.

Joining Judge Andrews on this year's program will be 12th Judicial Circuit Judge Charles Williams, Ninth Judicial Circuit Judge Reginald Whitehead, Hillsborough County Judge Eric Myers and these other Sixth Circuit (local) judges: Pasco County Judge Debra Roberts, Circuit Judge Patrice Moore, Pinellas County Judge Myra McNary, and Pinellas County Judge James Pierce.

Additional information is available by contacting Dr. Joseph Smiley, director of the Alpha Institute, at 712-5851.



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March 22, 2011

Meetings collect ideas to trim millions from Pinellas schools' budget

By Keyonna Summers, Anne Lindberg and Sabrina Rocco, Times Staff Writers

They brainstorm ideas at district meetings, and even agree to open their own wallets.

Some Pinellas County parents told district officials Monday they are ready to pony up their own money to help combat an anticipated school funding shortfall of up to \$86 million next year.

Keeping old textbooks and streamlining bus procedures were among other cost-cutting suggestions of dozens of parents and teachers who attended "budget community input" meetings at six schools Monday night.

The ideas will be turned over to the district staff, which is exploring ways to slice at least \$34.6 million from next year's budget.

But if state legislators approve Gov. Rick Scott's proposal to cut statewide education spending by 10 percent, Pinellas would have to cut as much as \$86 million, or \$780 per student, officials said. That's on top of the \$118 million they've cut in the past five years through measures including school closures, mergers and a hiring freeze.

"It's a tough year ahead," said Michael Bessette, the district's associate superintendent of facilities, operations, safety and security, and moderator of the Dunedin High School meeting. "It's important for us to get input from as many venues, from as many people, as we can. Nothing is too far out of the box."

Staffers will post the compiled community input gathered Monday night on the district's website, pcsb.org.

Many of the ideas matched those already being tossed around by district officials, including:

• More aggressively advertise to community groups that school space is available for lease for private events.

• Reduce busing costs through measures like a bus hub or an agreement with the Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority.

• Move middle- and high-school students to a four-day week and incorporate virtual classes into their schedules in an effort to cut down on costs for air conditioning and heating, lunch and bus fuel.

Several parents and teachers suggested scaling back to the bare bones essentials of reading, writing and arithmetic, and cutting out extras like sports, music and drama.

"I have students who don't even know what two-plus-two is, but they can tell me every sports statistic," Azalea Middle

School teacher Rachel Morrison told 50 to 60 people who attended the meeting at Seminole High School.

Critics countered that extracurricular activities often are the only things that keep students in school.

At Dunedin High, several of the roughly 30 parents and teachers in the audience nodded in agreement as multiple speakers pushed for implementing activity fees for sports and other extracurricular activities.

"Junior varsity and varsity - 20 to 25 kids per squad - there's a lot of money to be had," said Laura Gilroy, whose sophomore son and senior daughter attend Clearwater High School. "I'd be more than happy to pay \$20 and know it's going to stay completely with my team."

Veatrice Farrell, who said her children will attend county schools next year, was among about 40 people who showed up at Thurgood Marshall Fundamental Middle School. She suggested the district pool its money with that of the Pinellas County Juvenile Welfare Board because their programs overlap, she said. Farrell acknowledged that legislative action would be needed to eliminate the JWB and merge the two.

Several teachers and parents said the district might gain small pools of money by trading in \$2,500 computer-based Smart Boards for cheaper chalkboards, making do with old furniture or eschewing new textbooks.

"We're getting new textbooks all the time. It doesn't look like math has changed in the last four or five years," said Orange Grove Elementary School physical education teacher Gary Curtis.

Some audience members, however, said the district had waited too long to conduct the meetings.

The district began making cuts years ago, and it was clear early on that more cuts would be needed, the critics said. The district should have started planning earlier.

Pinellas Park Elementary School music teacher Kristen Schibener cautioned that requirements for more technology or a four-day week might burden economically disadvantaged parents and students.

For example, she said, many Pinellas Park Elementary students live in local motels. Florida Department of Education data shows 78 percent of students at that school receive free or reduced-price lunch - often an indicator of poverty.

"Some of my students really are their own parents, unfortunately," Schibener said.

