

Stepping Stones Learning Center abruptly closes

Board cites 'difficult decision'; parents say they 'feel like we were defrauded'

WILL CLEVELAND

@WILLCLEVELAND13 AND MEAGHAN M. MCDERMOTT @MEAGMC

There wasn't just sadness on Thursday evening when parents of students at Stepping Stones Learning Center gathered to learn about future options for their children with developmental disabilities.

There was outrage and anger over the way the abrupt closing of their kids' school on Hudson Avenue in Irondequoit was handled.

"We got nowhere," said Luanne Marsh, a mother of two young boys with autism. "We all know it was the board of directors and the mismanagement of funds. They refused to acknowledge it. They've known for months, maybe even years, that they were headed down the wrong path. But nothing was done."

"I feel like we were defrauded," added Scott Marsh, Luanne's husband.

"But the other agencies are amazing," Luanne Marsh said. "They are stepping up and helping us."

The school's board, in a statement, said, "Our commitment and dedication to the children in our care and the families we serves is what brings us to a difficult decision regarding the future of Stepping Stones Learning Center. As of today, Thursday, June 29, 2017, Stepping Stones will permanently cease operations as a result of financial necessity."

The center, a nonprofit organization, opened in 1994 with just nine students, but has endured a turmoil-filled month since its founder and CEO, Mariellen Cupini, was suspended by its board of directors and then fired in May.

According to state inspection records, Connie R. Rodriguez was listed as the acting director and the center's license was listed as valid as recently as Wednesday. Rodriguez declined to speak to the media Thursday as the school shut its doors.

After considering the findings of an operations statement, the board said it had no choice but to close. A statement from board chair Gregory George said, "We have determined the best course of action is to help families we serve understand their options and to help them transition to other supports available in the community for the care and services they need."

Since the beginning of the year there were five state inspections at Stepping Stones, whose website says it worked with 500 families. Violations were found each time. Results of a May 30 inspection are listed as "pending" on a state website.

Most of the violations are marked “corrected,” but some are not. Those include violations related to disciplining, interacting with or toilet training children with methods that “frighten, demean or humiliate a child.”

There also were two uncorrected citations for failing to notify the parent and the state Office of Family and Child Services “upon learning of the death, serious incident, serious injury, serious condition, communicable illness, or transportation to a hospital of a child which occurred while the child was in care at the program or was being transported by the program.”

According to OCFS, a serious incident “includes any event in which a child requires medical attention other than routine illness, is left without competent supervision for any period of time, or leaves the program without an approved teacher or designated person.”

According to the organization’s most recently available tax filings for 2015, the center had revenues of \$6.2 million and expenses of \$5.9 million. Total assets were listed as \$6 million, versus \$5.1 million in liabilities.

What’s next for all of those families with kids with special needs? Now they need a new school. Mary Cariola Children’s Center, 1000 Elmwood Ave., could pick up the slack. Its website says it has more than 350 students from 10 counties and 600 full- and part-time staff.

At a parents-only closed-door meeting Thursday evening, parents were presented with options, but many were unsatisfied by the answers they received. Other providers, including Mary Cariola Children’s Center, School of the Holy Childhood, the Rochester YMCA and Happiness House, were present at the meeting.

Colleen O’Connell, an Ontario, Wayne County resident, has three boys under the age of 13 who attend Stepping Stones.

“It’s baloney in there,” O’Connell said. “The kids aren’t being taken care of.”

Parents said many employees would not be paid for their work in June. Efforts to reach the school’s board for confirmation were unsuccessful.

“I’m losing my service coordinator tonight,” O’Connell said. “She walked out without a job. I’m hearing in there that staff has not been paid for the past three weeks. They are here working because their babies are in there.”

Luanne and Scott Marsh said it will be most difficult to tell their sons, ages 3 and 7, that they can’t go to Stepping Stones anymore.

“The shame is that my kids didn’t get a chance to say goodbye,” Luanne Marsh said. “That’s the hardest thing, they didn’t get to say goodbye.”

“It’s like they didn’t understand that kids with autism, they just can’t transition on a dime,” Scott Marsh said. “They have absolutely no way to cope with this.”

WCLEVELAND@Gannett.com MCDERMOT@Gannett.com

