

Troubled Orange school gets millions in vouchers. State investigates after a teacher's arrest and does nothing. Again.

By LESLIE POSTAL and ANNIE MARTIN, ORLANDO SENTINEL

MAR 21, 2021 AT 6:46 AM

Teachers hired at Winners Primary School in west Orange County included instructors without college degrees and others with checkered employment histories, an Orlando Sentinel investigation found. The school, whose name recently changed to Providence Christian Preparatory School, relies on state scholarships, or vouchers, to cover tuition for most of its students. It has received more than \$5 million in state scholarship money since 2015. (Rich Pope)

The job applicant hoped to teach fourth grade at Winners Primary School, a small private school in west Orange County. She didn't have a college degree and her last job was at a childcare center, which fired her.

"Terminated would not rehire," read the reference check form from the daycare.

Winners Primary hired her as a teacher anyway in early 2020, and she remains on staff.

Since 2018, the school, dependent on state scholarships for most of its income, has hired at least three other teachers with red flags in their employment backgrounds and at least 10 other instructors who lacked college degrees, an Orlando Sentinel investigation found.

One Winners teacher — whose only academic credential was his high school diploma — was arrested in November, accused of soliciting sexually explicit videos from a boy in his class. Others have criminal backgrounds or histories of being fired for incompetence in other jobs, the records show. Despite that, the Florida Department of Education recently opened and closed an investigation into the school without taking any action.

The school is constantly hiring because many teachers work there only briefly. With about a dozen teachers on staff, Winners had a teacher turnover rate of 83% between 2019 and 2020. The turnover and the questionable teaching credentials raise doubts about the quality of education offered to the school's 250 students in pre-K through eighth grade.

"The kids should've been in public schools," said Evan McKelvey, who taught math at Winners for six months, leaving in January after getting hired at Bishop Moore Catholic High School. "All of the public schools around here are leagues better than that place."

Almost all the students attend because Florida's scholarships, often called school vouchers, cover their tuition. Since 2015, Winners, a for-profit school run by a married couple with a history of financial problems, has received more than \$5.1 million in state scholarship money.

The school's students use the state scholarships — Family Empowerment and Florida Tax Credit — that aim to help children from low-income families attend private schools.

The Sentinel obtained the hundreds of pages of school documents, including employee rosters, background check forms and educational records, through a public-records request filed with the Florida Department of Education.

Typically, the nearly 2,000 private schools that take state scholarships do not need to make public information on their operations or their employees. Despite state support, taxpayers have no right to see who is hired or what is taught at these schools.

Winners Primary School in west Orange County was housed in a shopping plaza on west Colonial Drive until this winter when it moved to a church complex in Gotha. The school was the subject of a Florida



Department of Education investigation because one of its teachers was arrested in November. (Annie Martin/Orlando Sentinel)

Because of the teacher's arrest at Winners, however, the department opened an investigation, telling the principal it was worried the school could be in violation of state scholarship laws because "proper vetting during the hiring process is not occurring," according to a letter sent to the school Nov. 19.

"When we're made aware of situations like this, our team thoroughly investigates," said Eric Hall,

senior chancellor at the education department, when asked about Winners at a January meeting of the Florida Senate's education committee. "We take these things very seriously. We would make sure that we hold those institutions or those individuals accountable."

Less than two months later, however, the department closed its investigation without taking any action against the school, despite a file depicting a shoddy employee vetting process and a history of questionable teacher hires. The school faced similar state inquiries in 2017, 2018 and 2019 and was cleared to remain a scholarship school then, too.

That is because the Republican-led Legislature has written the scholarship program laws to give the state only limited power to oversee participating private schools. As the Sentinel reported in its 2017 ["Schools Without Rules" series](#), some of the schools have hired teachers with criminal backgrounds, been evicted, set up in rundown facilities and falsified fire and health reports but still remained in the voucher programs.

This year, the Florida Senate is considering a bill to expand the scholarship programs that already serve more than 181,000 students and cost nearly \$1 billion, so that more children could use them and more state money would be spent.

The Legislature also has turned down requests to stiffen the rules that govern participating private schools. In 2018, for example, [a proposal to require private schools' teachers to have bachelor's](#)

[degrees](#) — as the state demands of its public school teachers — was rejected. Advocates say the scholarships, some of which go to children with disabilities, give parents options outside public schools, and if parents aren't happy with the private school they pick, they can move their child to another campus.

Winners Primary — recently renamed Providence Christian Preparatory School — is run by Cecilia and Ike Ukachi-Lois. On school documents, she is listed as the principal and he as the owner.

