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### Savvy Solutions

## Get a plan

This entrepreneur changed the prospects of three local child-care centers that were bleeding red ink  
Dallas Business Journal - by [Cynthia D. Webb](#) Staff Writer

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By the time investors in three child-care centers contacted Clint Haggard for help in January 2004, an average of eight families per month were leaving, and the group was pumping \$30,000 a month into the ventures.

They'd expected by this time to be receiving returns of 15% to 18% on their investments in the day-care ventures they started in 1999.

In an effort to save the centers -- Preston Ridge school in Frisco and the DaySpring preschools in Plano and North Richland Hills -- the schools' investors decided the centers needed more professional management.

They turned to Haggard, an entrepreneur with an accounting and finance background who for the past four years had worked as a consultant for Swan Court restaurant owners -- one of whom also is an owner of the day-care centers -- to turn that venture around.

The Richardson-based Swan Court restaurant is located in an area hit hard by the telecom slump. Among the problems Haggard was faced with was the restaurant's runaway costs and employees who allegedly were running away with restaurant property.

Swan Court's revenue has increased by 25% each year of the four years he has worked with the business, Haggard said.

So while the day-care centers' low employee morale, lack of a solid business plan and inability to turn a profit were major problems, they were familiar, said Haggard, a minority owner and president of Homeplace Management Co. L.L.C., formed in April 2004 as a management entity for the schools.

#### Mission omission

"There wasn't a defined mission for the business," Haggard said.

As the father of two, he believed his role as a parent gave him insight into what other parents expected. He believed his past business experience would enable him to help the centers at least break even.

To stem the investors' cash outlays, he consolidated payroll, retirement accounts and other human resource-associated services -- each center had managed its own -- netting \$38,000 in annual savings for investors.

Then Haggard got to the difficult part: raising the quality of the centers.

On his first day, he told parents and teachers that the centers needed to be accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, a Washington D.C.-based organization that has strict standards for early childhood education. Only 4% of area centers have the accreditation, which takes between 12 and 18 months, Haggard said.

In talking with the center's employees, he learned that lack of communication, lack of appreciation and lack of training in presenting the curriculum were, in part, responsible for low employee morale.

Now, monthly one-on-one staff meetings with directors pinpoint problems, and the



Photo: Kenneth Brock

**PLAY SMART:** Clint Haggard's Homeplace Management Co. took over management of three failing child-care centers, improved the quality of care and revamped their business plan to improve the bottom line.

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company is reimbursing half the tuition of the 17 full-time teachers currently earning child-development degrees.

**Positive signs**

Today, enrollment at the three schools is up, and they lose an average of only two families each month.

Haggard wasn't happy with the meals served at the centers. He hired a local caterer he met through a culinary class, Steve Itasic, to serve as chef for the schools. He now caters meals for the Frisco and Plano centers with North Richland Hills to follow later this year.

As an added bonus, families can purchase the chef's meals -- a different menu from what is served at the school -- for an average of \$25 for a meal that feeds four.

The meals are one more way of increasing positive word-of-mouth about the schools.

By focusing on quality, Homeplace has changed the business in a positive way, said C.A. Mitts, a professional business broker with North Richland Hills-based Daily Resources Inc.

"Put yourself in the position of a parent with a child," Mitts said. "Your biggest concern is the quality of the person taking care of your child."

"There's a lot of great intentions in this industry," Haggard said. "There needs to be more professional growth to increase the quality of the industry as a whole."

[cwebb@bizjournals.com](mailto:cwebb@bizjournals.com)

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