From June 2006 through November 2010, the woefully cash-strapped Florida Department of Education (DOE) forked over $2.057 million to Julius Brown, former middle school basketball coach and cofounder of a string of obscure sports apparel businesses.

The money was in the form of tuition vouchers for kids with physical and learning disabilities to attend the South Florida Preparatory Christian Academy, the Oakland Park K-12 private school of which Brown — a looming and lean former basketball pro with a slug-like mustache — was founder, president, principal, athletic director, and boys’ basketball coach.

As is customary with schools that receive the vouchers, provided by the John M. McKay Scholarships for Students With Disabilities Program, the DOE didn’t inquire about Brown’s curriculum or visit South Florida Prep’s campus to make sure it was safe for schoolchildren. In Florida, private schools essentially go unregulated, even if they’re funded by taxpayer cash. South Florida Prep also received at least $236,000 from a state-run tax-credit scholarship for low-income kids.

While the state played the role of the blind sugar daddy, here is what went on at South Florida Prep, according to parents, students, teachers, and public records: Two hundred students were crammed into ever-changing school locations, including a dingy strip-mall space above a liquor store and down the hall from an Asian massage parlor. Eventually, fire marshals and sheriffs condemned the “campus” as unfit for habitation, pushing the student body into transience in church foyers and public parks.

The teachers were mostly in their early 20s. An afternoon for the high school students might consist of watching a VHS tape of a 1976 Laurence Fishburne blaxploitation flick — *Cornbread, Earl and Me* — and then summarizing the plot. In one class session, a middle
Rotten to the Core from p15

school teacher recommended putting “mother nature” — a woman’s period — into spaghetti sauce to keep a husband under thumb. “We had no materials,” says Nicolas Norris, who taught music despite the lack of a single instrument. “There were no teacher edition books. There was no curriculum.”

In May 2009, two vanloads of South Florida Prep kids were on the way back from a field trip to Orlando when one of the vehicles flipped along Florida’s Turnpike. A teacher and an 18-year-old senior were killed. Turns out another student, age 17 and possessing only a learner’s permit, was behind the wheel and had fallen asleep. The families of the deceased and an insurance company are suing Brown for negligence.

Meanwhile, Brown openly used a form of corporal punishment that has been banned in Miami-Dade and Broward schools for three decades. Four former students and the music teacher Norris recall that the principal frequently paddled students for misbehaving. In a complaint filed with the DOE in April 2009, one parent rushed to the school to stop Brown from taking a paddle to her son’s behind.

“That’s important to eliminate the bad apples. They can jeopardize the program,” Sen. John McKay (left), pictured with former Gov. Jeb Bush, says of his namesake scholarship.

McKay program has boomed exponentially

McKay (left), pictured with former Gov. Jeb Bush, says of his namesake scholarship. McKay program has boomed exponentially from p15

erators who have received funding include criminals convicted of cocaine dealing, kidnapping, witness tampering, and burglary. Even in investigations where fraud, including forgery and stealing student information to bolster enrollment, is proven, arrests are rare. The thieves are usually allowed to simply repay the stolen loot in installments — or at least promise to — and continue to accept McKay payments.

There is no accreditation requirement for McKay schools. And without curriculums, the DOE can’t yank back McKay vouchers from 22,198 children at an average of $7,144 per year. The lion’s share of that pot ends up in private schools.

The McKay fund is not the only cash cow that unregulated schools can dip into. There’s also the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program for low-income kids, which offers a smaller tuition cap — currently $4,106 — but is available for more students. Two years later, Republican lawmakers passed the Tax Credit Scholarship program for low-income kids, which offers a smaller tuition cap — currently $4,106 — but is available for more students.

The McKay program in 1999. “It’s appalling,” Wise says. “I’m amazed that there’s not more scrutiny about where the money is going.”

A fter I get done with you,” he tells a reporter, “I need to talk to my staff director. We need to have some hearings and do whatever we can to make some changes.”

According to Republican lore, it started with a senator’s child and a nun.

In the mid-90’s, state Sen. John M. McKay (R-Bradenton) struggled to find a proper school for his daughter, who had a learning disability.

“I called every public school in my district,” McKay, who has since retired from office, tells New Times. He ended up sending her to Dreams Are Free, a specialized school in Sarasota run by Sister Gilchrist Cottrill.

McKay’s epiphany: Create tuition vouchers so that all Florida children with special needs could go to schools like Sister Gilchrist’s. As senate president in 1999, he tacked his namesake program to Gov. Jeb Bush’s fledgling A+ Plan for Education, a voucher program paying private school tuition for students from poorly performing public schools.

“for poor students with learning or physical disabilities — and be failing in public schools. The latter requirement was eventually scrapped by legislators. A cap limiting the number of McKay kids per district was also tossed.

To be eligible for a McKay voucher in the early days, a student would have had to qualify for an individual education program (IEP) — which encompasses conditions ranging from attention disorders and autism to physical disabilities — and be failing in public schools. Today, students with an IEP are required to spend at least one year in a public school to qualify for the McKay program. But even in that, there is fraud. In June 2010, Deborah Swirsky-Nuñez, a special-education supervisor in Miami-Dade County Public Schools and wife of region superintendent George Nuñez, was arrested for playing a

Erica (left) and Jacqueline Bermeno of Hialeah’s Muskateer’s Academy were indicted for stealing disabled kids’ identities. Sisters Betty Mitchell and Jeannette Nealy swindled at least $200,000 through Polk County’s Faith Christian Academy.

It’s like a perverse science experiment, using disabled school kids as lab rats and funded by nine figures in taxpayer cash: Dole out millions to anybody calling himself an educator. Don’t regulate curriculum or even visit campuses to see where the money is going. For optimal results, do this in Florida, America’s fraud capital.

Now watch all the different ways the flimflam men scramble for the cash.

Once a niche scholarship fund, the McKay program has ballooned exponentially in the 12 years since it was introduced under Gov. Jeb Bush, with $148.6 million handed out in the past 12 months, a 38 percent increase from just more than five years ago.

There are 1,013 schools — 65 percent of them religious — collecting McKay vouchers from 22,198 children. In the early days, a student would have had to qualify for an individual education program (IEP) — which encompasses conditions ranging from attention disorders and autism to physical disabilities — and be failing in public schools. The latter requirement was eventually scrapped by legislators. A cap limiting the number of McKay kids per district was also tossed.

Today, students with an IEP are required to spend at least one year in a public school to qualify for the McKay program. But even in that, there is fraud. In June 2010, Deborah Swirsky-Nuñez, a special-education supervisor in Miami-Dade County Public Schools and wife of region superintendent George Nuñez, was arrested for playing a
sort of three-card monte with the McKay system in order to have her two kids’ private school tuition paid by the state.

