



Alaska's Private Education Legacy:

## Description

*The Unfortunate Demise of Tom Thumb Montessori Schools*

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The writer and Margret Green award diplomas to one member of the last graduating class of Tom Thumb Montessori Schools,

A previous reduced version of this story was published August 9, 2018 in [ECHO Magazine](#)

Many Alaskan baby boomers experienced a remarkable 40-year Anchorage private education option at a school system I was proud in the mid-2000s to have attempted to save from foreclosure. I learned important insight into why Alaska Public Education is *pig in a poke* from this effort.

I also learned how local childcare regulators favor nonprofit organizations which keep truly private education options unaffordable. The goal is obviously government control of children at every phase of their development.

*Tom Thumb Montessori Schools (TTMS)* was the first Montessori School in Anchorage. In its prime, this was the largest private Montessori school in the United States—with nearly 600 students being served at five locations here, plus two locations in Boise, Idaho.

## By 2006 Tom Thumb was Dead

Today the ghosts of those schools are roaming at several day-care centers around Anchorage—which are former affiliates of TTMS—but don't tell the kids.

My experience with Tom Thumb Montessori Schools goes back to when I had a publishing and public relations company in the late 1970s, and did business with Margaret Green, owner and *Directress* of TTMS. She ran the school enterprise with an iron fist in a velvet glove.



*Montessori Method* expert Margaret Green agreed to provide teacher training at *Tom Thumb Montessori School* during the mid-2000s.

**Margaret died at age 93 in 2013. I so admired her to the end.**

How did I get myself into this mess?

Returning from Juneau to Anchorage in 2003, with a Master's Degree in Education and a Type A teaching certificate, I was substituting in the *Anchorage School District* and tutoring at *Sylvan Learning Systems*. I was in my early 50s, and looking for my next career niche.

It didn't take long in my "old Anchorage stomping grounds" before I noticed the condition of the schools Mrs. Green and her hard-working husband **Harold Green, Sr.** had built. I was shocked at how dilapidated they were!

For background: The Greens had originally come to Alaska in 1946 and homesteaded in Eagle River, to be, in Mr. Green's words: "run out by bears." He was a *New York Yankees* baseball fan and an entrepreneur. Among the Green's several successful endeavors were *Harold's Grocery*, *Harold's Hardware*, *Alaskan Electronics*, *Silver Scissors*, and *Gambell Street Business College*.

These were Frontier Alaskans Building a Future for Alaska in Private Anchorage Private Schools

When I talked to the Greens about what had happened to their once thriving schools during my absence, they told of passing on their cherished enterprise to a son and watching it go into immediate and prolonged decline. They were in palpable distress over it.

## Harold Jr. had Never Been Actively involved in the Schools.

My challenge following several meetings: *Could the enterprise be saved from imminent disaster at this late stage? Could it be returned to its Montessori roots?*

A former *East High School* chum, **Harold Green Jr.** was a privileged *University of Chicago* and *John Marshall Law School* graduate, attorney, and Realtor, in the middle of a divorce. **It was ugly.** Everything was on the line—the schools, the real estate, visitation of the children, all the assets. I entered into a written agreement with Mr. and Mrs. Green to take over and maintain the schools until the court made a decision about who gets what.

[1] Agreement With senior Greens

**The Greens trusted me and I put my heart and soul into this effort!**

**As I embraced the situation I was struck by the reality that after 50 years in business this is what it had come to, which I documented in my August 1, 2005 Report to the Board of *Montessori Creative Schools, Inc. dba Tom Thumb Montessori Schools*:**

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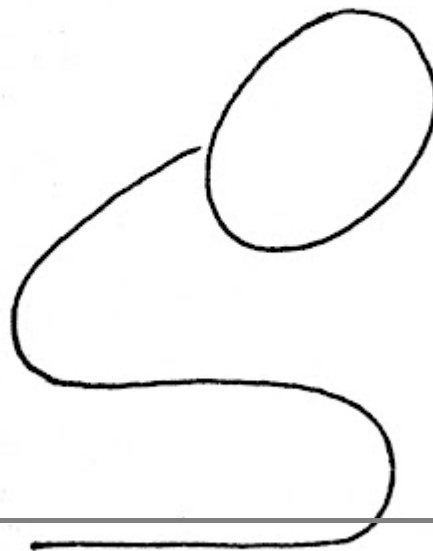
# Report to the

August 1, 2

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## MONTESSORI



Who cared about private market-based educational options for families in Anchorage? Not the MOA, not the family beneficiaries of the noble work of Harold and Margaret Green, not even the *State of Alaska Department of Education*, which had overseen this educational program and even awarded Margaret Green a lifetime teaching certificate.