Bessette said the district is focused on reducing costs in a way that is equitable for all students.

District officials joked that Bill Harting, a Clearwater resident whose daughter is in second grade at Dunedin Elementary, stole their closing with his admonishment to parents.

"If you are unhappy about the spending being done in schools, you need to contact your legislators and make your voice heard - loudly," Harting said. "Also, we need to get rid of this concept that all taxes are bad. We need to pay for basic services. I'm willing to pull money out of my pocket to pay for our schools."

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Political posturing not about kids' welfare

The commissioner's letter sounds politically calculated but not sincere. Now he's interested in children's services? During Commissioner Welch's six years as Finance & Audit Committee chair

at the Juvenile Welfare Board, dozens of neighborhood centers were defunded.
Joseph Weinzette, Tarpon Springs

State rankings improve for most providers

BY MICHELE SAGER
The Tampa Tribune

TAMPA — The free preschool program paid by for the state is doing a better job preparing children for kindergarten, according to the latest state rankings.

The Florida Department of Education recently released its annual scores for centers offering the



Compare VPK centers scores at TBO.com search VPK.

Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program, which allows all 4-year-olds to attend preschool at no cost.

The results show that about 10 percent of Hillsborough County's 426 VPK programs were considered low-performing, down considerably from last year, when nearly a quarter of the programs in the county ranked poorly.

The scores show that 44 Hillsborough County VPK providers — 10.5 percent — scored below 140 in the 2009-10 school year, compared with 81 the year before. The state scores the centers on a

More VPK centers pass test

Centers that provide voluntary prekindergarten programs saw a marked improvement, according to the latest ratings from the state Department of Education. One exception is Pinellas County, which saw an increase in low-performing centers.

Hillsborough County

2009-10 low performers: 44

2009-09 low performers: 81

Pasco County

2009-10: 10

2008-09: 15

Pinellas County

2009-10: 27

2008-09: 15

Preschool

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scale of 0 to 200, and centers that fall below 140 this year are deemed low-performing. The scores are based on how students perform on readiness tests given in the first 30 days of kindergarten. Centers repeatedly deemed low-performing are at risk of losing state money for VPK.

The improvements mirror a state trend. About 12 percent of about 6,000 providers across Florida scored as low performers, a slight improvement from last year when the state average was 15 percent.

Fourteen repeatedly low-performing providers across the

state are at risk of losing their funding. None are in the Tampa Bay area.

Pinellas was the only county in the area not to see an improvement. This year, 9.8 percent of providers were low-performing, up from an average of 5.9 percent last year.

Steward Greenberg, director of the state's Office of Early Learning and Just Read program, credits communication for helping boost rankings.

"We worked very hard to communicate with the providers what is expected of them, and what children need to know to be prepared for kindergarten," he said.

State officials held meetings with struggling providers and gave them concrete examples of

expectations for children entering kindergarten. For example, students entering kindergarten are tested on letter recognition, so providers are encouraged to incorporate that into their curriculum.

Dave Rogoff, director of Hillsborough County's Family and Aging Services, said detailed planning with VPK directors and staff helped turn things around at many of the VPK programs run by Hillsborough County. Last year, nine out of 16 programs were listed as low-performing, now just four are low-performing.

"Our goal obviously is to get all the scores up, but we are very pleased with what we have seen," Rogoff said.

The county reorganized staff

and brought in additional resources to help staff meet expectations, he said.

But critics of the state's ranking system say the scoring is flawed. They say it doesn't consider children with special needs who don't do well on testing or those who attend private school who aren't required to be tested when they enter kindergarten.

Anita Maurer, preschool director for Sydney's School for Autism in Tampa, says her school's improved ranking has more to do with statistics than academic changes. The school landed on the low-performing list last year with a score of 114. This year, the school scored a 188.

"We really didn't change anything," she said. "We use the

same staff and the same programs."

She said a greater number of her students last year went on to public school, giving the school a greater statistical chance of higher-performing students getting tested.

Maurer said she fears the way VPK centers are evaluated will reduce creativity in preschool programs.

"What's happening is that preschool programs are teaching to the assessments the way public schools teach to the (Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test)," she said. "That's going to hurt a lot of really good programs out there."

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