According to investigators, Swirsky-Nuñez fabricated address records. She falsely enrolled the children at the public Dr. Michael M. Krop High even though they attended Plantation’s American Heritage Private School. And she used her sway with test administrators to rig her kids’ performance on the IEP exam, securing a combined $19,000 annually in McKay payments.

At least seven others, including her husband George, were implicated, but only Swirsky-Nuñez was charged with organized fraud. She has pleaded not guilty, and her trial will start in October. Krop’s principal, Matthew Welker, was suspended for 30 days for alleged complicity in the scheme.

The recent expansion of the McKay program should only make it easier to milk the system. The new law, which last month easily passed the Florida House and Senate and was signed by Governor Scott, makes students with “504 plans” — special accommodations for physical impairments — eligible as well.

That includes asthma and allergies to anything from peanuts to bee stings, says Ron Meyer, a lobbyist for the Florida Education Association, who argues that the expansion is “undermining the validity of the program.”

An additional 52,000 students will be eligible, almost quadrupling the pool.

McKay waffled with indecision before throwing his support behind the expansion. He insists he “would never want this program to be a Trojan horse toward the destruction of the public school system.” Informed of New Times’ findings, McKay hedged that “there are sins in every program” but added that the state is “unwise to abandon all oversight... Somebody better get off their ass and fix those problems.”

The nun also has misgivings. Sister Gilchrist, of the prototypical McKay school, has seen her copycats. “There are a lot of people who are starting these little schools, and the teachers aren’t qualified,” she says. “There needs to be some oversight.”

Department of Education investigator Seth Stoughton, who specialized in voucher fraud, had a strategy when he’d go on field trips from Tallahassee to other regions around the state. He’d print a list of every McKay school in the area and, in many cases, still receiving McKay money totaling $49.3 million. In the 27 investigative reports that were made available to New Times — the rest have been purged — the vast majority were sparked by a tip, usually from an associate with an ax to grind. A few of the more notable cases:

• At Homestead’s Hope Academy, recipient of $2.8 million from McKay, a 2010 investigation revealed at least three staffers had criminal records. One of the employees had pleaded guilty in Georgia to intent to distribute cocaine. Another had served two years in the same state for the sale of marijuana. The school is the target of a lawsuit filed by a mother who claims her developmentally disabled daughter was repeatedly molested by a classmate on a school bus and that principal Cecil Persaud did nothing about it. Visited by New Times, Persaud — a gray-toned man with a patchy mustache — claimed the fraud “didn’t ring a bell,” refused to discuss the molestation lawsuit, and threatened to call police.
• The most common clipper involves simple forgery: school administrators doctoring attendance records and signing parents’ names to show that students are enrolled when they’re actually not. Jacksonville’s Success Academy — which received $4.8 million — was likely the largest such case. From 2001 through 2005, the school accepted $421,000 for 52 students who were enrolled in public schools.

• At Muskateer’s Academy in Hialeah (Stoughton says of the name: “I think they just had no idea how to spell”), husband and wife school owners Jacqueline and Erick Cermeno were indicted for stealing several students’ disability information to falsely enroll them and pocket thousands in tuition. Muskateer’s received $794,000 from the state. The Cermenos were sentenced to ten years’ probation and seem to have disappeared to Texas.

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But some of the most egregious offenders have evaded even a slap on the wrist. In February 2008, Stoughton personally held countless hours of deposition and prepared a damning 795-page report in exposing a similar $78,000 fraud at Harvest Christian Academy in Tampa. The principal, Bishop Michael Wayne Lewis, was already serving five years in federal prison for a $3 million bank fraud case. Lewis scoffed that because “he was currently incarcerated for a scheme involving the theft of $3 million,” Stoughton wrote, “he would not ‘waste’ his time with $78,000.”

The State Attorney’s Office (SAO) apparently agreed, deciding not to press charges. “This was a case I had worked on the entire time I was there,” Stoughton says. “It was incredibly frustrating.” The apathy to McKay fraud was politically motivated, he believes. “This program was the governor’s baby, and he had a lot of political capital invested in this,” the former investigator says of Bush, who held office until January 2007. “My understanding was that he viewed our investigations as negative publicity about the program.”

Counters Bush’s spokesperson Jaryn Emhof: “Governor Bush has consistently supported greater accountability over the scholarship programs.”

Of the case reports provided to New Times, only three resulted in arrests. The vast majority of offenders were ordered to simply repay the stolen money, although many of them have failed to make payments. In October 2007, prosecutors did decide to press charges in a case involving two sisters. Betty Mitchell and Jeannette Nealy had swindled at least $200,000 in McKay dollars through Faith Christian Academy in Polk County.

Stoughton helped the SAO write a news release, detailing the fraud and the sisters’ potential prison time — they would later be sentenced to a combined 17 years — to send to media outlets. There’s no deterrent to like-minded schemers, Stoughton believes, like a nice, scary news story.

When Stoughton shipped a draft of the release up the flagpole at the Department of Education, he says, “The response I got was essentially, This is good news how?”

Stoughton eventually left the department to go to law school. The DOE never sent out that news release.

S

heldon “Klassy” Klasfeld, beaver-toothed and round-spectacled with slicked curly locks, sits in his junk-clogged sliver of an office in the front of Academic High School. The principal and founder of the Boca Raton academy — and perennial candidate for the Florida House — is in full stall-and-divert mode, waxing at length about his hippie days in Pitts

burgh, clearly reluctant to give a tour of his school, located in a nondescript strip mall.

Eventually, he exhausts his tale of hitchhiking to Woodstock and opens a door into maze-like halls of yellow wood panels, scrawled in places with black graffiti.

In two classrooms, high school kids sit in oppressive silence, plowing through workbooks. The teachers are at their own desks, saying nothing. This is not an exam day; Academic High students get credits, and eventually diplomas, by filling out answers in textbooks every day from 8 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

Lunch is not served, though kids can buy chips and soda from vending machines wedged in a corner.

The state is aware of Klasfeld’s special brand of academia. In 2003, the Palm Beach County school board shuttered Academic High — which was then a charter school — for mismanaging its budget and cramming multiple classes into one room. Klasfeld appealed in person to the Florida Cabinet, where he was unanimously denied by a panel including Governor Bush and then-Education Commissioner Charlie Crist.

Within a year, Academic High re-opened as a private school and has received $138,000 in McKay cash, drawing the same milk from a different DOE teat.

Ask Klasfeld, though, and he’s simply providing options to students, most of them with learning disabilities, who would never pass Florida’s standardized tests required for graduation in public schools. “I used to be a big advocate against the FCAT,” he remarks while sitting at a picnic table outside of the hasty tour. “Then I realized it was just bringing more kids to us.”