## **Pillaging of the Successful Business Would be Rewarded by Government Regulators**

Harold Jr. was okay with me taking over; I was named Superintendent by the board on March of 2004 but was not able to take charge of the enterprise until October 1, 2004 due to legal wrangling by the former Anchorage MOA regulator-endorsed Administrator—in cahoots with estranged wife of Harold Jr.—**Susan Green**. Much additional damage to the enterprise was done in that final window of malevolence.

**During my year serving as Superintendent of TTMS, I was able to reopen and re-license the Mid-town school that had been shut down one year, established an authentic MOA approved Montessori toddler program in all schools, and instituted an in-house teacher training program with the best authentic *Montessori Method* instructor I could find.**

I saw the possibility of the schools returning to their previous glory and perhaps construction of a *Margaret Green Montessori Training School*. We were gaining students, I had proposed a realistic financial plan for recovery, and I was proud to have graduated the last class from the school—which included the Green's grandson, a beneficiary of the *Green's Trust Fund*.

## THE LITTLEST GRADUATE



Photo courtesy Donald Liston Sr.

Natalie Marie Fontenot, a kindergarten graduate in Jodi Roberts' class at Tom Thumb Montessori School, receives a diploma from school superintendent Donn Liston and congratulations from Margaret Green, who founded the local school in 1956 with Harold Green. Sixth-grader Patrik White gave the valedictory address at the ceremony, held May 25 at Wilda Marston Theatre.



I had not entered the teaching profession at midlife to make a killing financially. I had already worked nine years in Juneau for the teacher union, *NEA-Alaska*, and I aspired to reach students outside of unionized indoctrination factories. Even as an employee of NEA I always felt forcing public employees to be members of a public sector union was wrong. Today the law says teachers should be offered the option of joining the union—not forced to join and have their government school district serve as the bagman collecting dues and paying off the union. The *US Supreme Court* in the case *Janus v. AFSCME* has affirmed this corrupt practice to be unconstitutional even if Alaska managers of our public education industrial complex are in still denial.

[2]

I aspired to reach students who needed a good male role model and I hoped to approach the training of children and youth objectively. Having never had kids of my own I sought to learn what makes a good teacher from those who have proven themselves to be good teachers, such as my hero **Jaime Escalante**, the California Teacher about whom the movie *Stand and Deliver* was made.[3]

#### The Montessori Method

In the early 1900's Dr. Maria Montessori arrived at her system of helping children develop early independence, responsibility, and respect for others as a cornerstone for future academic success. She worked with ethnically diverse children who had been abandoned, abused or profoundly neglected. The children learned practical life skills, sensory awareness, and how to gain satisfaction from a job well done in academic pursuits. Montessori established a quality child-centered environment which is simple, uncluttered and enriched with purposeful activities geared to children's individual developmental levels. Dr. Montessori was not an authoritarian "teacher," but as a trained physician, she was much more of an observer who guided children according to their own abilities and inclinations.

When a version of the *Montessori Method* was brought to the United States from Europe by enthusiastic supporters between 1910-1918, it was adapted in ways that it's founder rejected. In total contrast to the progressive education and liberalism themes of John Dewey, these American charlatans demanded middle-class parents in this country to focus on THEIR version of Montessori academics. A flood of so-called "trainers" began selling variations of the method like snake oil cures. Upon hearing of this Dr. Montessori came over from Europe, saw how her system was being bastardized, and put an end to it here with threats of lawsuits. The education poseurs moved on to bring fad after fad of education mediocrity until today.

[4]

And, the authentic *Montessori Method* became dormant in the United States.

## Our ALASKA Montessori Legacy

In Alaska, Mrs. Green became a pioneer of the **Montessori Method** beginning in 1956, just as **Maria Montessori** herself had been a pioneer of the education of children to create the *Montessori Method* in Italy at the turn of the century. Being the first woman to graduate from the *University of Rome*, Ms. Montessori became Italy's first female physician in 1896. Over the next few years she became involved with the condition of those who were called "defective" children—first as their doctor and then as an activist who believed the deprived environment of the children was in part responsible for their condition.

*Dr. Montessori devised systems for teaching children who had been rejected by the public schools as "idiots," according to a Training Manual written by Mrs. Green. When she was able to make those **unteachable** children capable of passing the same exams given to public school children, the entire nation (of Italy) took notice."*

**To address this situation required an innovative approach to meeting the basic needs of children while elevating their cognitive pursuits. Some couldn't even talk, but they had to learn how to communicate and function in society.** Mrs. Green received instruction in the *Montessori Method* in London, from the son of Dr. Montessori. She replicated the method as closely as possible to the founder's intent. Her comprehensive book is entitled: *How To Make Sure Your Child Grows Up To Be A Winner The Creative Montessori Way*.

