

Two for-profit pre-schools among three joining govt scheme

Move will help to inject 'innovative ideas' into sector: Chan Chun Sing

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[SINGAPORE] Three pre-schools – including two for-profit outfits – have been chosen to be part of the government's expanded Anchor Operator Scheme, giving a significant boost to the number of childcare places available over the next three years.

First launched in 2009, the scheme offers funding support to selected operators to increase access to quality and affordable early childhood education – especially for children from lower-income families or disadvantaged backgrounds.

EtonHouse International's E-Bridge Pre-school, Kinderland Consortium's Skool4Kidz and Metropolitan YMCA's MY World Pre-school now join PAP Community Foundation and NTUC First Campus's My First Skool as anchor operators, taking the number of selected pre-schools to five. All have been appointed for five years.

A total of 16 pre-schools applied to be part of the scheme, after the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) called for proposals in June last year.

The new appointments will go some way in achieving the government's aim of creating 20,000 new childcare places by 2017. Collectively, the five anchor

operators are expected to provide around 16,000 additional pre-school spots by then.

In selecting two for-profit childcare centres for the scheme, the government has made a distinct departure from its previous eligibility criteria, under which operators were required to be not-for-profit bodies.

Noting that for-profit operators "should not (be) ruled out" if they can provide affordable, accessible and high-quality childcare services, Minister for Social and Family Development Chan Chun Sing said yesterday that having a diverse group of operators would help to inject "innovative ideas" into the sector.

Just as MY World was chosen for its strong sense of social mission, ECDA said, E-Bridge's strengths lay in its robust curriculum, while Skool4Kidz exhibited an outstanding commitment to the professional development of teachers.

Mr Chan added that safeguards have been put in place to ensure that government funds are not squandered. E-Bridge and Skool4Kidz are newly created legal entities, separate from EtonHouse and Kinderland, respectively. They will be subject to routine audits to ensure compliance with the Anchor Operator Scheme rules.

Added Mr Chan: "I think they have made the commitment that the profit motive cannot be their No 1 objective. They're selected because they want to serve a

higher goal, which is to provide quality development opportunities for our young children."

In exchange for the preferential allocation of choice HDB sites at subsidised rentals, and recurring government grants to offset costs such as teachers' salaries, anchor operators must not charge more than \$720 per month for a full-day childcare programme. That means fees will be capped at rates much lower than the indus-

try median, which stood at \$830 in December.

They must also serve the needs of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, through the disbursement of scholarships and other assistance initiatives.

Enrolment for the new centres will begin when the first anchor operators' centres come up in the second half of this year. ECDA said that the focus would be on high-demand estates first; these include Woodlands,

Punggol, Sengkang, Tampines, Bukit Panjang and Jurong West.

While Mr Chan said that it would be "too premature" to say whether more anchor operators would be added in the future, he did not rule out the possibility of that happening.

He added that additional announcements on manpower development plans would be made "in due course", with a focus not just on attracting more people into the sector, but also on retaining them.



Going in foot first: Pre-schoolers of NTUC First Campus's My First Skool, one of the five chosen pre-schools under the Anchor Operator Scheme. FILE PHOTO

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