After some consternation, Klasfeld pulls a student out of class to speak with a reporter. Seventeen-year-old Alex is poch-marked and slow-speaking. Until 2009, he attended Coral Springs’ Academy High School — which received $3.7 million in McKay funds — before administrators there were caught forging parents’ signatures, among other ploys, to continue receiving money after the
disabled students were no longer enrolled. Alex says it’s not entirely just book work at his new alma mater. “We do report cards too,” he says. “About president, about Obama, stuff like that.”

Klasfeld sits across the picnic table from Alex and often interjects nervously. Alex says he wants to enlist in the Army after he gets his diploma. “Then, we should talk about the problems with the schools,” the principal soliloquizes nonsensically. “Sir, yes, sir!”

As the program director of a Fort Lauderdale tutoring and after-school nonprofit called HANDY — Helping Abused, Neglected, Disadvantaged Youth — dealing mostly with poor and African-American children, Kirk Brown is depressingly familiar with the scourge of two-bit McKay schools “preying” on South Florida’s inner cities.

Twenty-eight percent of the scholarship fund’s students are African-American, and 45 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. Ghettoes tend to attract the hustler portion of the McKay schools. In neighborhoods such as Liberty City and Sistrunk, it seems, you can’t swing an FCAT without hitting a dubious educator setting up a fly-by-night school designed to lure kids who might otherwise struggle with standardized testing.

“Some of the words preparatory, Christian, hope, academy, and perhaps Zion usually appear in the name. The administrators make their arrival to a neighborhood known by leafleting and billboard housing projects. Or they show up on Sunday services and prowl for old ladies wearing church hats and toting children. “They look for kids who don’t have traditional parents,” Brown says. “Grandmothers, aunts, uncles — anybody who’s not necessarily going to do their homework and may be swayed by the religious angle.”

The inevitable morning comes when those students show up for class to find only an empty store for rent, or they attempt to transfer and are informed their credits are worthless. “They have that look of somebody whose mates taxpayers invested roughly $224,000 — for dozens of football recruiting violations. Other of Moore’s missing seniors had scattered to private schools, most of them McKay-funded. “It’s an absolute policy in this state now to move at-risk kids to charter or private schools,” Moore says.

A Plantation High reading teacher, who asked that her name not be used, can relate. She has noticed her “problem” seniors disappearing like never before. Sometimes she runs in the street and finds out they’re at Preparatory Zion Academy or someplace similar. “These kids are graduating, but they’re illiterate,” the teacher says. “If you ask me, it’s criminal.”

The principals of neither Carol City High or Plantation High responded to New Times’ inquiries. Public school brass are loathe to publicly admit to pushing struggling kids toward private schools. The illicit practice even has a name: “FCAT cleansing.”

Chris Christie could be the poster child for McKay scholarships. Sweet and glassy-eyed, he was raised by his grandmother in the shadow of Joe Robbie Stadium in Miami Gardens. Mom had died when he was 10 years old while she was giving birth to his brother. Dad made an awkward visit every three years.

Chris had trouble paying attention at Norwood Elementary and lagged behind classmates. In fifth grade, he took an IQ test. He got a 95. “Not retarded, retarded,” his blunt-spoken grandmother Gloria Joachim says, but low enough that the assistant principal recommended a more specialized school day: Have you heard of the McKay program?

So Chris ended up at the South Florida Academy of Learning, located in a storefront at the California Club Mall. Two years later, it went belly up. Next there was Opa-locka’s Mon-signor Edward Pace, a large private high school that accepts McKay scholarships. The classes were too “fast for him,” Gloria says, and she’d find Chris cowering in her bathroom when it was time to go to school. Last year, he finally received a diploma from the unaccredited West Hollywood Private School, which is run by a husband and wife in their converted home.

While transferring her grandson’s credits, Gloria was bewildered to find that, according to the state, he was already enrolled at another school she had never heard of: Muskateer’s Academy in Hialeah. As it turns out, Jacqueline and Erick Cermeño, the couple who run Muskateer’s, had stolen Chris’s McKay information from the South Florida Academy of Learning, where Jacqueline had once worked.

“I’m unimpressed,” 69-year-old Gloria says with a chuckle when asked her opinion of the McKay program. She estimates taxpayers invested roughly $118,000 — for dozens of football recruiting violations. Other of Moore’s missing seniors had scattered to private schools, most of them McKay-funded. “It’s an absolute policy in this state now to move at-risk kids to charter or private schools,” Moore says.

A Plantation High reading teacher, who asked that her name not be used, can relate. She has noticed her “problem”
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$30,000 in the last six years of Chris’s education. “I wish that money could have gone to establishing an area in his own public school for kids with special needs. Then there would have been some accountability.”

Though it sounds exotic, what Gloria is describing is the traditional public special-ed model. “I didn’t have the illusion that he was college-bound,” she says, “but I wish he could have more skills that would help him with a job.”

Now 22, after getting his high school diploma, Chris spends his days pacing Grandma’s living room. He talks about becoming a songwriter, but when art colleges return his phone calls, he tells them Chris isn’t home and hangs up.

“No job, no school, no nothing,” Gloria laments. “If you can think of what to do with him now, let me know.”

Christopher Vaughn decided it was time to leave South Florida Preparatory Christian Academy — the Oakland Park strip-mall school with the ass-thwacking principal — in his junior year, when a classmate tried to stab his brother with a pen.

It was 2010, and Christopher was 18. He was a sturdily built kid with a hard-fought, scruffy beard and loads of ambition despite having sprouted from tragedy: Mom dead of AIDS, Dad always working, six siblings, raised mostly by a grandmother who was getting eaten by Alzheimer’s.

Christopher Vaughn spent three years in a McKay high school before discovering his credits were worthless.

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Christopher Vaughn decided it was time to leave South Florida Preparatory Christian Academy — the Oakland Park strip-mall school with the ass-thwacking principal — in his junior year, when a classmate tried to stab his brother with a pen.

It was 2010, and Christopher was 18. He was a sturdily built kid with a hard-fought, scrappy beard and loads of ambition despite having sprouted from tragedy: Mom dead of AIDS, Dad always working, six siblings, raised mostly by a grandmother who was getting eaten by Alzheimer’s.

He wanted a college degree.

But when Christopher tried to transfer his credits — all As and Bs — from the disastrous private high, they were rejected by the charter Smart School. Then the alternative public school Whiddon-Rogers Education Center turned down his transcript as well. Having made no mistake besides going to the high school his grandmother heard about at church, Christopher faced the prospect of being a freshman again.

“I had to start from scratch,” he says. “Everything just went down the drain. I didn’t feel like being in school no more.”

He hasn’t taken the excuse to give up. He’s now about five credits from graduating from Whiddon-Rogers.

