

End of the line for GTCC Children's Center

By John Newsom

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After more than three decades, Guilford Technical Community College is closing its on-campus day care center.

The GTCC Children's Center has cared for the preschool-aged children of GTCC students, college faculty and staff members and Guilford County residents since 1979. It has a five-star rating from the state.

But the college says enrollment has slumped and the center isn't bringing in enough money to stay open. It will close June 30.

"It's supposed to be a self-sustaining entity," GTCC President Randy Parker said in a telephone interview Tuesday. "In the last several years it has not been self-supporting. If it's not going to support itself, we don't have other money to continue to pour into it."

Some parents are dismayed at the center's demise.

Karen Sylvester, a High Point parent whose 4-year-old daughter remains at the center, said it has provided good care and had little staff turnover. Many of the teachers who cared for her son, now 13, 10 years earlier still worked there when Sylvester enrolled her daughter there.

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For years the college used tuition payments from parents to keep the center going. Monthly tuition charges for all-day care range from \$725 and \$820 per child. In recent years, GTCC has used state and federal grants to make up budget shortfalls.

According to GTCC records, the 2011-12 academic year was the last time the center's revenues outpaced expenses. The center lost money in 2012-13 and again last year — even after the college pumped in nearly \$67,000 in grant subsidies two years ago and \$79,000 more in 2013-14.

The center ran a deficit last year of \$104,412. The college covered the shortfall by dipping into the center's fund balance.

The reason for the financial trouble? Enrollment is too low.

The center is licensed to care for 61 preschool children between the ages of 6 weeks to 5 years. The college says the center needs 56 children to remain profitable.

But enrollment hasn't been above 50 since at least 2011, when 46 children were enrolled, according to the college. Enrollment dropped to 41 last year.



Parker said there's not as much grant money available to run the center. The center's fund balance has declined by 50 percent since 2011, and Parker says the college might have to spend the remainder — \$145,000 as of November — to keep the center open through June 30.

“We are saddened to have to close the day care center after 35 years,” Parker said. “But it is a business decision for the college.”

Parker notified parents in September that the college was reviewing the center's finances and were thinking about closing it.

The center's director put together a proposal to offer after-school care for older children. Parker said college officials rejected the plan as unsustainable.

Some parents explored other options to keep the center open and unsuccessfully lobbied college trustees at their December meeting. Trustees voted in January to close the center at the end of the academic year.

Enrollment sagged, meanwhile, as parents learned about the potential closure and sought child care elsewhere. The center was down to 30 children in October and 22 in November.

As of Monday, the Children's Center had just 11 children and five employees.

“It wasn't because (parents) wanted to leave,” Sylvester said. “They wanted to find quality care to take care of their children.”

Although parents understand the center's precarious finances, Sylvester said she and some others are disappointed in the way the college handled the process. They said they got little information from college officials, were rebuffed in their attempts to meet with Parker (though they did meet with a college vice president in October) and did not know that trustees had scheduled a vote on the center's fate until shortly before the December board meeting.

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“I think we all felt like the way it went down didn’t reflect the values the community college allegedly holds itself to,” Sylvester said.

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GTCC CHILDREN'S CENTER

Enrollment (counted in October)

2011: 46 children

2012: 48

2013: 41

2014: 30

Profit/loss

2011-12: \$24,623

2012-13: -\$28,576

2013-14: -\$104,412

2014-15: -\$34,870

Note: 2014-15 numbers are as of November
