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Boarding schools go unchecked in Utah

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by [Toby Hayes](#) [Deseret Morning News](#)

Utah has no regulatory power over boarding schools within its borders, parents and state officials are discovering following a crackdown on a Costa Rican boarding school with Utah ties.

"There's no background check on any of those people," said Ken Stettler, director of licensing for the Utah Department of Health and Human Services. "What you get are untrained and unprepared staff who will dole out abuse because they don't know how to handle the kids."

Even someone accused of aggravated sexual abuse is free to work with children in boarding schools.

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Wayne E. Winder was arrested and charged last year with one first- degree felony count of aggravated sexual abuse and three class A misdemeanors of child abuse while director of Majestic Ranch Academy. The boarding school is affiliated with World Wide Association of Specialty Programs and Schools Inc. of St. George, the same company under which Dundee Ranch Academy operated in Costa Rica.

Majestic is a working 2,000 acre ranch and school for 10- to 14- year-olds. It sits northeast of Sage Creek Junction and borders Wyoming where the Bear River enters Utah.

In March, Winder entered a plea in abeyance to the single felony count, aggravated sexual abuse, after the alleged victim recanted her story. If Winder stays out of trouble for the next nine months, his charges will be dropped, said his attorney, Earl Xaiz. Meanwhile, Winder has returned to the school as director.

Following last year's investigation of Winder, Utah Assistant Attorney General Craig Barlow advised Majestic's owners they were operating without a proper license. But a closer look revealed Utah had no mechanism for licensing boarding schools.

"They are claiming to be a boarding school, and Utah has no regulations for boarding schools," Stettler said. "(So) there is no requirement for them to have fire inspections or anything for life and safety."

No one seems to know who regulates World Wide, either.

The nonprofit corporation is classified by the Utah Department of Commerce as a grant-making and giving service that provides referrals to individually owned behavior modification facilities, many of which are owned by family members of the corporation's founders.

Stettler says it doesn't fall under his jurisdiction because World Wide is an association and offers referrals only. And the Division of Consumer Protection doesn't regulate the group because the corporation assists treatment and behavior modification facilities, not secondary schools.

World Wide, meanwhile, has faced allegations of child abuse by several foreign governments, including Costa Rica, Samoa, Mexico and the Czech Republic.

But the corporation's Utah ties run deep, up and down the state. World Wide founder Bob Lichfield was a manager at Provo Canyon School in the early 1980s when child welfare officials investigated allegations of abuse at the school.

"We had a report that there was abuse. And yes, there was," said former youth corrections investigator Wayne Holland. "They would drag kids by their hair into a dark room and keep them there for an extended period of time. At least a couple hours."

Several managers, including Lichfield and Karr Farnsworth, left Provo Canyon to start their own schools. By 1988 the two had started Cross Creek Manor in LaVerkin. As Lichfield

opened similar schools in places such as Jamaica, Samoa and Mexico, the need for a corporate umbrella became apparent.

Lichfield teamed with his attorney, SkyWest Airlines founder J. Ralph Atkin, to establish the corporation in 1998. At the time of incorporation, World Wide was headquartered at the St. George law office of Atkin, who assumed the position of trustee along with Lichfield and Brent Facer. In April 1999 Atkin resigned his post as trustee after the Czech Republic shut down a reform school he owned there. School officials faced allegations of abuse in a raid similar to that in Costa Rica this spring.

Last year Lichfield was the third leading Utah contributor to federal election campaigns and gave a combined \$10,000 to three southern Utah representatives, according to state and federal campaign disclosures.

"The Lichfields have been very generous to help contribute to the quality of life in our community," said Rep. David Clark, R- Washington County, who received \$2,500 from Lichfield. "Bob Lichfield has had an interest in Republican values."

Lichfield gave \$175,000 to various federal campaign funds in the last two years, and his wife and children gave more than \$40,000.

Clark said the money Lichfield gave to his campaign has not influenced any of his decisions.

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