In October the year that Christopher left South Florida Prep, fire marshals shut down that school. The student body wandered between local parks and churches for a month, before the DOE finally suspended its McKay payments, about four and a half years too late.

Principal Julius Brown was sued by the strip-mall owner for falling behind $55,650 in rent, and he faced three other lawsuits related to the tragic van accident on the trip from Orlando. He does, however, know one way to make some money in a hurry.

In March 2011, Brown and partners incorporated Sunrise College Prep in Orlando. According to its website, classes in grades kindergarten through 12 begin August 29.

Sunrise College Prep is not registered with the state, but Brown clearly has a plan: The school website advertises that it accepts McKay scholarships.

After reaching Brown by phone at his new school, New Times could get in only one question: Planning on paddling kids in your new digs?

“I got nothing to say to you!” he bel lowed before hanging up. “South Florida Prep was a long time ago. I’ve moved on!”

Rich Abdill contributed to this report.

Email gus.garcia-roberts@miaminewtimes.com
McKay Scholarship: The Fraud Hall of Shame
By Gus Garcia-Roberts
published: Wed., Jun. 22 2011 @ 10:50AM

If you ask us, a private school that's been busted defrauding the state of scholarship money for disabled kids probably doesn't deserve a second chance. It most likely wasn't the finest institution of learning anyway.

The state clearly doesn't agree.

Yesterday, we published a feature story, "Rotten to the Core", that detailed the blissful lack of oversight private schools enjoy while accepting funds from Florida's McKay Scholarship program.

Due to very little proactive investigation, most fraudulent McKay schools are probably getting away with it. But the Department of Education has proven that 25 schools engaged in financial fraud, plus one where the owner was discovered to be a felon using a frontwoman.

According to our unscientific survey-- using websites and corporation records as a guide-- at least eleven of them are still in business.

Here are the fraudsters, along with how much money they've accepted from the program. If this blog post came up when you were Googling a prospective school for your child, we would suggest you keep looking.

1. Florida Christian Institute for Academic Excellence
   County: Lee
   McKay cash received: $6.8 million
   Fraud: Collected money for student who was no longer enrolled, apparent signature forgery
   Still around: No

2. Leadership Academy
   County: Broward
   McKay cash: $6.5 million
   Fraud: Payments for at least ten students who didn't go to the school, more forgery, no proper school building, staffers with criminal records
   Still around: No

3. Agape Christian Academy
   County: Orange
   McKay cash: $5 million
   Fraud: Summer school payments for students who didn't attend summer school
   Still around: Yes

4. Aukela Christian Military Academy
   County: Broward
   McKay cash: $4.9 million
   Fraud: Payments for at least ten students who didn't go to the school, more forgery
   Still around: Yes

5. Success Academy
   County: Duval
   McKay cash: $4.8 million
   Fraud: Payments for at least 52 students who actually went to public school
   Still around: Yes
6. Academy High School  
County: Broward  
McKay cash: $3.7 million  
Fraud: Payments for at least 13 students who didn't go to the school, forgery  
Still around: No

7. Hope Academy  
County: Miami-Dade  
McKay cash: $2.8 million  
Fraud: Staffers with criminal records including grand theft, possession of cocaine with intent to distribute, and the sale of marijuana  
Still around: Yes

8. Center of Life Academy  
County: Miami-Dade  
McKay cash: $2.2 million  
Fraud: Payments for students who were no longer at the school, forgery  
Still around: Yes

9. CHC Private Schools 1  
County: Brevard  
McKay cash: $2 million  
Fraud: Report purged  
Still around: No

10. Choice Preparatory School  
County: Miami-Dade  
McKay cash: $1.6 million  
Fraud: Payments for students no longer at school  
Still around: Yes

11. Solid Rock Community School  
County: Pinellas  
McKay cash: $1.5 million  
Fraud: Getting people other than parents to sign McKay information without parents' consent  
Still around: Yes

12. New Jerusalem Christian Academy  
County: Putnam  
McKay cash: $1.5 million  
Fraud: Purged  
Still around: No

13. Heritage Academy  
County: Leon  
McKay cash: $753k  
Fraud: Purged  
Still around: Unknown

14. Paladin Academy  
County: Miami-Dade  
McKay cash: $1 million  
Fraud: Cashing McKay checks without parent signatures  
Still around: No, but its parent company, Pennsylvania-based Nobel Learning Communities, is still kicking.

15. Community Learning Institute  
County: Gadsden  
McKay cash: $893k  
Fraud: Payments for students who were incarcerated or otherwise no longer at the school  
Still around: Yes

16. Muskateer's Academy
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>McKay cash</th>
<th>Fraud</th>
<th>Still around</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Miami-Dade</td>
<td>$794k</td>
<td>Stole students' McKay information from other schools, used it to falsely enroll them at Muskateer's</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putnam</td>
<td>$349k</td>
<td>Accepting funds for tutoring and group therapy, despite not providing those services</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pasco</td>
<td>$490k</td>
<td>Payments for at least ten students who didn't go to the school, more forgery</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duval</td>
<td>$344k</td>
<td>Purged</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hillsborough</td>
<td>$206k</td>
<td>Payments for a students who didn't go to school. Owner was already incarcerated in federal prison for a $3 million bank fraud scheme</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td>$268k</td>
<td>Payments for students who didn't go to the school, payments received even after school was closed</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hillsborough</td>
<td>$312k</td>
<td>Owner, who had criminal record including kidnapping and witness tampering, used frontwoman to register school</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td>$73k</td>
<td>Receiving McKay payments without getting parent signatures</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
26. Cyber Tech Academy
County: Duval
McKay cash: $54k
Fraud: Didn't physically exist
Still around: No

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Showing 6 comments

NickR 7 months ago
#19. Dvual -> Duval, please.

Telcomm 7 months ago
 Millions in tax waste that should have gone to help families dealing with kids in need and all you are concerned with it a misspelled word!! Shame on you.

Lpiedra523 7 months ago
If you have a school to add to that list who should you contact? Hialeah, Florida

GusGarciaRoberts 7 months ago  in reply to Lpiedra523
gus.garcia-roberts@miaminewtimes.com

Iloveyfamily 3 months ago  in reply to GusGarciaRoberts
My spouse works at Florida Christian Institute in Ft.Myers. The owner/principal/athletic director/basketball coach/accountant is behind by 5 paychecks. The employees are begging to know what is going on and he makes up excuses. We have lost the home we were renting and have lost it due to not getting paid. We lost our vehicle because he didn’t pay my husband. I can’t even work or afford to send my children to daycare to even find work. He is a fraud!!!! He has recently been in trouble for signing parents signatures on checks and they were all returned by the bank. He lies to parents because all he cares about is basketball. Last year the teachers hadn’t been paid in months but a ups driver snuck in a package of new Nike basketball uniforms and sweatsuits. When asked how he was able to afford it he said it was donated!! His son was involved in a theft at school where he stole another teachers purse and days later he (the owner) begged the teacher not to tell on his son because he didn’t want him back in jail. His students were the ones who killed an NFL star in Miami! He made excuses for them so the school wouldn’t have be investigated. He purchased a new home a few months ago. There are so many things he has done it’s ridiculous. I plan on going to my local news about this also! it is time this asshole is investigated!!

