

Tutoring firm expelled from 7 of city's schools

By Tracy Dell'Angela, Tribune staff reporter. Tribune staff reporter Jodi S. Cohen contributed to this report

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Chicago Public Schools has yanked one of the nation's largest private tutoring firms from seven elementary schools, arguing the company is hurting children promised help under federal reforms.

Complaints about oversized classes, teacher shortages, canceled classes and administrative lapses triggered a district investigation into the New York-based firm Platform Learning, which started tutoring about 14,000 children in 76 Chicago schools five months ago in a contract worth about \$15 million. Similar complaints have been echoed in other big-city districts, but Chicago is the first to cancel Platform at problem schools.

"They have simply failed to perform, and this has hurt kids," schools chief Arne Duncan said Friday. "After-school tutoring is a hugely important part of what we're trying to do to improve student achievement."

Duncan vowed that all of the more than 1,100 children currently enrolled in Platform's program in these targeted schools would be placed with another private company or in the district's tutoring program for the remaining six weeks.

This abrupt cancellation could have major ramifications, not only for the company's national reputation in this lucrative new field but also for the district's ability to help struggling students next school year. And it highlights the challenges schools face when newly minted private companies take on some of the most challenging work in urban districts--an industry spawned by mandates in No Child Left Behind that failing schools must pay for private tutoring that parents choose.

Although the cancellation only affects schools where principals demanded a change, Duncan said he is unhappy with Platform's performance "across the board"--signaling the possibility that Platform will lose its contract with the district next year and forcing the 14,000 children now enrolled to find new tutors.

The interruption comes just two months after the U.S. Department of Education barred the district from using federal money to pay for its own tutoring program, which will force Chicago to rely even more on private firms next year. That means many of the 80,000 children now receiving extra help could be dropped from the tutoring rolls, because the district won't have the money to serve as many children with pricier, private programs.

Moreover, the 20 other private companies from which parents can choose don't have the capacity to pick up all the overflow--especially if Platform isn't an option next year.

Platform President Eugene Wade said Friday that he was disappointed by Chicago's decision. Still, he is confident his company will continue to work with Chicago schools next year.

Wade acknowledged that Platform has experienced "a few hiccups" in a handful of schools, but he said most problems have been fixed. He said the company has hired more tutors and substitutes to ensure all classes are covered and do not have any more than the 10 students per teacher allowed by the contract.

He also said the district's bureaucracy also has contributed to the logistical problems, particularly the demand that Platform keep adding pupils after the program started.

"We're in an environment where providers don't have a lot of room to be anything but perfect," said Wade, who co-founded Platform two years ago after running charter schools in New York. "There's a lot of antipathy [in school districts] for No Child Left Behind ... and there's always going to be challenges when there's change and new players in town."

Program works elsewhere

The program does appear to be working smoothly in a number of schools, based on a sampling of calls to principals.

But the problems are far from fixed at other hotspots, including Spry Community School in Little Village.

This is the time when after-school tutors start pouring it on, these last few class days before students take crucial state reading and math tests that will determine whether their schools are making enough progress to avoid federal sanctions. But recently at Spry, dozens of children enrolled in Platform classes sat in the school auditorium watching the movie "Garfield."

The reason? Six of the 11 Platform tutors didn't show--a lapse Spry's principal says is typical of the logistical and instructional problems that have plagued Platform's program since tutoring began in November.

"We saw they weren't really meeting the children's needs, and parents started to question if they were learning anything," said Principal Carlos Azcoitia, who pressed to get rid of them. "They are not equipped to deal with English-language learners. There are constant classroom-management issues. They took advantage of all the federal money thrown at No Child Left Behind, but they didn't have the organization to pull this off."

At Carpenter Elementary, a former Platform tutor said the after-school program did not deliver what it promised.

Teacher Amy Rosenwasser said that instead of developing individual tutoring plans as required for each child, tutors were told to use the same plan for each child. When teachers were absent, substitute tutors played hangman or Wheel of Fortune with pupils and classes often were combined, putting together pupils at different academic levels.

Platform Learning exploded into the lucrative tutoring market in 2003, when big-city systems nationwide were forced to offer families free tutoring at struggling schools that failed to meet academic standards three years in a row. The tutoring is funded by federal poverty grants, and parents choose from a list of approved companies.

Just halfway through its second year, Platform is one of the biggest players nationwide, serving more than 50,000 children in the nation's most challenging urban schools--including New York, Detroit, Atlanta, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Newark.

Criticism in other cities

But its explosive growth has not come without controversy.

New York City Schools, expected to pay Platform about \$35 million for tutoring in 105 schools this year, also is investigating the company for not conducting background checks on all employees and using incentives and prizes to encourage enrollment and attendance.

Atlanta schools reined in Platform's "overly aggressive" recruiting efforts. In Los Angeles, a school official said he is disappointed with Platform's performance on a pilot program launched in October.

"We're less than happy ... because you don't promise folks something you can't deliver," said John Liechty, an associate superintendent who runs the \$75 million after-school tutoring programs for the 750,000-pupil Los Angeles Unified School District. "They are coming out of the gate so fast in so many cities. I think they've bitten off more than they can chew."

Tutoring company ousted
Tutoring by Platform Learning has been stopped at seven
city elementary schools.
SCHOOL ADDRESS PROGRAM ENROLLMENT
Von Humboldt 2620 W. Hirsch St. 295
Goldblatt 4257 W. Adams St. 219
Carpenter 1250 W. Erie St. 153
Woods 6206 S. Racine Ave. 153
Spry 2400 S. Marshall Blvd. 137
Cameron 1234 N. Monticello Ave. 98
Piccolo 1040 N. Keeler Ave. 72
TOTAL 1,127
Source: Tribune reporting

