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At Tampa Bay charter roiled by lawsuits, parents feel left in the dark

Plato Academy's long legal battle with its early learning provider has frustrated families scrambling for child care.



The exterior of Plato Academy is seen Tuesday, July 30, 2024 in Clearwater. [CHRIS URSO | Times]

By **Sonia A. Rao** *Times staff*

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Since 2018, Sarah Lentsch has relied on child care services at Plato Academy, one of Tampa Bay's largest locally-run K-8 charter school systems.

She's a single, working mom with two daughters, 9 and 5, who last year were in third grade and preschool at Plato Academy St. Petersburg. Plato was well-known for teaching Greek and having A-rated schools, and she liked that they had preschool, elementary school and before- and after-care on one campus.

But in late April, Lentsch found out by email that she'd need to make new plans. The school said it was ending its long-standing agreement with Superior Schools, the Clearwater company providing early learning and child care at Plato. There would be no Superior summer camp, no pre-K, no before- or after-school care for the upcoming year.

"My jaw hit the ground, because I was flabbergasted," she said. "Every single decent camp that I would trust to watch my children was booked up, way booked up."

One month before school let out, Lentsch scrambled to find alternative summer plans and ended up pulling her daughters out of the school.

Lentsch is one of many parents left behind by the most recent chapter of a yearslong legal battle between Superior and Plato, which serves almost 4,000 students across nine campuses in Pinellas, Pasco and Hillsborough counties.

This year, Plato accused Superior of running unsafe child care programs and tried to terminate their relationship. Superior, rejecting those claims, filed three lawsuits in May against Plato for violating their 2023 contract,

which was supposed to be effective through June 2027. Plato then responded with subsequent lawsuits aiming to evict Superior from its campuses.

School is back in session at Plato. But communications from the school about the safety concerns and lawsuits have continued to frustrate families.



Plato Academy Charter Schools flyers sit on display at Plato Academy's Clearwater campus on Aug. 14. [DIRK SHADD | Times]

What the lawsuits say

The lawsuits, already messy, are further complicated by Plato and Superior's history.

Superior Schools was created as a management company in 2005 by Steve Christopoulos, then the principal of Plato Academy's first campus in Clearwater, which opened in 2004. Superior managed Plato Clearwater and additional campuses as they were built after 2010.

As a management company, Superior oversaw financial operations, staffing, curricula, early learning and child care programs and developing new schools. Superior still owns three of the school's campuses, which it leases to Plato.

Court documents describe the relationship between Plato and Superior as "conflict-free" until 2018. That's when Christopoulos [died during a vacation](#), and his ex-wife, Jenny Tsantilas, took over Superior. Plato officials had concerns about her ability to manage the company, [board documents showed](#).

Tsantilas fired key managers at Superior and did not show up to a board meeting, according to court documents. Around the same time, a new Plato campus in Trinity did not open in time, and officials from Hillsborough County Schools' charter office threatened to close Plato's Tampa location because of management issues.

Then, in 2019, Plato's board voted to drop Superior as its management company. Superior sued, starting a protracted battle. Superior resumed oversight of child care programs later that year and has provided them since.

In another lawsuit from this May, Plato has called Superior's child care programs "unsafe," citing a state law that charter schools can become subject to immediate termination and closure as a result of school safety breaches.

But Superior alleges that Plato wants to terminate the agreement for commercial reasons. They say Plato wants to form its own company or enter into a more profitable agreement with another company, referring to a "long history and misguided efforts of Plato's current leadership

trying to terminate Superior's contractual rights."

"It's great that they don't want to do business with us anymore, but that's not a choice that they can make," Tsantilas said in a June interview.

"Plato and Superior have always run together since day two, pretty much. So this is the way it was meant to be."

Plato Academy board chairperson Louis Kokkinakos objected to Superior's claim, saying Superior is a for-profit institution and landlord of Plato's Trinity, St. Petersburg and Tarpon Springs campuses, while Plato is a tuition-free public charter school system.

"It really bothers me," he said. "They're worrying about the money in their pocket and not about the security of the schools."