Elaine Heyler 7 months ago
This article is so true. I teach in public middle school and we get kids from McKay private schools that have disabilities and after year or two in McKay school the learning gap widens 2x’s, then I have to fix them. And we do.
Rotten to the Core, Part 2
A notorious football recruiter has a new “diploma mill,” and you’re picking up the tab.

BY GUS GARCIA-ROBERTS

ASHAAD EASTERLING WAS SHOOTING HOOPS IN THE GYMNASIUM AT GOULDS PARK WHEN A LOOMING, SHARPLY DRESSED MAN WITH A LONG SCAR UN-JOGGED OVER TO HIM. “COME TO MY SCHOOL,” HE TOLD THE 17-YEAR-OLD MANNER-OF-FACTLY, REFERRING TO CHOICE PREPARATORY SCHOOL, THE OUTFIT IN A CORNER OF THE TINY PARK BUILDING. HE PROMISED RASHAAD THAT AFTER A STINT AT HIS PRIVATE SCHOOL, THE KID COULD GET A SPORTS SCHOLARSHIP TO ANY TOP COLLEGE HE WANTED.

The man, Antron Wright, then made the same pitch to Rashaad’s bone-thin mom, Roslyn, who lives in the projects across the street from the gym. He told her he’d get Rashaad a McKay Scholarship — a state-funded tuition voucher for students with disabilities — despite the fact that the kid, who earned good grades at Miami Southridge Senior High, didn’t have a disability.

They didn’t ask too many questions. To Rashaad, who wants to be either an NBA player or a veterinarian, the dapper sports recruiter offered a chance to escape Gould’s bombed-out environs for Bethune-Cookman University, his dream school.

But there was no happy ending for Rashaad — who left the school with a black eye and a semester of lost credits — or many of the school’s former students who spoke with New Times and complained of transcripts held hostage and rejected diplomas. Even a former principal, Shauna Jones, who helmed the school in 2010, declared, “Choice Prep is a diploma mill. I wish I had known what Wright was about before I got involved.”

Since this past spring, Wright has been evicted from a Coconut Grove office and his Brickell Avenue apartment, court records show. Photocopier-leasing company Precision Copier Service sued him and his school for allegedly not paying a $4,800 bill. Even Key Biscayne’s Rusty Pelican claims Choice Prep fleeced the restaurant with $1,600 in worthless checks for a May 12 graduation dinner.

In an interview five months ago — before the school was barred from competing and investigated by the NCAA, before he cleared out the building and disconnected his cell phone — Wright, a 36-year-old former substitute teacher, insisted to New Times: “This is no sports factory. I’m just trying to give these kids a better chance to succeed.”

And he has done it mostly on your dime. Since 2007, the Florida Department of Education has doled out $1.74 million in vouchers for students to attend Choice Prep. The bulk of that — $1.62 million — was in McKay checks. Mismanagement and an egregious lack of oversight in the program, which cost taxpayers $149 million last year, is the target of a continuing New Times investigation (“Rotten to the Core,” June 23). In this case, the state tossed cash at a school run by a murky figure with a documented history of bogus education, illegal sports recruiting, and defrauding the very fund he was allowed to continue drawing from.

As a teenage football player in Miami at the turn of the ’90s, Antron Dematrius Wright was the sort of talent he is known for unearthing today: from the streets but destined for the big lights. In a brief March interview, before escorting a reporter from the Goulds Park building, he told New Times that his father and brother were murdered when he was a child and that another brother spent years in prison. Dusty Miami Herald clips show a Goulds-raised all-Dade and all-State linebacker. Transferring from Southridge to Palmetto his senior year, Wright saw his local star rise as he filled out a solid six-foot-one, 240-pound frame.

“All during the storm, I was thinking about college because college is my dream,” he told a reporter when he was 17, referring to Hurricane Andrew, which virtually destroyed Goulds in 1992. “For a lot of us here, sports is our only ticket out.” He has lived by that credo. Without the grades for a Division I school, Wright instead earned an associate’s degree from Santa Fe Community College in Gainesville before enrolling at Daytona Beach’s Bethune-Cookman.

But even as he studied sociology and set the school record for total sacks, Wright was already showing a distaste for paying bills. Beginning in 1997, he has been declared “delinquent” in court multiple times for failing to pay child support to two women in Levy County. Beginning in 1997, he has been declared “delinquent” in court multiple times for failing to pay child support to two women in Levy County.

In April 1999, at age 23, Wright signed with the NFL’s Baltimore Ravens. He was released only five months later, after minimal playing time. His pro-playing career’s last gasp was on sub-NFL teams such as the Chicago Enforcers and Florida Bobcats. Cereemoniously dumped from football, Wright found another way to infiltrate the sport; by recruiting inner-city athletes and connecting them — by any means possible — to top college scouts.

On paper, Wright was a $6.44-per-hour substitute teacher in Miami-Dade County Public Schools who spent one year as an assistant football coach at South Miami High in 2002. But unofficially, as the New York Times reported, “Wright is into some gangster shit. However, I’m not surprised Murdoch has been getting away with his crap in England and the United States for so many years. The type of scandalous, slanted coverage Murdoch’s News Corp. is known for was born and bred in Great Britain. And just like the pilgrims, sleazy journalism migrated to the New World.”

As much as the left-wingers want to see Fox News go down, it wouldn’t be in President Barack Obama’s best interest if that happened. Fox News employs more than 53,000 people. A lot of them are hard-working Americans who will be out of jobs if Murdoch’s empire crumbles. The last thing the president needs is more people in the unemployment line.
Rotten to the Core, Part 2 from p10

Times exposed in December 2005, Wright was the recruiter for University High, an outfit awarding high school diplomas to academically struggling football players. Southridge's principal had banned Wright from campus for luring athletes from his alma mater.

There were no classrooms or tests at University High. The low, low price for a degree that gained so-called graduates entry to top football universities such as Auburn, Florida State, Florida, Tennessee, and Temple: $399.

Wright's partner pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor for running a private school with a criminal record. Wright — who the Times also exposed, had bought his teacher certification from a criminal operation offering no classes — was never charged with a crime.

