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TODAY'S PAPER ▶			
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Tufts day care change criticized

Parents unhappy with switch to for-profit firm

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JULY 24, 2014



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Tufts University's announcement that it soon will hand over management of its long-running campus day-care center to a national for-profit company has triggered an outcry from parents and some college faculty and staff.

Critics said they fear the switch of the Tufts Educational Day Care Center to a Bright Horizons Family Center, starting Sept. 1, might diminish the quality of child care at the decades-old center, which runs a year-round,

full-day program for about 80 children from 2 years, 9 months old through kindergarten.



Many also said Tufts made the move, which the college announced last week, without adequate outside feedback or warning and left little time for families to enroll children at other day cares, most of which filled their spots for the coming school year months ago.

“It’s kind of like if Tufts all of a sudden said, ‘Hey, incoming freshmen, we’re going to hand over management to a for-profit university,’ ” said Kristen Zecchi, a Tufts staff member whose 5-year-old daughter attends the day care and who had envisioned her newborn son attending one day. “Students and parents would be so angry. Could you imagine?”

Parents who oppose the change have created a [Facebook page](#), “Save TEDCC,” and plan to march Thursday to Tufts president Anthony Monaco’s office to protest the decision.

Tufts faculty and day-care center staff have written letters opposing the move. The state attorney general’s Consumer Protection Office said it has received six complaints this week about the management change.

Scott Sahagian, Tufts’ interim dean of arts and sciences, broke the news to parents in a letter last week. It said university administrators have struggled to manage the center “in accordance with the most current regulations, industry standards and best practices, and in the most fiscally responsible way.”

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‘For colleges that are looking at tight budgets, it’s an easy way to save some money.’



He said by phone Wednesday that child care is not Tufts' forte and that a recent university review found "some internal issues with the center." He declined to detail them.

From an administrative perspective, "Bright Horizons can do a far better job, where 100 percent of their attention is to the staff, parents, and children of that center," Sahagian said.

"My primary concern is the children at the center," he said. "I know parents may feel this flies against that, but I believe this is the best thing for the children and the center."

"We want to assure families that we are committed to maintaining what they love and value about the center, first and foremost the educators who care for their children and have built an outstanding early childhood program," Mary Lou Burke Afonso, head of center operations for Bright Horizons, said in a statement.

Tufts is joining a growing number of colleges and universities across the country getting out of the increasingly expensive child-care business. Many colleges started their own day-care centers decades ago to recruit and retain students who have children.

"For colleges that are looking at tight budgets, it's an easy way to save some money," said Pamela Pallas, an early childhood development professor at the University of Florida who directs the campus's child-care center.

Several local colleges have retreated on plans for their centers following backlash from parents.

In February, [Boston College](#) scrapped a proposal to move a longstanding campus school for children with disabilities and merge it with an off-campus hospital-run school. Parents agreed to work with BC to explore ways to boost enrollment and fund-raising.

This spring, Regis College in Weston nixed plans to shutter its entire child-care center, but it still will end its kindergarten program.

At Tufts, Sahagian said he does not anticipate children or parents, many of whom are university employees,

will see significant changes.

Sahagian said the day-care tuition — \$19,440-a-year — will stay the same this year; parents can withdraw for a full refund. Existing staff will lose Tufts' benefits, but they are being offered the same salaries and Bright Horizons' benefits.

Tufts and Bright Horizons officials declined to say how much the company will pay to lease and run the facility.

For the past two years, Ryan Wheeler has enrolled his 3-year-old son, Leo, at a Bright Horizons day care at his employer but had planned to have Leo transfer to the Tufts day care in September.

“We haven't been unhappy with Bright Horizons, but we were really looking forward to sending him to the Tufts center,” he said. Parents of other children at the Tufts day care “have attributed their children's social skills and coping skills to their attendance.”

Now, Wheeler said he might cancel plans to have Leo switch.

“One of the things Tufts prides itself on is its commitment to social justice and giving back to the community,” he said. “But this is really antithetical to that.”

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