In explaining the philosophy of Montessori, Mrs. Green states in that book: *Maria Montessori's philosophy is based on the premise that children desire to learn from and to imitate adults. In fact, this very desire is often the cause of many conflicts between adults and children. How often are children told to look and not touch but are expected to understand such properties of matter as delicacy or durability? It's all right to drop the plastic catchup bottle, but not Aunt Faye's porcelain cup. Children are forbidden to pour their own juice because of the uncertainty of a spill, but if they never practice, how will they learn? Through the use of **prepared environment**, **three-to five** year olds are able to practice practical life skills which enable them to become confident, secure and independent learners."*

### **Prepared Environment is a cornerstone of the Montessori Method.[5]**

Many of these concepts originally introduced by Dr. Montessori are now commonplace in all of our amalgamated education system schools, where educational fads prevail—anything dreamed up is thrown against the wall to see what will stick in paint-by-number curriculum. We have now seen generations of these fads in educational theory which mostly distract from the basics of the Reading, Writing, Math, History and Life Skills necessary to be successful in modern society. Dr. Montessori likely would have rejected the unstructured, anything-goes approach, of many schools today in favor of her dignified and highly structured systems—teaching specific skills in a pedagogically sound manner.

## **The Hope of Tom Thumb**

### **The Hope of Tom Thumb**

Taking over an enterprise in the condition of TTMS with aspirations of bringing it back to its previous level of excellence was a challenge I relished. **Five schools, in four locations were the life's work of the Greens, with the headquarters in Spenard, a midtown school at midtown on Fairbanks Street, a school on Boniface Parkway, and two at O'Malley Rd and Lake Otis Pkwy.** I felt a profound sense of responsibility to those parents who entrusted their precious children to our care and enlightenment.



TTMS West Headquarters school in Spenard.



Two TTMS South Schools were located at Lake Otis & O'Malley Rd



TTMS East on Boniface near 24<sup>th</sup> Street



TTMS Midtown was closed when the writer took over as superintendent but was refurbished and relicensed as a daycare center by the *Municipality of Anchorage* during the time he was working for *Montessori Creative Schools, Inc.*

Everywhere I looked in the classrooms and play areas of TTMS I saw the work of Mrs. Green's firm but gentle inspired hands reinforced by Mr. Green's ability to efficiently maintain the facilities and make things work.

But practically I saw another dynamic at play; I was the interloper in a system run from the central office that was taking in money but declining in product quality and long-term sustainability. The primary effort was to kiss up to regulators while diverting lifeblood funds from the enterprise. This enterprise had needed a champion—who would fight for its viability—but what I had now was squeaking by and in need of program revitalization and serious upgrades to facilities.

## Regulatory Overreach = Death by a Thousand Cuts

TTMS now suffered under regulatory oversight by the *Municipality of Anchorage*, under AMC 16.5.010-.500 Child Care and Educational Facilities—Centers and Homes. The department has the power to investigate anything and everything without notice. They might be responding to a complaint, or they might just feel like today was a good day to visit TTMS. On one occasion investigators showed up at the O'Malley school as I was wearing a tool belt and helping with renovations at that school. I had to drop everything to accommodate their inquiries.

Given the pages of requirements, timeframes, and expectations, the possibility of running a viable private school is greatly diminished under the code, rather favoring church or other government-sponsored non-profit corporations. The regulations read, in part: *The department recognizes the responsibility of parents to select and monitor caregivers for their children in order to ensure a reasonably safe and developmentally appropriate childcare environment. The licensing standards and procedures in this chapter are intended to reduce predictable risk of harm to children and to provide support services to those providing child care.*

**I ask you: Are parents responsible for their kids or not?**

### Are Parents Responsible for their Kids or Not?

Since anybody can be a parent, the need to provide government oversight of child care facilities might seem reasonable. But at what point does government intrusion into a business enterprise simply because it deals with children become overkill? I was a certified teacher and all of our facilities were licensed. Our teachers were licensed and trained. Parents chose to bring their children to our facilities and we provided educational services as well as daycare. The reputation of TTMS had been damaged by the operators since regulations had replaced common sense and the Greens retired, but I was taking the bull by the horns. Shouldn't that be enough to cut us some slack?

