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Preschools Weigh in on Economy

By T. R. Audley

Prior to 2008, Lamorinda parents were known to register their young children on the first day of the preschool enrollment period. They willingly completed numerous applications and paid non-refundable fees to secure a spot at one of their top choice schools. Many of the preschools in Lamorinda agree that times have changed. While the importance of early childhood education is understood and valued in our communities, local preschools are feeling the effects of competition for family dollars as a result of current economic conditions.

"We have noticed quite a change. We've had decreased enrollment in our twos program by half. When I first came to this community five years ago people were placing their kids in preschool at age 2 instead of 3. Now that trend seems to be reversing," reports Connie Kellaher of The Nurtury in Moraga. Due to a lack of enrollment, Kellaher had to close one of her twos classes last fall. Other preschools also report changes to their part-time programs.

Meg Taggart-Wright of The Child Day School in Lafayette sees the business side clearly. "The economy is definitely having an effect on part-day schedules. Operating margins are small and reductions to class size are felt quickly," says Taggart-Wright. Like many schools, The Child Day School belongs to professional associations which provide schools with industry information. "I've heard of possible hikes in licensing fees as well as cutbacks to state funded early education programs," reports Taggart-Wright. Such costs could be more than many schools can bear.

"It feels like I'm in quick sand," says Ruth Kaiser, owner of Tot Drop in Lafayette. Tot Drop is an appointment based center where parents pay hourly instead of monthly. "With our program, parents have free time when they need it," reports Kaiser, who grew her business to seven different locations over 15 years due to high demand for her services. "I know it will be good again, but for us to survive and serve the community, we simply need more business," says Kaiser. Kaiser closed her Walnut Creek Tot Drop center for an entire day last week due to low enrollment.

Filling open spaces during the school year is not new for preschools. But as Marilyn Ragan of Diablo Valley Montessori School reports, "Waitlists which would traditionally have worked to fill open spots are just not as long." Nevertheless, with increased available housing in the area, new families are moving to Lamorinda and some schools are benefiting. Carol Carter at St. John's Preschool in Orinda reports a recent increase in interest. "I am shocked by how many calls I've gotten in January," says Carter. Four new children started at St. John's last month.

Other schools also give positive reports while recognizing the change around them. Dot Feist of Joyful Beginnings Preschool in Lafayette says that her school raised tuition this year and really hasn't noticed any change. "We've been really blessed," Feist admits.

Thus it may not exclusively be the cost that is prohibitive. If it were, one might see a rise in applications to cooperative preschools where program fees are low in exchange for parent participation. Time is money, however, and many families seem to have less of either to spare. Enrollment is down at The Orinda Preschool and they are considering changing classes to make up for budget shortfalls. In past years at Lafayette Nursery School, parents lined up outside to register for the small, hands-on cooperative program. This year, only two

applications came on the first day of enrollment.

Statistics and studies show that early childhood education is advantageous for future success in school. However, it seems that many Lamorinda families have yielded to economic pressures when considering education for preschool aged children. Connie Kellaheer says socialization is the main goal that parents have for younger preschool aged children. "I get a sense that parents are feeling they can accomplish socialization through playdates," says Kellaheer. As with many of our local businesses and private schools, the economic effects of 2009 will remain to be seen.

Jean Follmer contributed
to this article.

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