GCSD approves contract with Victory Child Care

by Melissa Hale-Spencer

GUILDERLAND — More than two years after the Guilderland School District, faced with declining enrollment, sought ways to contend with empty classrooms, the school board Tuesday agreed to a contract with Victory Child Care.

Come September, the Albany-based preschool, founded by Victory Riedy, will teach 3- and 4-year-olds in six Guilderland classrooms — two each in Altamont Elementary School, Pine Bush Elementary School, and Farnsworth Middle School.

Superintendent Marie Wiles said, when she last spoke to Riedy, she had 40 "firm" commitments of children for the new Guilderland program. "She hadn't advertised yet," said Wiles.

The board ratified the contract by a vote of 8 to 1.

The Enterprise — Michael Koff

Victory Riedy *gently coaxes a child in her Fed Club program in Albany. Her Victory Day Care will run classes in Guilderland classrooms this fall; the school board approved the contract on July 5.*

Teresa Gitto, who assumed office in the meeting before the vote, cast the sole dissenting vote. She had not been part of the years-long process that ended with the decision to host a private pre-Kindergarten program.

Gitto said that, while she approved having the preschool classes in the elementary schools, she did not believe the middle school was an "appropriate facility" for them.

Last month, parents and staff from Pine Bush Elementary School had submitted a petition, falsely claiming the board reached decisions "behind closed doors" and requesting that the two preschool classrooms at Pine Bush be placed in the "red pod" rather than the "blue pod" as planned — the pods are clusters of classrooms. The blue pod has kindergarten classes and one of the concerns parents raised is that the kindergartners would be distracted by the nearby preschool classrooms as well as by a playground for the preschoolers, visible from kindergarten windows.

At Tuesday's meeting, Bonnie Schultz, a Guilderland alumna and resident of the district, told the board she had read about the Pine Bush objections in The Enterprise, and that she thought the child-care program was "absolutely essential."

At a June 21 session at Pine Bush Elementary School, Superintendent Wiles had stressed that, while the rental of the six rooms will bring in $195,000 over five years, minus $17,000 in start-up costs, the central goal was not to make money but rather to repurpose space in order to keep all five neighborhood elementary schools open.

A consultant hired by the district to study excess space had recommended closing an elementary school. Public outcry caused the board to set aside the consultant's recommendations and led to task-force committees researching various ways to repurpose the excess space.

Schultz had volunteered to work with a repurposing committee. In her public health job, Schultz said, she had visited six times in the past month the program that Victory Riedy runs, called Club Fed, in federal building in Albany. She called it a "vibrant program" and said she learned a lot from the teachers there.

Schultz described the curriculum as "robust," and said that activities, using multi-sensory perceptions, were constantly changing.

Quelling fears that the children would be disruptive in Guilderland schools, Schultz said she had seen them "parade in and out of the federal building" without any disturbance. "It's all about the expectation set," she said.

Schultz spoke of the importance of early learning and concluded of having Victory Child Care in the Guilderland schools, "This is just the perfect pairing."

Another concern raised by Pine Bush parents was that, if an extra kindergarten section were needed, there wouldn't be room near the other kindergarten classes. Superintendent Wiles promised in a letter to the Enterprise editor, published on June 30, that such a class would be placed in the blue pod with other kindergarten classes.

Before voting on the contract, which was drafted by the school district's attorney, the newly elected vice president of the board, Christopher McManus, questioned contract language allowing "provision of pre-K instruction and associated child-care services."

"Infants with cribs, we don't want here," McManus said.

The district's assistant superintendent for business, Neil Sanders, responded that the licensing was solely for 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds.

McManus also noted that, while Pine Bush parents had raised concerns about parking, it was not in the contract.

"Correct," said Sanders. Plans for parking, Sanders said, may need to be refined "as we go along."

He noted, too, that the district would provide no nursing care. "If they have a serious issue, they dial 9-1-1," he said.

Victory Child Care, Sanders said, works under a stringent set of regulations, over 100 pages in length, overseen by the state's Office of Children and Family Services.

McManus said he'd like to see concerns raised by Pine Bush parents addressed on the district's website He said of the contract, "I don't want people to see this and think we ignored their concerns."

Later in the discussion, McManus said, "My own son has been through two years of pre-K." There, McManus said, his son received services to help him with speech so he won't need those services when he gets to kindergarten.

Sanders concluded, "We dictate things that happen on our premises." There will most likely be refinement and change he said, concluding, "We need flexibility."

"This vote tonight is the culmination of a lot of hard work by a lot of people," said board member Gloria Towle-Hilt." We were stuck with a problem," she said. To solve it, she went

on, "Members of the Guilderland community were involved every step of the way."

"It's been a very collaborative process," said board member Catherine Barber. "I also feel good about this occurring."

"I think it will be a great addition to the district," concluded the board's newly elected president, Christine Hayes.

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