**With Alaska public education academic outcomes at the bottom of all the states, while cost for our public education fiasco at the top among all the states, who are these bureaucrats to say what parents must endure to educate their children? With Covid many parents have discovered what their kids are learning in government education factories. They have begun pulling their children for almost any possible alternative. Wouldn't it be helpful if a meaningful and affordable private school option was available?**

Mrs. Green had fought what she felt was overregulation of her schools by the MOA. A 1990 story in the *Anchorage Daily News* describes the next round of an ongoing saga with the sensationalized headline: *Tom Thumb Fights Again*. Enrollment at that time was listed as 320. The writer of that sensationalism, **Dusty Rhodes** described the situation thus: *Whenever any agency the Alaska State Board of Education, the state Department of Education, the Anchorage borough or the municipality has attempted to add regulations that would increase her costs, Green has fought to keep her schools operating just as she established them. And every time despite the fact that the state has received significant complaints about incidents at her schools (see accompanying story) Green won.*[6]

**Every school in the Anchorage School District is subject to complaints. How often do local media sensationalize THOSE complaints?**

Mrs. Green was fighting increased costs to parents because that is who ultimately paid for childcare if she had to raise rates to accommodate government requirements. TTMS rates were stable, the program was well established, and the Muni had an obligation to help this school stay in business to serve those who chose to have their children there. Data shows the MOA and co-conspirator *Anchorage School District* have failed the families of Anchorage for a long time.[7]

Also from that story: *Margaret Green isn't against child care. She isn't against the proposed ordinance and its new regulations, either except for the one clause that would require her and her schools to meet municipal licensing requirements. Though there is nothing in the proposed regulations dictating educational philosophy or content, she says the regulations would force her schools to become merely daycare centers.*

Ultimately what Mrs. Green feared is exactly what happened to TTMS—AFTER she was no longer able to fight the fight for separation of school and day care programs. Any child care center can now incorporate parts of the *Montessori Method* and call itself a Montessori School, however.

### The Green Legacy

## The Green Legacy

Today I still marvel at how amazing it is that Alaska was the point where the authentic *Montessori Method* was reintroduced to American Children by Tom Thumb and allowed to prosper for so long. Many who attended there have been blessed.

On the other hand, this experience has caused me to lose faith that those trust fund children who have benefitted so much from commitment, sacrifice and industry of others before them will ever really care about what has been lost to everybody else. They lack any social conscience—or shame.

### References:

[1] Agreement between Harold & Margret Green and Donn Liston

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[2] Power of Alaska's Public Sector Unions, DONN LISTON October 16, 2019  
<https://donnliston.net/2019/10/a-teachers-dilemma-2019-donnliston.html>



[3] Stand and Deliver

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaime\\_Escalante](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaime_Escalante)

[4] Dewey, John. (1897). My pedagogical creed. *School Journal*. 54. pp. 77–80. Retrieved on November 4, 2011, from <http://dewey.pragmatism.org/creed.htm>

### **The school and social progress.**

For Dewey, education, which regulates “the process of coming to share in the social consciousness,” is the “only sure” method of ensuring social progress and reform (Dewey, 1897, para. 60). In this respect, Dewey foreshadows [Social Reconstructionism](#), whereby schools are a means to reconstruct society. As schools become a means for social reconstruction, they must be given the proper equipment to perform this task and guide their students.

[5] Description of the (authentic) Montessori Method

Mrs. Green’s self-published book provides an insightful overview of Montessori, with Part I explanations of the philosophy and a description of the **Adult’s role in the Montessori Classroom**: *...discipline must come through liberty. (meaning) Small children have an innate dignity of their own which is often unknowingly trampled upon by the adults in their lives who are just trying to be helpful,*” to **How to begin a Montessori Class and Safety Concepts in the Classroom**. Her learning process is formal and structured so children take incremental learning seriously.

Part II of Mrs. Green’s book includes curriculum on **Practical Life** aspects of Montessori: Lesson plans for **Care of the Person, Care of the Environment, Sorting and Matching, Food Preparation, Grace and Courtesy, and Control of Movement**.

Part III **Sensorial Material** includes lesson examples in **Visual, Tactile, Auditory, Smell, and Taste**.

Part IV **Language Arts and Writing** details innovations such as making six-inch letters of the alphabet cut from sandpaper to give a tactile component to learning for little fingers.

Part V **Math and Exercises in More Complex Operations** uses cubes and beads and group games to build basic understanding at a primary level in the brain. Through familiarization of concepts of math without onerous drills, the Montessori Method provides a foundation for higher level understanding of math.