Kathryn Apostolopoulos, board liaison for Plato Academy, and Louis Kokkinakos, board chairperson for Plato Academy, talk after a board meeting at Plato Academy's Clearwater campus on Aug. 14. [DIRK SHADD | Times]

Safety concerns on both sides

In court documents, the charter company lists examples such as Superior employees granting campus access to individuals without verifying their identities, allowing children to roam unsupervised and leaving access and security gates propped open.

Superior received 27 citations from licensing authorities this past school year for violations of child care regulations. They've received 74 total since 2021, county and state records show.

At a June board meeting, Tsantilas said those violations were largely about paperwork and documentation, and only two incidents from this year involved inadequate supervision.

Superior representatives at the meeting also questioned Plato's employee vetting practices. They noted that a teacher [accused of duct-taping a kindergarten student's eyes](#) while at East Tampa's Potter Elementary School in 2015 [was then hired by Plato Academy](#).

Felicite VanBuren's son Ke'avin attended Plato's Pinellas Park location from second through eighth grades. She expressed concerns about an English teacher who had multiple felony charges, including aggravated assault and trafficking more than 4 grams of an illegal substance.

Plato officials defended this teacher to VanBuren in a December 2023 email, saying that "Plato Academy conducts a very thorough interview and background screening of all staff and teacher hires" and that this teacher was cleared by the state of Florida and the Pinellas County School District.

Plato said neither the English teacher nor the former Potter teacher still work there.

VanBuren said she believes the school has gone downhill over the last four years.

Seven Plato campuses were rated A schools by the Florida Department of Education in 2018-19. Now, they have four As, two Bs and three Cs.

“I’m honestly so happy to be rid of it,” VanBuren said.



The exterior of Plato Academy in Clearwater on July 30. [CHRIS URSO | Times]

Mixed messaging, confusion

Over the summer, Lentsch, the single mother, ended up sending her younger daughter to another early learning center in Pinellas Park. Her older daughter went out of state to stay with Lentsch’s sister.

A few weeks after pulling her daughters out of Plato St. Petersburg, Lentsch found out from another parent that, despite repeated statements from Plato that there would be no Superior summer camps, Superior’s programs at that campus never ended.

Lentsch never felt that her daughters were unsafe in Superior’s care. She also loved her daughter’s teachers at Plato and is frustrated that this fight has forced her to change her children’s education.

“It’s just really sad that they couldn’t handle it differently,” she said.

The mixed messaging has continued. Though Plato emailed parents to say Superior would not be providing pre-K or before/after care, Superior is still operating on all nine Plato campuses.

Parent Megan Layton spent most of the summer thinking Superior wouldn’t be offering before- and after-school care at her fourth grader’s Plato Clearwater campus this school year, because the school said so. She was assured by Plato that the transition to another provider would be smooth and that she would have child care.

Summer passed, and she didn’t hear anything about a new provider. She reached out to her son’s principal, who informed her that Superior was still on Plato’s campuses.

But when she tried to sign her son up with Superior, she was told to join a waitlist. Layton, who works full time, doesn’t know what she’s going to do.

“Now we have to scramble to find before- and after-care for our children, when we were assured that this was something they were going to handle,” she said.

Tara Rothenhoefer’s son is in eighth grade at Plato’s Palm Harbor campus and attends Superior’s before-school care. She was relieved when Superior staff told her their programs would go on as normal. She’s not yet comfortable leaving her son on his own.

But she’s wary of the conflicting communications from Superior and

Plato, which have confused and frustrated her.

“Is something going to change?” she said. “Are we going to all of a sudden be left without child care?”

Where things stand now

Tsantilas said in June that Superior’s business had dwindled because of the messaging from Plato that has confused parents.

“They are attacking our business and attacking the integrity of our programs,” she said. “They are ruining our business.”

Tsantilas has not responded to multiple interview requests since.

At the June board meeting, Plato moved to [replace Superior’s camp and childcare services](#) with the YMCA. The motion passed but needs to be finalized at a later meeting.

Kokkinakos acknowledged that the drawn-out legal battle with Superior has led to uncertainty about programming. But he said the school is bound by the legal system and concerns for student safety.

“We’re at the mercy of the court system right now,” he said. “What we thought would happen, didn’t happen. As a parent, I would be frustrated too, not knowing what’s going on.”



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