

## **Special Ed: Nowhere To Go**

State Education Department officials insisted this week that "an orderly transition" was under way, but parents of about 30 preschool special education children from Montauk to Bridgehampton were not at all sure about where their 3 to 5-year-olds will go to school this summer and in September.

The Eastern Suffolk Board of Cooperative Educational Services decided last week to close the doors of its 20-year-old preschool special education program in Westhampton Beach on June 30. The action, anticipated and postponed for more than three months, returns preschool children with disabilities to their school districts for placement.

"We haven't heard from any school districts about trouble placing children," said Bruce Schachter of the Education Department's regional office in Lindenhurst. "There are other programs available."

### **Hope For New School**

Not so, said at least one East End school board president, John Wyche of Bridgehampton, who broke the news Monday to his board and a roomful of parents.

"It's not comfortable or fair for the state to push individual school districts to deal with this program," he told them.

As to what's in place for these children, said Mr. Wyche, "Right now, we have nothing."

One of the districts' and families' hopes is that the state will move quickly to approve the Child Development Center of the Hamptons. For almost two years, the not-for-profit group has been organizing a preschool in East Hampton for children with - and without - disabilities. Its capacity will be 60 students, including some who might come from farther west or the North Fork.

### **Await State Approval**

The development center, headed by Dawn Zimmerman of Amagansett, has received state approval for a small portion of its program - teachers who visit children with special needs at home or in day care centers.

**However, it is awaiting the state's seal of approval for its main offerings, including an evaluation center for prospective special education students and "special education classes in an integrated setting," meaning together with nonhandicapped children.**

**Mr. Schachter said the state must also review the center's budget and approve its leased quarters, at the former Most Holy Trinity school building on Meadow Way.**

**The center is raising funds to build its own facility on land leased from the Town of East Hampton on Industrial Road. Ms. Zimmerman said she hoped to break ground in the fall.**

### **Can't Miss Classes**

**Mr. Schachter declined to be pinned down on when the new school might appear on the state's "approved" list. A review of its application was to have taken place this week by telephone, he said, with a site visit by Education Department officials likely "within the week."**

**East End school officials in East Hampton, Springs, and Sag Harbor all told The Star this week that a number of students - those who must go to school year-round to avoid losing ground - will need placement by July 1. One Bridgehampton parent told Mr. Wyche at Monday's meeting that her daughter regresses after a single week without classes.**

### **Alternatives**

**"I thought the BOCES school would stay open for another year," said Ms. Zimmerman, adding that she has received calls from roughly 35 families "since last week."**

**Ms. Zimmerman said she has been interviewing for the last two months to hire a faculty of 24 full-time teachers and aides and three administrators. She said she had received a number of resumes from the BOCES program's faculty.**

**Besides the development center, parents and districts can look to one other South Fork facility, the Education and Therapeutic Center of St. Charles Hospital in Southampton, which can accommodate about 25 more children.**

**Also, Just Kids, a Wading River facility, has a branch program in Riverhead.**

**The BOCES decision, based on recommendation by its Superintendent, Dr. Edward Milliken, came as a result of a projected \$1.5 million shortfall in the program's budget this year.**

**BOCES officials have said lower reimbursement rates for professional services and delayed payments from the state caused the deficit. State officials, however, claimed the program was too expensive and cited teacher salaries averaging more than \$80,000.**

**The staff salaries at the Child Development Center will likely be a lot lower, but fiscal constraints are inevitable. Tom Connors of Amagansett, a founder and board member, said the center was conducting a corporate and individual fund-raising campaign and hoped to raise enough to plug any loophole in government reimbursements.**

### **Wide Support**

**He noted that transportation costs for East End students - now averaging \$2,000 per month per child to the Westhampton Beach facility - would be vastly curtailed, with parents transporting their children locally, or local school districts providing busing.**

**Mr. Connors said the program had received widespread support from school districts on both Forks as well as from public officials, including Congressman Michael Forbes, Senator Patrick Moynihan, State Senator Kenneth LaValle, Assemblyman Fred W. Thiele Jr., and the East Hampton Town Board.**

**"We want to help the local community," said Mr. Connors.**

**SUSAN ROSENBAUM**