Part VI **Science** examines **Botany** through types of seeds and leaves to examination of plant cells through a microscope. **Physics** are explored by establishing the difference between magnetic vs. nonmagnetic through the making of a compass. **Zoology** examines living vs. nonliving, plant or animal and vertebrate or invertebrate.

Part VII **History & Time** introduces the concept of time using a *Montessori Clock* manipulative. Another lesson examines the different parts of a flag in a matching game with various countries on a map. *This provides a holistic overview of time relative to place.*

Part VIII **Creative Arts including Music and Art** are instrumental to a Montessori school day. Mrs. Green was a graduate of *Julliard School of Music in New York*, and played piano at a very high level. She recommends a number of activities: *During the period under five, there is a real sense being formed in the inner being of the child. The significance of the ability to be able to match one form to another can be appreciated as the child works with the sensorial materials. The child needs to be given the possibility of observation so that as he looks around his environment he can heighten his appreciation of form,* she wrote.

[6]ADN Story

[http://docs.newsbank.com/s/InfoWeb/aggdocs/AWNB/0F78E3543050BD32/0D0CB57DF8A1C275?p\\_multi=ADNUS](http://docs.newsbank.com/s/InfoWeb/aggdocs/AWNB/0F78E3543050BD32/0D0CB57DF8A1C275?p_multi=ADNUS)

*Posted here in its entirety:*

## TOM THUMB FIGHTS AGAIN

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Anchorage Daily News (AK)-March 2, 1990

Author/Byline: DUSTY RHODES

Daily News reporter

Staff

Edition: Final

Section: Lifestyles

Page: G1

In 1956, Margaret Green opened her first Tom Thumb preschool, enrolling about a dozen children. Over the years, she changed the name to Tom Thumb Montessori Schools, expanded and added elementary classes. Now she owns and operates five schools with a combined enrollment of 320.

Otherwise, though, little has changed about the way Green operates this business. She herself has seen to that. Whenever any agency the Alaska State Board of Education, the state Department of Education, the Anchorage borough or the municipality has attempted to add regulations that would increase her costs, Green has fought to keep her schools operating just as she established them. And every time despite the fact that the state has received significant complaints about incidents at her schools (see accompanying story) Green won.

Now she's pulling on the gloves again. For decades, her schools and similar programs have enjoyed an exemption from municipal licensing. But a childcare ordinance currently before the Anchorage Assembly would, if passed, require Tom Thumb and other fullday reschools to meet the same licensing regulations that govern all local childcare centers. The assembly is scheduled to hold a public hearing on the proposed ordinance Tuesday night.

Proponents of the ordinance say these new regulations are simply minimal health and safety standards that should be met by all fullday programs for young children. "It's sort of like if you go to a restaurant, you expect there's a certain standard of cleanliness, that you won't get sick from eating the food," says Virginia Samson, chairwoman of the municipal Health and Human Services Commission subcommittee that formulated the proposed regulations. "It's the same with child care. There should be certain standards in place."

Green's schools are not the only programs that would be affected by the ordinance: The municipal Parks and Recreation Department's summer program, the school district's two childcare programs, several Head Start programs and the preschool portion of Anchorage Christian Schools would also be subject to municipal licensing requirements if the ordinance is passed.

But the school district has already had both of its programs licensed by the municipality, and all Head Start programs are either licensed or in the process of being licensed. And directors of the other programs are not fighting the proposed ordinance the way Green is.

"I don't want any change of status, because our parents are very happy through all these years," Green says. "We just want to remain status quo. And that's why I've fought and I'll continue to battle this as long as I can."

How many preschoolers can one adult safely handle? That is the question Margaret Green and various agencies have tangled over for almost 20 years.

The municipal Health and Human Services Department and the state Department of Education recommend a ratio of one adult for every 10 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds. Green contends that her teachers can handle 16 or 20 preschool-age children.

The municipality and the state base their ratio on numerous studies, on guidelines published by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and on nationally accepted norms. Currently 31 states require a staff/child ratio of 1 to 10 or less for this age group. Green argues that her teachers are better trained than the average childcare worker and therefore able to supervise more children safely.

Most of Green's teachers' qualifications do exceed state Department of Education guidelines for private schools. The DOE requires only that employees hired to teach be 19 or older (16 if they're in a training program) and receive some training from their employer.

But on Nov. 27, she testified before the Health and Human Services Commission that more than 80 percent of her teachers have Alaska teaching certificates. After the Daily News obtained evidence that she had overestimated the number of certified teachers at her school, Green acknowledged that only five of her 20 teachers have current teaching certificates. Three others have expired certificates, and Green says two others have teaching degrees from abroad, Mexico and the Philippines.

