

A staff member at Ombudsman Plus alternative school in Countryside greets youths. Lyons Township High School District 204 spends taxpayer dollars to send students to the school, which lacks state approval and has been visited by police 20 times in the last year. Another Ombudsman Plus school in Waukegan also lacks state approval. ANTONIO PEREZ/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Special-ed students at risk?

State hasn't given approval to pair of alternative schools

By Lisa Black
TRIBUNE REPORTER

A west suburban school district has been spending taxpayer dollars to send troubled students to an alternative school that isn't approved by the state and has been visited by police 20 times in the last year, a Tribune inquiry found.

Police made eight arrests, the most serious for battery and sexual misconduct, at the private Countryside school, Ombudsman Plus, which serves high-school-age children with disabilities as wide-ranging as autism, mental illness and destructive behavior.

The Ombudsman Plus school in Waukegan, run by the same company, also isn't approved by the state, the Tribune found.

In response to the newspaper's questions, officials with the Illinois State Board of Education said they will examine whether two suburban school districts that contracted with the company — Lyons Township High School District 204 and Waukegan School District 60 — violated state law by placing special-education students at the private schools.

Helen Kossler, the former director of the Countryside school, resigned in the fall after five months on the job. She said the Nashville-based company that operated the school refused her requests for metal detectors or cameras and did not supply textbooks for months after school started.

Lori Smith, an Ombudsman official, said metal detectors or cameras aren't used because "that is not the kind of program we want to put out there. ... The students empty their pockets at the doors." The school, she said, did supply textbooks.

State officials said they were unsure if the Ombudsman Plus program violates state law regarding special-education placements.

"This definitely warrants a thorough review," said Mary Fergus, state board spokeswoman.

If the state finds the two school districts at fault, it would require corrective action or impose sanctions such as withholding state funding. Both districts started summer classes this week.

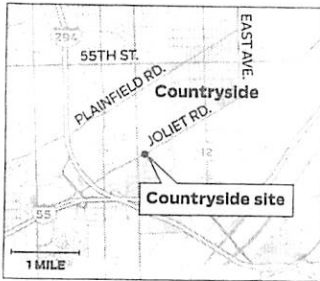
Neither district uses state funding — relying instead on federal or local tax dollars — to pay for Ombudsman.

After the Tribune inquiry, Smith said the company has started working to get state approval.

To be considered, a school is required to hire certified special-education teachers and personnel who pass criminal background checks. They also must provide ways to measure progress and offer behavior intervention policies.

Ombudsman inquired about state approval about two years ago but never completed the process, Fergus said.

Parent company Ombudsman



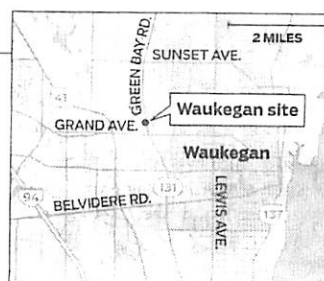
The Countryside site enrolled 26 students in grades 9-12. They have emotional disabilities, autism or mental illness.

The Lyons Township High School District contract with Ombudsman Plus was for \$705,000.



2009-10 school year enrollment

2009-10 contract



The Waukegan site enrolled 25 students in grades 6-12. Most have behavioral and/or learning disabilities.

The Waukegan school district's contract with Ombudsman Plus for the school year was for \$559,570.

SOURCES: Waukegan School District 60, Lyons Township High School District 204, ESRI, TeleAtlas

TRIBUNE

Advocates fear impact of state cuts

By Lisa Black
TRIBUNE REPORTER

Special-education advocates fear that as the state's budget crisis filters into classrooms, more school districts will skip on services to children with disabilities — or take money from regular education programs to pay for them.

While critics complain that two suburban school districts are contracting with a lower-cost private school, Ombudsman Plus, for some of their most fragile students, they describe it as a sign of the economic times.

Under federal law regarding children with special needs, school districts "have a legal obligation to try to maintain services at a certain level. Otherwise they can be sued," said Rodney Estvan, education policy analyst for Access Living

of Chicago.

He fears that districts will start to cut programs affecting all children, such as music or arts, pitting parents against each other.

Meanwhile, school districts are borrowing money while waiting for the legislature to approve a state budget and pay its backlog of bills, he said.

Others worry that more students with special needs will be placed in regular education classrooms without proper support.

On Monday, state schools Superintendent Christopher Koch issued a memo that allows school districts to request a waiver to a law requiring that at least 70 percent of students in a regular education classroom not have special needs.

"It would only be granted with great thought and consid-

eration," said Mary Fergus, spokeswoman for the Illinois State Board of Education.

Still, advocates fear regular education teachers without experience or credentials for working with disabled students could become responsible for them, said Bev Johns, chairwoman of the Illinois Special Education Coalition.