Two years later, he went into business for himself. This time, a chronically under-regulated state scholarship fund provided the financial bounty. In the fall of 2007, Wright's Choice Preparatory School registered with the Florida Department of Education (DOE) to receive McKay vouchers. The nomadic academy bounced from churches to storefronts before landing in the tiny orange building in Goulds, which the school paid the county a total of $26,000 to rent for a little more than a year.

In 2008, the DOE followed a tip from Choice Prep's disgruntled office manager and discovered the school had accepted $9,500 in McKay payments for students who had long ago dropped out or been incarcerated. In order to accomplish the caper, parents' signatures had apparently been forged. Wright was ordered only to repay the money and was allowed to continue accepting McKay cash — a common procedure for the fund, as New Times has revealed.

Choice Prep was not exactly a rigorous educational institution. Students in third through 12th grade were crammed into a couple of classrooms for two hours of courses in the morning. Then, after lunch — almost always hot dogs, chips, and juice drinks — the girls gabbed in the gym while the football team practiced.

"It felt like day-care center with elementary classes," recalls Sakia Duperme, who spent two years at Choice before graduating this spring; her tuition was paid by the DOE-run Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program. "I wasn't learning nothing."

Those minimal classes appear to have been Wright's means to his real end: his football squad, which, according to a high-level source close to the NCAA investigation, is the target of an NCAA probe.

Wright filed paperwork entering Choice Prep's football team for competition in 2009. He hired a string of high-profile local coaches, such as former Florida State University star and NFL player Lamont Green and current Hialeah-Miami Lakes High head coach Jerry Hughes, neither of whom responded to requests for comment for this story.

The team traveled to Key West and Orlando for tournaments. Choice Prep finished with losing records both seasons it played, but Wright's true goal, according to the person close to the NCAA investigation, was getting his players seen by Division I coaches.

Agrees 17-year-old cornerback Israel Smith: "That was all he cared about. He told the whole football team he would get us scholarships to any colleges we wanted."

NCAA investigators are studying Choice Prep's football rosters to see which players ended up in university ball.

On March 25, Florida High School Athletic Association (FHSAA) investigators visited the Goulds school building — something the DOE never did. The sports honchos weren't impressed. Says investigator Seth Polansky: "We saw some kids around a table and a TV in the gym, and that apparently was a class."

They also discovered the school was not accredited by any of the 14 agencies required by the FHSAA. Choice was suspended from competition.

But the DOE doesn't require schools to be accredited in order to receive McKay checks. Choice Prep remains on the state's list of schools eligible to receive scholarships.

It's unclear whether Wright plans to reopen Choice Prep in another location this fall. He'll contend with a burgeoning angry mob of former students if he does. That crowd will include Sakia Duperme, who says her Choice Prep diploma was rejected by Miami Dade College. At 17, the aspiring doctor will have to return to the 10th grade, which was when she transferred from Southridge.

"He's preying on his own people," says Sakia's mother, Simone, who adds the real blame lies with the state. "It's kind of strange, because they give away all this money but they never wonder, Why is this school inside of a gym?"

As for Rashad Easterling, the aspiring NBA player/veterinarian, his tenure at Choice Prep lasted only a few months. His mom says she yanked him after his left eye got punched by a gangbanging classmate with a grudge against Rashad's housing project. Wright didn't call the police because the aggressor was on the football team, she says. When Rashad transferred back to Southridge, Wright refused to send the young man's transcript. "They kids been going faithfully to that school," she says of Choice Prep. "It's a crime."

Notes left on the doors of Wright's two Miami-Dade properties — a $200,000 Homestead house and a $123,000 townhouse in Southwest Miami-Dade — went unanswered. But he apparently threatened Sakia and Simone Duperme with litigation for speaking to New Times. He denied any allegations of McKay fraud, says Simone. "I have money," Wright scoffed. "Why would I need to steal from the government?"

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The team that jogged onto a Fort Lauderdale basketball court for the regional quarterfinal playoff wearing baggy silver and blue jerseys sure didn’t look like a high school squad. Their center was 6’8”. Four of their guards were over 6’5”. The squad had reserves coming off the bench that were 6’6” or 6’7”.

To Rick Medvin, head coach of the opposing Fort Lauderdale Christian High boys’ squad — on which the tallest player was a 6’3” center — it must have felt like something from the Twilight Zone: “Attack of the Monsters From Miami.” “All I remember is they were big,” he says, sounding a bit dazed three years after that game in February 2008.

The intimidating team was from Choice Learning Academy, a two-year-old private school for 130 poor kids in grades 3 through 12. CLA was located in a building leased from a homeless shelter. Head coach Bernard Wright, a short, bulky man wearing a pressed dark suit, paced the sidelines and flailed like a miniature Rick Pitino.

In youth ball, height is everything. If you can dominate the boards, block shots, and bully your way to easy hoops, the game can quickly get ugly. That looming center, Joel Gierbolini, a long and lean senior baller freshly transferred from his native Puerto Rico, scored 18 points, dunked with ease, and sent four blocks flying. CLA demolished Lauderdale Christian by a score of 78-26 and moved on to the regional finals. With a win-loss record of 25-3, the Hoyas were used to being on the right side of beatdowns.

The Miami Herald was in love. The paper, which had named Gierbolini to its all-county team, said the 52-point pummeling “proved why [CLA] is the best Class 1A team in Miami-Dade or Broward counties.” It published a fawning profile about Bernard Wright and his “disadvantaged” miracle squad. But rival coaches weren’t wearing blinders. In local high school circles, Wright’s name has screamed recruiter — an outlawed occupation — for more than a decade. In 1998, this publication exposed him as the designated talent thief for a powerhouse Miami High squad that was stripped of a state championship. Wright trotted out rosters in consecutive years that were almost entirely composed of very tall seniors. That doesn’t happen organically, especially when your high school population is about 50.

“Oh, I knew something was going on,” Medvin says. “But you can’t go to the FHSAA [Florida High School Athletic Association, the sport’s governing body] unless you have something concrete.”

Boca Raton’s Grandview Prep finally eliminated CLA in the regional quarterfinals. The team finished one win from a state title game.

Bernard Wright was apparently emboldened. The next season, after the school had abruptly changed its name to Center of Life Academy, he unveiled a roster filled with giants from around the world. It was unlike anything ever seen in local high school sports.

There were three students from the Ivory Coast: center Jacques “Willy” Kouassi (6’10”), power forward Nonma Baru Adjehi (6’9”), and small forward Bernard Morena (6’7”). Center Ismaila Dauda (6’10”) and small forward Paul Sati Gombwer (6’7”) were from Nigeria.

There were two talented Bahamian natives — guards Brian Delancy and Edvardo Burrows — and a Dominican-born guard, Kelvyn Valdez.
Talent Trap from p15

As if by magic, Wright had also snagged Tony Mitchell, a 6’7” junior phenom freshly transferred from a Texas high school. The explosively fast Mitchell, who was already committed to Kansas State University, was on the shortlist of the best high school players in America.

