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Three more pre-school players get 'anchor operator' status

New operators, including private ones, must keep fees low in return for aid

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PARENTS can look forward to big-name private operators setting up more childcare centres in the heartland and charging a fraction of their current fees, from as early as July.

Three more pre-school players have been appointed anchor operators under a scheme that requires them to keep fees affordable in return for government subsidies.

They are: EtonHouse International's E-Bridge Pre-school, Kinderland Consortium's Skool4Kidz, and Metropolitan YMCA's MY World Preschool. The first two are private operators, while the third is a non-profit organisation.

The operators, which have been appointed for a tenure of five years, were the first to qualify for the expanded anchor operator scheme announced last year to include private players for the first time. The expanded scheme attracted 16 applications. Previously, the scheme was open only to non-profit organisations and the anchor operators were NTUC's My First Skool and the PAP Community Foundation.

The five anchor operators are expected to provide about 16,000 more childcare places by 2017. This year alone, at least 45 child-

care centres will be built island-wide, of which 33 sites have been set aside for anchor operators.

Minister for Social and Family Development Chan Chun Sing presented certificates of appointment to representatives of the five anchor operators yesterday.

Mr Chan gave the assurance that "the fees will be affordable to parents". Anchor operators' monthly fees for a full-day childcare programme cannot cost more than \$720. The industry median as at last month was \$830. "I think they've made a commitment that the profit motive cannot be their No. 1 objective," he said, adding that there are "strict financial regulations" on the separation of the operators' accounts.

Besides providing affordable and quality programmes, he said, the selection process also factored in other key requirements.

"One was their commitment to continuing professional development of our teachers... The other was their commitment to play a part to uplift, especially, children from disadvantaged backgrounds, to give them a good head start in their pre-school development."

Senior Minister of State for Education Indraneel Rajah said the scheme is "very much in line with (our efforts in) supporting families" and underscores the importance of pre-school education.



An EtonHouse teacher conducting an art lesson. Amid the push to build more childcare centres, the new pre-school anchor operators said they face the common problem of finding enough qualified teachers. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

Amid all this, the new anchor operators said they face a common challenge in finding enough qualified teachers.

"During this transitional period when... our local teachers are still being trained, we hope to be able to get more manpower from overseas," said EtonHouse group managing director Ng Gim Choo.

The two existing anchor operators said the new players will help raise the industry's overall standards.

"The hope is that everyone tries to bring in new people from elsewhere so that the sector is built up as a whole," said NTUC First Campus chief executive Chan Tee Seng.

Housewife Ong Shi Yee, 37, who is looking for a pre-school for her one-year-old son, welcomed more choices of anchor operators. She added: "Hopefully they don't water down the curriculum just because it's going to be cheaper."

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What some new centres offer

MY WORLD PRESCHOOL

- **Operator:** Metropolitan YMCA
- **Number of new centres by year-end:** Two to three. It will charge the same fees at 11 of its existing 12 centres.
- **Fees:** About \$700 per month for full-day childcare.
- **Curriculum:** Emphasises values and character. Each centre is equipped with an electronic white board, and children can read stories or do maths on it.

E-BRIDGE PRE-SCHOOL

- **Operator:** EtonHouse International
- **Number of new centres by year-end:** Three
- **Fees:** Below \$720 per month for full-day childcare.
- **Curriculum:** Aligned with primary school syllabus. The focus is on inquiry-based learning that is centred around projects instead of sticking to a fixed timetable.

SKOOL4KIDZ

- **Operator:** Consortium led by Kinderland Educare Services and KLC School of Education chief executive Jane Ching-Kwan
 - **Number of new centres by year-end:** Three to four
 - **Fees:** \$720 per month for full-day childcare.
 - **Curriculum:** Tablet computers will be used in learning.
- Electronic reports on the children's progress are then generated and sent to the parents.

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