"That is a major concern, particularly when you look at Chicago, which is making the class sizes bigger," Johns said.

She also has heard complaints that school districts are refusing or delaying evaluations of children who may be eligible for special-education services.

"They are not evaluating because they don't want to pay for services," Johns said.

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Educational Services since 1975 has offered an alternative-school program to at-risk students who need to earn credits to graduate and can do so at a computer, working at their own pace under a teacher's guidance.

In 2008, the for-profit corporation branched out and enrolled the more challenging — and lucrative — special-education population with severe emotional problems by contracting first with the Waukegan district, then with Lyons Township. They are the first two districts in the nation to sign on with Ombudsman's new program, which the company is now promoting to other school districts, encouraging officials to seek federal grant money to pay for it, its Web site said.

Some special-education experts say school officials are trying to find cheaper ways to educate some of their most troubled students by contracting with a private company.

"When you start cutting those corners ... you get into a very dark place," said Matthew Wanzenberg, a special-education advocate who formerly worked for Lyons Township High School. He represented a Lyons Township student in spring 2009 who had been

referred to Ombudsman Plus. He said he was stunned to find no clinical oversight, such as a psychiatrist.

"When you start dealing with kids with very complex disabilities — autism and borderline personality and bipolar — disabilities that need to be overseen with a very high level of detail and care, I start to get very nervous about that," said Wanzenberg, whose student was placed in a more therapeutic setting.

In 2009-10, Lyons Township agreed to pay Ombudsman Plus \$705,000 to teach up to 30 students, the school district said. With other expenses included, the district actually spent \$28,846 per student, according to officials. That compares with the \$37,710 per student the district pays for an additional 21 students placed in state-approved therapeutic day schools, officials said.

School officials say students at Ombudsman are closer to moving back into regular education classrooms at Lyons Township, and do not need as intensive a setting as the costlier therapeutic day schools.

In Waukegan, the district paid Ombudsman Plus about \$560,000, with 25 students enrolled through

June, officials said.

The program has "changed and grown" over the past year, said Smith, director of special education for Ombudsman Educational Services. "I can honestly tell you from the beginning of the year to now, we have had terrific successes with the program," said Smith, who works in Libertyville. "I am not going to say it is all roses and cotton candy."

Smith said that Ombudsman Plus is geared to each district's unique needs and that Waukegan's program relies more heavily on student use of computers.

The Ombudsman Plus program does not allow hands-on discipline, including restraints, which are sometimes used in more intensive programs for students with similar behaviors.

Instead, employees call police if they fear for the safety of the students or staff, Smith said.

School district officials say the students may be difficult, but most behaviors do not require police intervention.

Ombudsman Educational Services is accredited with a national agency, AdvancED, a nonprofit organization that sets educational standards that school districts voluntarily meet to get that

endorsement.

The agency will schedule its first "quality assurance visit" to the Waukegan location within the next year, a spokeswoman said. The Lyons Township program is also applying for accreditation, an official said.

The Waukegan school made nine calls to police for help during the 2008-09 year but didn't make any over the past year, police records show.

"We work very hard to make sure we have successes," said Janine Gruhn, special-education director for the Waukegan School District. She is pleased with an 87 percent attendance rate, she said.

"We meet regularly with Ombudsman staff. (The Waukegan site) had some turnover the first year, but this year has been very consistent," she said. "I think with any new program, you have to go through some growing pains."

The district, she said, has been careful about student placements, moving students into more restrictive schools, or less restrictive settings, as needed.

At Lyons Township, special-education Director Karen C. Brown conceded that Ombudsman Plus, which has seen three administrators since opening, had a rough start. She visits at least weekly and said she is satisfied that students are getting a quality education.

Before Ombudsman Plus, many students were bused to therapeutic day schools up to 45 minutes to an hour away, and could not participate in Lyons Township High School activities. Now, she said, those students may attend a class or join extracurricular activities because of the shorter distance.

Brown was asked about Ombudsman's turnover rate — including a social worker who spent only one day on the job before quitting, school district records show. Staff turnover has been brisk; five of the seven employees at the Ombudsman for Lyons Township have been hired since January, officials say.

"When you work in the world of special education, it's ever-changing," she said. "It takes a particular type of personality to be in this field. You have to be on point at all times."

Sandee Medor, whose 17-year-old son has attended Ombudsman Plus off and on since last summer, said she has been mostly pleased.

"I think the idea is great; it is a necessity," Medor said. "Most of these kids, they don't fit anywhere."

Despite often serious emotional and mental problems, many of Kossler's students hungered for discipline and consequences, she said. The day she resigned, a student who had threatened to "get" her ran up to apologize, she said.

"I just got very, very worried about safety" at the school, she said.

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