Their school has no website and provides no public information about its academic offerings. One parent said she learned about Winners from a man, whom she thought was Ike Ukachi-Lois, handing out fliers at a Family Dollar store on Pine Hills Road.

Housed for years in a former Target store on West Colonial Drive, it is now in a church complex about two miles west in Gotha. It has been accepting state scholarships since 2013.

The education department investigated the school previously after a complaint from a parent who wrote the state to say the campus was dirty and “children of all ages are running out of the classroom screaming and hitting each other,” as well as after a report from the Florida Department of Children and Families that a teacher had hurt a student and [the Sentinel's report in 2018](#) that the school had hired a felon as a teacher.

The couple did not respond to letters, emails and phone calls requesting comment. A parent and several former teachers said they were rarely on campus.

They appear to be living in a five-bedroom Windermere home, and Cecilia Ukachi-Lois was driving a Mercedes when she was stopped for speeding in 2019, records from the Orange County utilities department and Orange County Circuit Court show.

But both the couple and the school have long-standing financial problems.

Cecilia and Ike Ukachi-Lois lost a business property to foreclosure in 2009 and their Winter Garden home to foreclosure in 2016 after the court said they owed roughly \$400,000 on the property, including interest and court fees.

They also face \$63,336 in personal federal income tax liens from 2012, according to the Orange County comptroller's office.

The school also owes back taxes — more than \$467,000 to the Internal Revenue Service, the office shows. Most of the unpaid taxes were from 2016 and 2017, the comptroller's office shows, and are ones paid by businesses to fund unemployment, Social Security and Medicare.

Until this month, the school also faced two lawsuits from companies claiming it owed them money. It settled one case but still faces one filed in Manhattan by a software firm that says more than \$18,000 is past due.

State requests records

Florida lawmakers have given the education department no authority to question the school about those financial troubles. But the education department can request some information about private school employees and their backgrounds, and it made that demand of Winners in November.

In response, the school provided a jumble of records, though some not until after the department sent at least four follow-up letters, most asking about missing criminal background checks.

The records show the school employed teachers who lacked credentials needed at public schools or at well-regarded private ones — both of which insist on bachelor's degrees as a minimum standard — and hired teachers with checkered employment histories.

The records also suggest employees weren't always carefully screened.

Take Tyrone Parker, who worked as a custodian on Winners' staff.

The state asked for his background check and then noted what the school sent was missing several pages. Education department staff also twice noted a concern.

"Need additional information on the firearms convictions in NY," read one of those notes.

Parker was convicted in the Bronx in 2011 of criminal possession of a firearm, a felony, pled guilty and was sentenced to a year in prison, according to the New York State Unified Court System.

Parker told the Sentinel he thought that conviction had been expunged. When he was hired at Winners last year, he said, he had been out of trouble since then and didn't think the school knew about his record.

The New York conviction would not have automatically kept him from working in a Florida school that takes scholarships. But Cecilia Ukachi-Lois never provided his full background check, as the state wanted and as scholarship law requires her to provide, the records show.

"We do not have this information on file, he is no longer employed," she wrote on Feb. 5, after the state asked about Parker's background check for the third time.

Ukachi-Lois told the state Parker's last day was Dec. 10.

On the night of Dec. 10, Parker was arrested by the Orange County Sheriff's Office and charged with "obscene communication-travel," his arrest report showed. He was accused of using a computer to try and lure someone he thought was a teenager into meeting him for a sex act, the report said. Parker has pleaded not guilty to the charges.

Parker, who said he was fired the next day, called the incident the result of a "misunderstanding," and he didn't intend to have sex with the person posing as a teen, who was actually a detective.

Dion Bryant, the teacher who was arrested, was hired by Winners in February 2019. On Dec. 11, Cecilia Ukachi-Lois wrote the state that she could not find his employment history file or background check. Then later, she sent Tallahassee reference checks seemingly done with his former employers that were dated December 2020 — a month after his arrest and subsequent termination and nearly two years after he was employed.

In February, Cecilia Ukachi-Lois admitted the school didn't have all its documents in order.

"There is no justification for not having the reference checks on file," she wrote, adding that the school's "procedures have been updated."

Seemingly eager to please education department officials, she also said she would demote to assistants some teachers and administrators, including the former daycare worker teaching fourth grade, because the state raised questions about their credentials.



By law, teachers without bachelor's degrees who work in private schools that take state scholarships need teaching experience or undefined "special skills" that would qualify them for the job. But the state does not check their records, or inquire about those "special skills," unless the school is the subject of a complaint or someone is arrested, as was the case at Winners.

