

3 new pre-school anchor operators chosen

BY LIM YI HAN

COMING soon to a neighbourhood near you: More childcare centres offering more affordable rates.

In exchange for lower childcare fees, three pre-school operators will be given government help, such as rental subsidies and priority in securing Housing Board premises for new centres.

The three operators are EtonHouse International Education Group's E-Bridge Pre-school, Kinderland Consortium's Skool4Kidz and Metropolitan YMCA's My World Preschool.

They are the first to qualify under the Government's enhanced anchor-operator scheme which was announced last June to include commercial operators and voluntary welfare organisations. The scheme attracted 16 applications.

As anchor operators, they have to keep fees below \$720 a month for full-day childcare.

All three will adhere to this pricing guideline for their future centres.

Kinderland Consortium aims to have two new Skool4Kidz centres by July, as part of the 25 centres it targets to open in the next five years. EtonHouse plans to open 40 new centres within the same period.

Together with existing anchor operators – NTUC First Campus' My First Skool and the PAP Community Foundation – they are expected to provide about 16,000 pre-school places by 2017.

All five have a tenure of five years, starting from this year.

The Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) said yesterday that the three new anchor operators were selected based on their track record, and their ability to meet demand and offer good-quality and affordable programmes.

It also looked at whether the organisations had professional-development opportunities for teachers, as well as a "social mission", and were able to provide for low-income families.

Minister for Social and Family Development Chan Chun Sing said: "We want a sector that is vibrant with innovative ideas, a sec-

tor that is not here because of money, but because of a higher social goal to raise the standard of education and development for our children, to extend a helping hand to those who are less fortunate."

Parents planning to send their children to these new centres should expect a more pared-down curriculum due to the lower fees.

For instance, the new Skool4Kidz centres will not feature Kinderland's physical-education, music and creative-arts programmes, said director Jane Ching-Kwan.

But, she added, they will follow curriculum guidelines set by ECDA.

Kinderland currently charges \$1,200 per month for full-day childcare at its existing centres.

NTUC First Campus chief executive Chan Tee Seng acknowledged that this presented more competition, but "the situation now is (that) there is more demand than supply".

Lawyer Safa Zahedi, 30, who has two children, aged four years and three months, said: "There's



MORE AFFORDABLE RATES: Pre-schoolers at EtonHouse's pre-school centre in Mountbatten. EtonHouse's E-Bridge Pre-school, a newly appointed anchor operator, will keep fees below \$720 a month for full-day childcare. PHOTO: ETONHOUSE

a high chance that it is a positive thing. The perception of EtonHouse is that it's a premium brand. But it depends on how the

schools implement the curriculum, and the kind of facilities and activities they will have."

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