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State finds child abuse and neglect at school

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The state of Oregon has shut down a boarding school for troubled teens in Central Oregon after allegedly finding a pattern of child abuse and neglect of its students, forcing parents around the country to scramble to bring home their children.

"Our first priority is to ensure the safety of the students at Mt. Bachelor Academy," Erinn Kelley-Siel, Director of the Children, Adults and Families division of the Department of Human Services, said Wednesday in a statement. "Ultimately, the investigations revealed such serious abuse and widespread violations of Oregon's licensing rules that we decided we needed to take immediate action."

The results of the Oregon Department of Human Services seven-month investigation of the Mount Bachelor Academy outside Prineville, Ore., were given to Crook County authorities to decide whether to pursue criminal charges.

Triggered by a complaint, the investigation found nine cases of alleged abuse and neglect involving five students since 2007.

Most came out of a mandatory treatment program called Lifesteps. At least two students were forced to act out sexual roles in front of staff and other kids during treatment sessions, one had to act out past physical abuse, one was not properly supervised on a trip to Europe, and others were subjected to obscene and degrading comments from staff, the

investigators alleged.

A department summary of the full report, which has yet to be released, said the abuses reflected problems with the program as a whole, and held executive director Sharon Bitz responsible for not correcting them. She was also cited for failing to develop individual treatment programs for four students.

The school had only one state licensed mental health professional, who did not meet with every student or regularly take part in the Lifesteps, investigators found. No staff members were qualified to treat drug or alcohol abuse, eating disorders or other mental health issues.

Bitz said in a statement that Mount Bachelor Academy was disappointed in the state's action, after it had cooperated in the investigation and made changes based on limited information it received from the agency.

"The state's sudden action was not only erroneous but also created an unnecessary burden of distress and disruption for our students and their families," she said. "We are aggressively pursuing legal options, including requesting hearings to overturn the order issued by DHS and to contest the findings by the Office of Investigations and Training."

The department gave the school 90 days to fix the problems, or its license would be permanently revoked. The school has the right to appeal to an administrative law judge.

Located in a rural area 26 miles outside Prineville, the school was established in 1988. It is owned by Aspen Education Group of Cerritos, Calif., which operates 25 programs in 13 states, including two others in Oregon. The company calls itself the nation's leading provider of therapeutic education

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for young people. Programs include boarding schools for troubled teens, wilderness programs, weight loss boarding schools and weight loss camps.

Mount Bachelor Academy was authorized for 125 students, but had 88 students and 75 staff last March, the department said. Tuition is \$6,400 a month. Students typically stay 14 to 17 months.

Aspen Education Group is a division of CRC Health Group, located in Cupertino, Calif., which operates 135 recovery facilities for adults and children across the country, spokeswoman Kristen Hayes said.

Hayes said 55 students and 70 staff were at the school Wednesday, and the school had negotiated an agreement with the state giving parents an extra week to collect their children, beyond the original 48 hours.

Another Aspen program, SageWalk in Bend, Ore., has been closed since August, when a 16-year-old boy collapsed and died while on a hike in Lake County. Lake County sheriff's Deputy Chuck Pore said the investigation is continuing.

Aspen also operates New Leaf Academy for middle-school girls in Bend, Ore.

Nancy Bishop, who lives in California, told The Oregonian newspaper she was in shock after getting a phone call from state officials Monday evening saying she would have to make new arrangements for her 14-year-old daughter.

"I feel like they pulled the rug out from us," she said.

Virginia Stauffer, a marketing professional in Dallas, Texas, with an 18-year-old son at the school, told

The Bulletin newspaper in Bend, Ore., that she did not know where she would send him.

"I've exhausted every avenue," she said.

Jim Bianchin of Redding, Calif., told The Oregonian that the school helped his son, who attended the school from 2005 to 2007.

"They helped open his eyes to a lot of destructive behaviors that he had," Bianchin said. "At no time did we observe or hear of any inappropriate behavior or policies."

Department documents described 18 issues that violated state licensing statutes governing boarding schools. Many came out of the Lifesteps program, where sexual role-playing, acting out physical abuse, and verbal abuse allegedly took place.

Others were related to discipline, which included barring students from bathroom breaks, doing push ups and running laps, not being allowed to go to sleep, and being forced to do strenuous work or camp out alone. Some students were banned for a week or longer from talking, touching or looking at others, and forced to eat their meals facing a wall.

Students were barred from describing the program in phone calls, which were stopped if they complained, the department said.

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