

Mount Olive school board vote causes financial woes for child care center

- By PHIL GARBER Managing Editor

MOUNT OLIVE TWP.— Four decades ago, a group of parents and educators were concerned with the dearth of quality child care in the area and formed the Mount Olive Child Care & Learning Center.

But recent decisions by the Board of Education have pulled the financial rug out from the center, forcing it to reconsider its programs. Since opening in 1976, the center has served more than 8,000 kids in half-day pre-school, before and after school programs and parent education programs.

The board voted 5-4 on March 13 to award a one year contract for the district's before and after school programs to AlphaBEST Education Inc. of Lewisville, N.C. The contract includes three annual renewals, at the district's choice. The programs will be offered at the Sand Shore, Tinc Road, Mountain View and Chester M. Stephens schools and the middle school.

The Mount Olive Child Care & Development Center has provided the service for the last 31 years, charging a sliding fee based on a family's ability to pay. Funds from the before and after school programs represent a major part of the center's budget.

Melissa Harper, the chief financial officer for AlphaBEST, said the company has replaced other community programs and is sensitive to parents and staff.

"We'll make sure it all goes smoothly," Harper said.

The board said contracting out the service will save the district money.

"We will have to relook at our whole business plan," said Steve Rattner, a longtime member of the board of trustees of the private, non-profit child care center. "We'll survive for a certain period of time." Under the vote, the winning bidder, AlphaBEST will pay the district 12 percent of the revenues it collects. It cannot charge more than current fees for the first year of the contract.

The before and after school program serves around 300 children, 5 to 14 years old who cannot be at home while parents are at work. The program provides recreation and education activities with certified teachers.

In another measure, the board rejected bids to run the district's K-Excel program, which also has long been administered by the child care center. The board decided that the program will be operated by the district, another financial blow to the child care center. K-Excel provides half-day, literacy support for kindergarten-age children.

Board President Elizabeth Ouimet did not return several calls for comment.

Voting in favor of awarding the contract to AlphaBEST Education Inc. were Rhonda Lake Cohen, Mark Werner, Brian Schaechter and John Kehmna. Voting against were Ouimet, Bill Robinson, Anthony Strillacci and Antoine Gayles.

Formed In 1986

The before and after school program was created in 1986 as a joint effort by the district and the child care center. The drive was led longtime president, Barbara Melveger. Gail Reuther has been the executive director since 1982.

The center is located on Wolfe Road in Budd Lake in the former public library. The center continues to pay \$113,000 annually to lease the building from the township.

Rattner said losing the funds for the before and after school and K-Excel programs will be a major blow to the center. The two programs combined bring in about half of the center's total revenues.

"It's going to be tough," Rattner said. "Alpha is a very large regional organization and they're trying to break into New Jersey."

AlphaBEST has before and after school programs in several states but this will be the first in New Jersey. It was founded in 2005 as a subsidiary of Kaplan Early Learning Co. in Lewisville, N.C. The parent company has 51 to 200 employees and reported revenues of \$10 million to \$25 million per year, according to the Glassdoor.com website, a job and recruiting website.

AlphaBEST has after school programs in Maryland, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Virginia and West Virginia. The company also runs enrichment programs in Randolph, Florham Park, Chatham and Morristown.

“We pride ourselves for being an educational company whose sole purpose is before and after school programs,” said Harper.

Harper said kids are offered homework help as well as programs in STEM (science, technology, engineering, math), world languages, art and sports and fitness.

Fees are at or below those currently charged by the Mount Olive Child Care & Development Center. The fees will be posted at the AlphaBEST website. Registrations will begin on April 3.

Families pay weekly fees on-line, directly to AlphaBEST. Discounts are offered for siblings (12 percent), children who are enrolled on free lunch programs (15 percent) and children of military members (15 percent). Children of Mount Olive school district employees get a 25 percent discount. AlphaBEST also will accept subsidies provided by the state.

Children attend the before and after care program in their regular schools. Transportation is not provided. Before school programs begin at 6:30 a.m. while after school programs end at 6:30 p.m.

Harper said each before and after school location will serve up to 50 children with a 1:15 ratio of staff to students.

The company also plans to hire 26 to 30 staff members as recommended by each school’s principle and families of students currently enrolled in the before and after school programs.

Judy Nee, CEO of AlphaBEST Education, served as president and CEO of the National AfterSchool Association from 2004-09. The association is for professionals who work with children and youth in school and community-based settings to provide extended learning opportunities and care during out-of-school hours. In 2014, the association named Nee as among the “Top 25 Most Influential People in the After School Field.”

Nee also served as the chair of the Coalition for Science After School, a consultant to the Noyce Foundation, and a board member of the Florida Afterschool Network and Child Trends.

The Mount Olive child care center has a staff of more than 60 people and an annual budget of \$1.7 million. It is accredited by the National Association for the Education of young Children (NAEYC).

Last year, the Preschool Advantage program awarded its “Golden Acorn Award” for exemplary quality in preschool education to the Mount Olive center. The Golden Acorn Award is based on five points of quality in preschool education including teacher and child interaction, curriculum, family involvement, staff qualifications and professional development and management of the school.

The Board of Trustees for the center includes, Melveger; Karen Thompson, vice-president; Rattner, treasurer; Erin Thompson, secretary; and Paulette Munley, Bob Casey, Patrick Bent, Judy Buell, Mary Lalama and Mike Pocquat.

The center’s Advisory Council includes former Mount Olive Police Chief Mark Spitzer; Gene Buczynski, engineer, Van Cleef Engineering Association; Attorney Patrick Dwyer; Leslie Smith, Jr., executive vice president for development, Rockefeller Development; and Tracy Pepe, environmental health and safety manager for Givaudan Fragrance.