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EDUCATION

Former Miami-Dade teachers indicted in certification scams

Two Miami-Dade teachers were indicted in separate cases that prosecutors say show problems with how the district checks teachers' credentials.

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A former Miami-Dade high school teacher was indicted Monday, charged with running a company that sold worthless continuing-education classes that helped about 100 teachers renew their state licenses or qualify to teach additional subjects.

In a separate case, illustrating similar problems, another teacher was indicted on charges he brazenly falsified his qualifications by claiming to earn bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees -- all within three months.

The two cases were highlighted in a damning report issued Monday by a Miami-Dade grand jury, which found serious flaws in how state and local education officials verify teachers' educational records.

"It directly affects the lives of our children attending our public schools," Miami-Dade State Attorney Katherine Fernández Rundle said, announcing the grand jury report and indictments.

The alleged credit-selling scheme centered around William McCoggle, 73, a longtime physical education teacher at Palmetto Senior High. He was charged with grand theft and organized fraud, both first-degree felonies.

McCoggle surrendered to police Monday morning, according to his attorney, Yale Freeman, and was expected to post bond Monday evening. Freeman said he had not reviewed the indictment and declined to comment on the case.

According to prosecutors, McCoggle collected more than \$250,000 while running a company called Move On Toward Education and Training, or MOTET.

During late 2002 and 2003, he had a partnership with Eastern Oklahoma State College to offer noncredit classes using the college's name and accreditation.

"In fact, there were no classes taught by or through MOTET," the grand jury report said. "There were no tests; there was no homework; there were no assignments and there were no class discussions. None of the adjunct professors actually taught anything. No teachers actually attended any classes."

Some teachers said they did attend classes, according to an investigation by the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, but they gave conflicting stories about where, when and how often they were given.

"I think some of the teachers may have been protecting themselves," Assistant State Attorney Susan Dechovitz said.

State law requires public-school teachers to earn six continuing-education credits every five years to maintain their licenses.

Even if McCoggle's classes did meet, his deal with Eastern Oklahoma State College only allowed him to provide noncredit courses, which cannot be used in Florida to meet teachers' continuing-education requirements. The transcripts received by teachers in McCoggle's program were almost indistinguishable from those listing for-credit class work.

REPUTATION SPREAD

The grand jury said McCoggle's reputation for providing easy credits spread primarily by word of mouth. Teacher Bennet

Packman, who helped lead investigators to McCoggle said colleagues knew the program `` may not be exactly kosher."

"He has no course descriptions, he has no fee schedule, doesn't tell me when we'll be meeting," said Bennett Packman, a physical education teacher who spoke to McCoggle in 2003 about becoming certified to teach driver's education. `` The whole thing sounded like a scam."

Packman never registered, but the grand jury identified 15 driver's ed. teachers who received credits from McCoggle's program. They have been reassigned during the investigation, according to the grand jury.

According the grand jury's report, state and local officials make only a perfunctory review of transcripts.

"They look at the paper, the seal and the form of the transcript," the report read.

Miami-Dade has since tightened its reviews, looking at dates and watermarks on the documents, and investigating who has had access to the transcripts, said a spokesman for Superintendent Rudy Crew.

"The practices that were in place at the time were followed," said spokesman Joseph Garcia, noting that both alleged crimes were committed before Crew was hired last year. `` Those practices have been changed."

Nonetheless, the grand jury said each teacher's records should be individually verified with their college or university.

"We're going to study the recommendations in the grand jury report," Garcia said, adding that Crew expects to make his own recommendations to the School Board next month.

At the very least, the grand jury said, any teacher connected to McCoggle's programs should be checked, which Garcia said the district was "anxious" to do once it receives a list of the teachers.

"The danger here is that two cases [found during] a year of investigation would essentially tarnish the reputation of 22,000 other teachers," Garcia said.

He said the district was legally required to accept continuing-education credits from any accredited college, and said state officials, not those in Miami-Dade, granted the driver's ed certificates.

"The university issued the credits; the state accepted the credits; we never saw the transcripts," said Thomas Gary, Crew's administration attorney.

The Oklahoma investigation identified nearly 200 South Florida teachers who paid MOTET for credits. Fernández Rundle said nearly 100 of them -- maybe more -- work in Miami-Dade schools.

They paid \$175 per credit, according to the Oklahoma report, of which the college received \$75 and McCoggle kept \$100.

"The cheaters ought to be ashamed of themselves," Fernández Rundle said. `` In the end, these teachers kept their salaries and kept their certification."

She said the teachers had been notified and `` are on notice they need to take immediate action."

Fernández Rundle would not comment on whether those teachers face criminal investigation. The grand jury's report recommended they be removed from the classroom and forced to repay salaries.

She also would not discuss whether other charges could follow; the grand jury's report said McCoggle had at least four previous deals with other colleges and was known among teachers as `` a giant in the recertification field."

According to the Oklahoma investigation, McCoggle presented MOTET as an 18-year-old, tax-exempt company that provided teacher training on behalf of accredited colleges.

McCoggle has worked in Miami-Dade schools since 1983 and earned nearly \$75,000 a year before he retired this summer. His alleged scam was first reported last year by WSVN-Fox 7.

MORE WEAKNESSES

James Majors, the other teacher indicted Monday, was not connected to McCoggle's program, but Fernández Rundle said he further illustrated weaknesses in the school system's procedures.

Majors applied for a job in October 2002, when he was 24. He claimed to have a bachelor's degree from Vernell University and master's and doctoral degrees from Florida State University.

Prosecutors say the last two, at least, were outright lies. And Dechovitz said Vernell, based in Middletown, N.Y., was an unaccredited "diploma mill" and has since declared bankruptcy.

During his year as a teacher, Majors worked at Cutler Ridge and Westview middle schools.

"He had the audacity to fail 22 students," she said, describing Majors as ``a charlatan who was able to masquerade as a teacher."

Majors was charged with second-degree grand theft, a felony. He was released on bond Monday afternoon and could not be reached for comment. Majors' fake credentials were not caught until he left the Miami-Dade district and applied for a job in Broward.

"Parts of our education system, both locally and statewide, missed the clues that were readily available," Fernández Rundle said.