In all, 11 of the 14 players on CLA’s 2008-09 basketball roster exceeded 6’3”. Eight of them were born, and lived until the year before, in foreign countries.

How Wright pulled it off is a tale of single-minded determination, even as the school he ran solely to achieve his basketball master plan fell into chaos.

He employed international scouts to lure foreign players with the promise of college scholarships, housed them in an Opa-locka home with little or no adult supervision, and had them fed and driven to and from school.

It was all completely against Florida athletic rules, which state that students cannot be poached from other schools — or countries — cannot live with coaches or boosters, and cannot be provided free services or meals. But FHSAA executive director Roger Dearing says this case goes beyond basketball: “To me, this is human smuggling.”

Wright, age 52, is not fond of New Times, which has run exposés that have cost him two assistant coaching jobs. “Don’t you ever fucking call this number again,” he seethed over the phone after being contacted for this article. “You’re a fucking scumbag, and if I ever fucking catch you near me, you’re going to regret it. You better lose this fucking number.”

The basketball court inside the Miami Rescue Mission’s Community Activity Center was unspectacular but well maintained: hardwood floors, cleanly painted free-throw and three-point lines, and intact nets. The single set of bleachers could hold 200 fans squeezed armpit to armpit. Dust danced in the sunlight streaming from the high windows facing NW First Avenue between 20th and 21st streets, where drifters slouched against the wall outside.

Bernard Wright didn’t see a gymnasium in a men’s homeless shelter. He saw the stage for his own redemption.

Wright’s résumé is that of a consummate hustler. Starting in 1986, he spent 21 years working off and on for various Florida state agencies involving children. He was a protective investigator, a family services counselor, and a juvenile probation officer. He was also the co-founder of an unlicensed nude club that in 1999 saw him arrested for hiring ladies to dance naked in his Three Fingers Lounge, a slouch-and-slip package store in Liberty City. And he was a soldier, enlisting in the National Guard in July 2001 and serving as a reserve for eight years.

Wright, who wrestled and played football at Miami High, was betrayed by his “nature. He majored in criminal justice at Grambling State University, where — a bit of foreshadowing here — he failed Marriage and Family 402 and Deviant Behavior 412, according to transcripts he submitted with an application for a state job.

Wright has always been most confident on the sidelines of a playing field, where he commands respect like a drill sergeant.

He coached the Bucktown Buccaneers, a semipro football team in Miami; became the assistant boys’ basketball coach at Carol City High; and then scored the gig that would vault him to local notoriety. In 1993, Wright became the assistant coach, under Marcos “Shakey” Rodriguez, of the Miami High boys’ basketball team, which won eight titles in 16 years but was dogged by rumors of recruiting.

In 1995, Shakey scored the men’s basketball head coaching job at Florida International University and left Wright to assist a new coach, Frank Martin. Three years later, the Miami High Stingerkees — packed with very tall transfer students and led by current NBA stars Udonis Haslem and Steve Blake — won yet another state championship. Then the ax fell.

New Times published an investigation exposing rampant recruiting violations on the title-winning squad. Haslem and Blake, among others, used fabricated home addresses or lived with coaches in violation of state regulations. Two inside sources claimed Wright had held a very specialized role: recruiter. “That was all he was supposed to do,” said one. The other source added that he would make poaching trips to meet promising players within other schools’ boundaries.

The FHSAA commissioner called it the most “blatant violation of... rules against recruiting that [he had] ever encountered.” His association stripped Miami High of the championship. In the aftermath, Frank Martin was canned. Wright also left Miami High, returning to his old buddy Shakey’s side as assistant coach at FIU.

Two years later, another New Times investigation rocked that team as well: Future NBA star Carlos Arroyo had punched a team manager in the face. There were dubious grade changes for student athletes. And Shakey had filled his coaching and playing ranks with old faces from the toxic 1998 Miami High squad. Shakey Rodriguez resigned. Wright was released.

It seems everybody but Wright moved on from the disgrace. Frank Martin rakes in $1.2 million a year coaching the Kansas State Wildcats. And Wright (no relation), a pariah on the local basketball scene as well: Future NBA star Carlos Arroyo had punched a team manager in the face. There were dubious grade changes for student athletes. And Shakey had filled his coaching and playing ranks with old faces from the toxic 1998 Miami High squad. Shakey Rodriguez resigned. Wright was released.

But by 2005, when he first saw that basketball court in the Miami Rescue Mission, Wright was still out of coaching. Besides his National Guard money, he was making $28,000 a year keeping tabs on juvenile delinquents’ whereabouts. He had been divorced four times. In Richard Burton-esque fashion, three of those failed marriages were with the same woman, named Jacqueline. Wright fathered several children and lived in a small unit in a dingy Hialeah apartment building.

So he must have sensed a coup when he got involved in a new academy being planted in the Miami Rescue Mission by administrators who shared Wright’s unique educational vision.

Bernard Wright didn’t see a gymnasium in a men’s homeless shelter. He saw the stage for his own redemption.
employed by CLA in 2008 allegedly assaulted a cop whose squad car was blocking his rubbish truck. Charles Jackson was a 320-pound, down-on-his-luck former Los Angeles Raider who slept at the men’s homeless shelter when his mom wouldn’t have him.

With his ragtag army assembled, Wright grabbed their CLA’s yearly win-loss records and rosters indicate a crescendo of ambition. In the 2006-07 season, the team was composed mostly of local students and finished a very respectable 16-5. The next year, Wright picked up a handful of Puerto Rican ringers, including Gierboli, and finished a game out of the state finals.

Puerto Rican students don’t require student visas, known as I-20s, to play in the States. Before the 2008-09 season, Wright and Smith — whom Derrick Williams calls “the I-20 man” — decided to no longer be limited by U.S. territories. “They were greedy,” Williams says, rubbing his palms together as if in simulation. “After the team did so well in 2008, they were like, ‘Let’s get it popping with the overseas players.’”

But even before such popping commenced, Sheldon Brown smelled a rat. In August 2007, the then-32-year-old educator was hired as the school’s head teacher for $28,000 a year. He also taught night classes and coached track. Brown, who taught previously in Broward and Miami-Dade public schools, is short, trim, and normally soft-spoken. But, as CLA administrators would learn, he’s prone to vengeance. “I always told them,” he says, “you’re going to be hearing from Mr. Brown.”

Roughly 85 percent of the students at CLA, including his niece, were there on state learning-disability grants known as McKay and Florida PRIDE Scholarships, Brown says. The teacher knew the school was receiving as much as $3,000 per month for each kid’s tuition and, with 130 students enrolled, had more than enough cash for proper supplies. But the school had taken to purchasing outdated textbooks from a book depot for as little as a dollar each.