All of her teachers have "some college work, though not necessarily in early childhood," Green says. She also puts her teachers through her own training program, holding monthly teacher meetings and conducting Saturday morning Montessori sessions for new teachers as long as needed. "I don't set a specific number of hours because it depends on the person," she says.

But state-certified teachers at other DOE preschools say no amount of training can equip a teacher to supervise 16 or more 3 to 5-year-olds.

Peg Redding, co-director of the Anchorage School District's King Career Center preschool program, laughs at the notion. "Sure, you can handle them," she says. "You can herd'em, like a herd of cattle."

“When you have that many children, all you’re doing is group management. You’re not attending to individual needs. And with young children, it’s critical. Birth to age 5 is the most critical time in a child’s life. I think it’s a real disservice to children to have that many with one teacher, because they don’t get the attention they need.”

Pamela Keller, director of Zion Lutheran Preschool, says she has an education degree, but that she couldn’t handle more than 10 preschoolers without the help of an aide. “Not well, anyway,” she says. “If you’re working constantly on classroom control, education isn’t happening. With the low ratio, there’s a lot more learning going on.”

There are indications that high ratios can lead to even more serious problems, as complaints against Green’s Tom Thumb schools show.

Several complaints filed against the schools describe children being allowed to kick or hit each other without adult intervention. Other complaints describe teachers as appearing “burned out.”

In 1985, Anchorage police officer Bill Reeder investigated a case at the Spenard Road Tom Thumb involving at least 11 preschoolers who were engaging in inappropriate sexual behavior over a period of several months in the school’s closets and bathrooms and under blankets during nap time. “It was one of those things that haunts you for life,” Reeder says now.

After interviewing the children, Reeder concluded that no adult at Tom Thumb was involved, and about eight months later, one of the preschoolers’ uncles was convicted of sexually abusing the child. “There’s a good possibility he could have been our source,” Reeder says.

But even Reeder, who was unfamiliar with any question of staff/child ratios, points to that exact issue as a factor in the case. “Bottom line is: More teachers could have kept a better eye on the kids and might have prevented it,” he says.

Green, however, says her teachers “keep a pretty close eye on the children,” and adds that the case was “blown out of proportion.”

“That’s just something that happened,” she says, “and I think our school picked up and went ahead. . . . I just kind of obliterate that from my mind and look to the future.”

This debate over the number of children one adult can safely supervise has become the focus of what is actually a broader question posed by the proposed municipal childcare ordinance: If a preschool is already certified by the state Department of Education, does it also need to be licensed by the municipal Health and Human Services Department?

For decades, preschools certified by the DOE have been exempt from municipal licensing. The proposed ordinance would continue to exempt programs that keep children three hours a day or less, but would require full-day programs to be licensed by the municipality.

Mia Oxley, executive director of Child Care Connection, a nonprofit childcare resource agency, chaired the task force work group that proposed removing that exemption. “It’s a very large loophole that’s existed for a long time, and this is the only opportunity we have to close that loophole,” she says. She says that the exemption “creates confusion for parents” by implying that the DOE regulations are parallel to or better than the municipal licensing regulations.

But even the crudest comparison of the two sets of regulations proves that the municipal licensing requirements are more stringent than the DOE rules: The DOE regulations are six pages long; the municipal regulations are about 40 pages long.

The municipal regulations spell out certain health and safety standards. For instance, licensed childcare centers are required to keep on file an emergency information card for each child, to obtain three documented references for each employee working with children and to have at least one staff person with CPR training on duty at all times. DOE-certified preschools are not required to have any of these items. Municipal childcare regulations also dictate space requirements (35 square feet per child) and staffing ratios (these vary by age group). The DOE specifications for preschools, however, contain no minimum space requirement and mandate only that the schools have “sufficient staff.”

To enforce regulations, the municipality has four fulltime employees who inspect and investigate the 90 or so licensed childcare centers in the Anchorage area. The DOE, by comparison, has only one full-time employee early childhood specialist Kathi Wineman, in Juneau responsible for supervising more than 130 certified preschools around the state.

Obtaining or renewing a DOE preschool certificate is largely a matter of extensive paperwork. Actual onsite visits to preschools generally occur only for investigations of significant complaints, Wineman says. And even then the DOE gives the preschool several days’ advance notice of Wineman’s visit.

In response to the 12 complaints filed against Green’s schools in the past five years, Wineman has made only three onsite visits.