Many of those listed on Winners' rosters as assistants or "K-8 support" ended up teaching, according to the documents and interviews, and there is nothing to stop the school from doing that again.

Student falls behind

Cynthia Anderson, whose three children attended the school for two years until the family moved out of state last year, watched that happen repeatedly.

She was initially drawn to Winners because the school offered transportation, with early morning pickup from her house and then late-afternoon drop-off. That was a help to the single working mother.

Some of the teachers were good and the class sizes were small, which she liked, Anderson said. Her kids all received state scholarships to cover school bills.

But her daughter, who attended for kindergarten and first grade, struggled with reading and writing skills, and no one seemed to help her, she said. That was in part because there were new teachers constantly assigned to the little girl's class.

"It felt like it was every other week," she said.

Anderson said she suggested her daughter be held back, but the school just wanted to "kick her to the next level." When she had concerns, she added, often a classroom assistant was the only person available for a conversation. "Sometimes they were so short-staffed, they taught the class."

Many of the school's assistants have no educational background beyond a high school diploma. One worked as a cashier at a Sav-A-Lot and another worked security at Gatorland, their reference check forms showed.

Bryant was hired in early 2019 as a teaching assistant after a stint in the U.S. Army, the documents show. But in August, as the new school year started, he was tapped to teach science because the school was so short-staffed, Cecilia Ukachi-Lois wrote in a February email to the state.

"It was not intended that he would cover for long. He was asked to cover class because we had been unable to fill this position, he has a high school diploma," she said.

Bryant is a 2014 graduate of Orange's Cypress Creek High School, the records show, but has no college education.

He was still a science teacher on Nov. 16, when authorities were called to Winners to meet with a mother and son who told deputies that Bryant had solicited sexually explicit videos from the child via text messages, threatening bad grades if the student didn't comply but also offering to pay for them. He was arrested that day. Bryant, who couldn't be reached for comment, has pleaded not guilty to the charges.

Cecilia Ukachi-Lois, in an email telling him he was fired, called him a "good teacher" but said she was "very shocked and saddened " by the police accusations.

McKelvey, the former math teacher and a graduate of Florida State University, said that during his time there the school was always short-staffed. A Spanish teacher stayed for a week, he said, and for about three months, the school did not provide language arts classes.

Some of the teachers who stuck around seemed "to waste a fair amount of time" in class, McKelvey added. "It didn't seem like the rest of my team was academically inclined as I was."

The private schools that take scholarships are [free to teach what they want and do not have to meet state academic standards](#). They must give some students a national standardized test, and the state collects that data, but there are no consequences for schools whose students perform poorly. The latest state report shows Winners students lost ground in both reading and math during the 2018-2019 school year.

Nearly a dozen teachers hired at Winners in the past several years lacked college degrees, according to the records. One had an "evangelical teacher training certificate." Another had taken classes at three colleges but never earned enough credits for a degree. An employee roster from 2018 showed fewer than 50% of Winners' 12 teachers had the four-year college credential.

Three of the school's current teachers with degrees once taught in public schools but problems ended their tenure. One wasn't rehired in Marion County after leaving a child unsupervised for 30 minutes, records show.

Another lost his job in Orange County Public Schools after reprimands for "excessive absences," comments like "pretty little girl" made to middle schoolers and leaving campus in the middle of the school day. Just before he got the Winners job, that teacher had an unsuccessful stint as a cook at Walt Disney World, his reference check shows.

Medicaid fraud felon

Shanqual Marshall-Gunn was hired by Winners a month after her release from prison in 2016. She was an Orange elementary school teacher when she was convicted of Medicaid fraud and incarcerated. She was then temporarily banned from teaching in Florida's public schools.

State law prohibits people with some felony convictions from working in private schools that take vouchers, but a Medicaid fraud conviction isn't one of them.

Marshall-Gunn, however, had been promoted to a school administrator at Winners in recent years, and the education department, as it completed its investigation, told Ukachi-Lois that her record prevented

her from holding such a position at a school that takes scholarships. Ukachi-Lois said she would be demoted.

Her letters back to the school made it clear she wanted to remain in the voucher program.

“We take our responsibilities under the Florida state scholarship program very seriously and will continue to do everything within our power to maintain a compliant program,” she wrote in December.

The education department, closing the case on March 3, thanked her for the documents and said the case was closed. “We see no need to take further action at this time.”

lpostal@orlandosentinel.com; anmartin@orlandosentinel.com

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