The municipal Department of Health and Human Services has a record of responding to complaints more quickly. Martha Anderson, who oversees licensing of local childcare centers, dispatches her workers to investigate complaints using a timetable that ranges from “immediate” to “within a week,” depending on the seriousness of the complaint. And, unlike Wineman, Anderson and her licensing workers make unannounced visits to childcare centers.

Oxley’s opinion that the two sets of regulations create “confusion for parents” appears to be borne out by the pattern of complaints filed against Tom Thumb Montessori Schools with the DOE: At least five of the 12 complainants called the local childcare licensing agency Anderson’s office and were referred from there to the DOE’s Juneau office.

Certainly some complaints don’t reach the Department of Education in a timely manner: The 1985 sexual abuse complaint reached the DOE three months after the police were already investigating and nine months to a year after the sexual behavior began.

Anderson reviewed all the complaints against Tom Thumb Montessori Schools and says that they differ from complaints filed against licensed childcare centers.

“We’ve not had any center in town where we’ve had recurring serious complaints,” Anderson says. “We don’t have the same kind of pattern that this teacher ‘yelled,’ this one ‘pulled and yanked.’ It does happen (in licensed childcare centers), but then that teacher gets replaced or retrained, and you don’t see it happen anymore.”

Samson, who chaired the task force that drafted the proposed childcare ordinance, also reviewed the complaints against Tom Thumb schools as well as complaints against licensed childcare centers. She also says she found a difference, especially in the tone of the complaints.

“I found the tenor of the complaints (against Tom Thumb Montessori Schools) very disturbing and essentially different from the tenor of complaints against (licensed) childcare programs in Anchorage,” Samson says. “They were different to the effect that the way the staff (of Tom Thumb) treated children was harsher. . . . There’s sort of a broad range of complaints against childcare centers in Anchorage in general, but . . . nobody complained that, for instance, the language used with the children was harsh and inappropriate, where that was the case with the complaints against the Tom Thumb program.”

Margaret Green isn’t against child care. She isn’t against the proposed ordinance and its new regulations, either except for the one clause that would require her and her schools to meet municipal licensing requirements. Though there is nothing in the proposed regulations dictating educational philosophy or content, she says the regulations would force her schools to become merely daycare centers.

“I’ve never said things against their day cares, because we need day care,” Green says. “I’m not against day care. But I’m against them coming in and trying to dictate to our school that we shall be day care when we’re not.”

Green, a well-educated woman, prides herself on operating an educational program. She earned a master’s degree from Teachers College Columbia University in 1944. In 1966, she was certified through the prestigious Saint Nicholas Training Center for the Montessori Method of Education in London. She is currently affiliated with the National Center for Montessori Education, a “progressive” faction separate from the American Montessori Society.

Of the 320 children currently enrolled in her five schools, Green estimates that about 170 children are full-day preschoolers the group that would be affected by the proposed ordinance. About six months ago, Green began organizing a lobbying effort to fight the proposed ordinance, sending parents a packet including a petition form and a list of assembly members’ names and phone numbers. She asked the parents to gather 10 signatures on the petition and telephone every assembly member. She also asked parents to testify before the Health and Human Services Commission and to send letters to commission members. Some parents organized a Tom Thumb Committee for Parents’ Rights and began holding weekly meetings.

In her letter to parents, Green emphasized that the proposed ordinance would increase tuition costs. For her full-day programs, Green charges \$330 a month, or about \$40 less than the average rate for licensed child care in Anchorage.

The parents responded to Green's request by writing some 150 letters, gathering more than 1,000 signatures on her petition and filling an auditorium for the Nov. 27 Health and Human Services Commission public hearing.

Green also persuaded five state senators and three state representatives to write letters to the commission on her behalf.

When Mayor Tom Fink presented the proposed ordinance to the assembly Feb. 13, his cover memo indicated that he supports the ordinance with the exception of two regulations: a regulation that would ban childcare centers from using corporal punishment and the clause that would require full-day preschools to meet municipal regulations.

That same night, assembly member John Wood requested the drafting of an alternate ordinance that would make municipal licensing optional for all childcare centers.

Green is encouraged by this outpouring of support. "I'm very optimistic about the (public) hearing. I think our parents have stood behind us before," she says. "I just feel that things will continue status quo. I have that feeling. We shall see."

A 15-member task force composed mainly of parents worked since February 1989 to revise existing childcare regulations. As they worked, they periodically mailed drafts of the revision to local childcare providers and held public forums to hear those providers' opinions.

In the process, the task force backed down on several issues. A move to set maximum group sizes for children was deleted, as was a suggestion to lower the child-toilet ratio. And a regulation that would have increased space requirements to 50 square feet per child was quickly drummed out of the document by childcare center owners.

But on this issue of requiring full-day preschools to meet municipal regulatory standards, the task force refused to back down.

"We did know there would be opposition," says task force member Mia Oxley. "Every time childcare regulations are rewritten in any state, there are lots of opinions. And unfortunately, the competing forces are almost always between what we know is best for children and what we can afford."

Margaret Green, however, sees this controversy as a philosophical and financial battle. If she doesn't win, she says, she may close her schools.

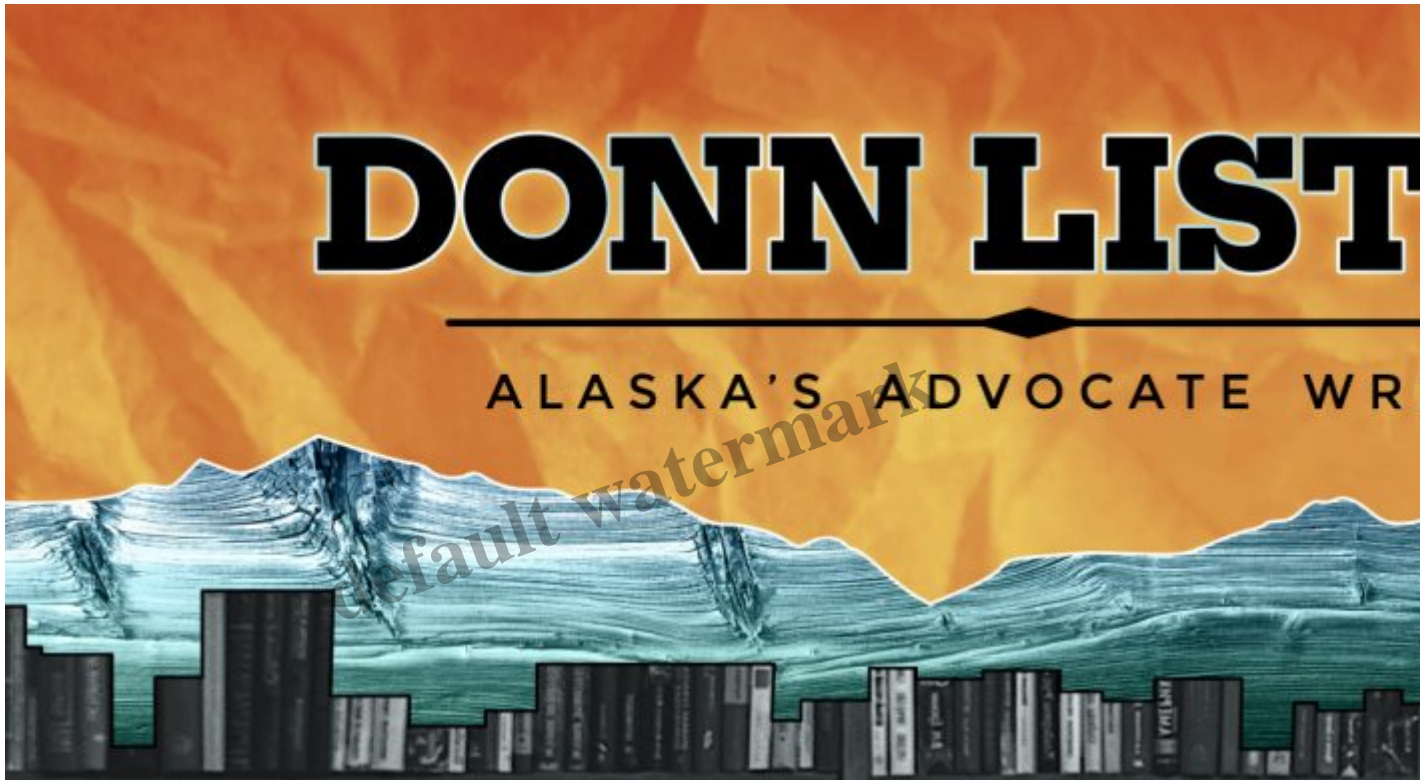
Paying "a number" of her teachers \$2,000 a month, plus insurance and property taxes that amount to some \$40,000, makes it impossible to hire enough teachers to meet the 1:10 ratio the regulations would require, she says. "In order to pay teachers on a 1:10 ratio, we would have to raise tuition way up," Green says. "And I don't think parents in these hard times, I don't think a lot of them could afford more than the \$330 a month."

"If this goes through, I am not going to run a day care, and that's for a certainty," she says. "I've always had a school, and that's how I'm going to finish up my career running a school."

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