Brown approached Rushae Sweeting. “The state’s giving us money to buy these kids’ new books,” he told her. “Why don’t we use it?”

But, says Brown, “she didn’t want to hear it.”

Within two months of his hiring, a schoolhouse Bay of Pigs broke out between Brown and Sweeting, full of lobbed insults, questionable court filings, and eventually a bombshell.

The battle featured publicly recorded accusations from both of them. She called him “gay” in front of students and colleagues and said he went to a “gay nightclub” and “acted like a girl.” Brown responded by showing up at her office with his wife and telling Sweeting: “I got something for you.” After asserting his heterosexuality, he filed a discrimination complaint with the EEOC, arguing he was being treated badly for being male. Sweeting fired him a week later, on November 5.

The DOE investigator found eight cases in which guardians claimed they hadn’t seen scholarship documents or attendance cards where their signatures appeared. The signatures were often scrawled in three different handwriting styles over the months, the investigator discovered, implying that several administrators were in on the scheme.

Because many of the parents and students with “questionable attendance and payment records” couldn’t be reached by the DOE, the agency was able to prove only that the school swindled $14,415. CLA’s lawyer, German Morales, wrote that the school was “appalled” and denied any wrongdoing, but offered to return that amount in six monthly installments. The DOE accepted.

Meanwhile, Christopher Sweeting had quietly incorporated a new name with the same initials: the Center of Life Academy.

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2) Some fares permit one free stopover in Barcelona.
In fall 2008, a Serbian high school senior took the long flight to Miami. He was headed, he believed, to a prestigious upstart academy where he would play basketball and get a scholarship to a top American college like Kansas State or Duke. Though the kid’s parents paid for the plane ticket, his tuition in Miami was comped. “There was a scholarship or something,” Serbian basketball scout Mihailo “Mike” Vidovic recalls. Vidovic had arranged for the transfer after Jerome Smith and Bernard Wright emailed him.

If Lubomir “LJ” Rustic expected ivy-covered school buildings and a clean dorm room, he was rudely awakened. He was shuttled to a house “in a really tough neighborhood,” Vidovic recalls over the phone from Serbia. There he met his ceiling-scraping roommates, who demanded respect. That’s when it came to basketball, he was a different person. He demanded respect. That’s why the school had so many problems. “The only thing he cared about was basketball.”

That’s a surprisingly boldface name. At the time, Dominican-born Julio Subero was president of the International Basketball Federation (FIBA), a global governing body for basketball. He resigned in 2009. Subero did not respond to multiple messages requesting comment.

Valdez recalls the house was a three-bedroom in Opa-locka. Though neither Valdez nor Vidovic names the other roommates, they were presumably of the crop of basketball players Wright and Smith imported that fall: Ivory Coast natives Jacques “Willy” Kouassi, Bernard Morena, and Ismaila Dauda, and Nigerian Paul Sati Gombwer.

“Four coaches brought them food,” Valdez says. “There was an adult living with them, but Valdez can’t remember the man’s name.”

The living situation freaked out the Serbian kid, says Vidovic. LJ complained to his parents, who set him up with roommates living in South Beach. Once there, he claimed he was injured and refused to go to school.

On October 6, Smith sent a testy email to the Serbian scout. He copied Bernard Wright, Derrick Williams, and Christopher Sweeting on the typo-laden message. “Mike, LJ is my responsibility and if he doesn’t show the effort that needed for school I will have no choice but to suspend his I-20 visa,” Smith wrote. “LJ needs to come to school, attend practices, and let us prepare him for the next level. To make matters worst I don’t have a way of getting in touch with the people he is staying with or him. I have no problem releasing him from the I-20 status, but as you know if anything happen to him it would be your responsibility not mind.”

LJ returned to Serbia within a month of arriving in Miami. “It was a disaster,” Vidovic says. “The thing that surprises me the most is that somehow these guys were allowed to run a school.”

That the international ballplayers lived in a house together was an open secret. Charles Jackson—the semihomeless ex-Raider—says he recalls Jerome Smith shuttling the kids to and from school. Sheldon Brown

Bernard Wright’s International Dream Team

The 2008-09 basketball roster for Center of Life Academy (CLA) was full of imported giants. Many have or will go on to top college basketball programs.

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Brian Delancy 6’3” Nassau, Bahamas Krop High, Miami
Paul Sati Gombwer 6’7” Kaduna, Nigeria Committed to Florida State
Kristin Kelly 6’4” Miami Head coach, CLA
Jacques Kouassi 6’10” Abidjan, Ivory Coast Committed to Auburn University
Blair Miller 6’3” Miramar University of Central Florida
Tony Mitchell 6’7” Dallas, Texas University of North Texas
Bernard Morena 6’7” Abidjan, Ivory Coast Committed to Auburn University
Kelven Valdez 6’4” Santo Domingo, DR Indian Hills Community College
Alberto “AJ” Vinet 5’7” Miramar Kansas State University

Source: Hometeamsonline.com

“THE THING THAT SURPRISES ME THE MOST IS THAT SOMEHOW THESE GUYS WERE ALLOWED TO RUN A SCHOOL.”
Talent Trap from p20

remembers they had a “special van” for the purpose. Derrick Williams says he heard about the house but was willfully ignorant: “I didn’t want nothing to do with any of that.”

Before his international dream team hit the court in fall 2008, Bernard Wright took CLA “independent.”

While the squad would still be under FHSAA rule, it couldn’t participate in the playoffs. This might have signaled Wright’s shifting priorities: Cleaning up in profile-building regional and national tournaments was more important than making the local playoffs. CLA had become a big-time talent funnel to Division 1 colleges.

The team won the prestigious A-Rod Basketball Classic that December and the 20-team South Florida MLK Classic the next month. CLA finished with a 12-8 record that year.

But that summer, Wright’s reign finally succumbed to CLA’s signature anarchy. In August 2009, Christopher Sweeting filed suit against Derrick Williams and registrar Sophia Roberts. He claimed the pair was sabotaging the school, making strategic “derogatory comments” about the Sweetings, and stealing information in order to start their own outfit, called Global Academy.

The suit was eventually settled out of court. Williams admits they were planning on opening a school in the Little Haiti Cultural Center. He says Wright was in on the idea, which fell through when a principal investor, who “it turns out was a crackhead,” didn’t come through with start-up cash.

Wright wasn’t named in the lawsuit. But the Sweetings terminated him in early August 2009 as the suit was filed. “Ey Coach B really messed up,” star guard Tony Mitchell wrote on his Facebook page August 3. “He got fired from CLA.”

In the aftermath, Wright’s former phenoms have fanned out to top high school and college programs across the nation, where they’ve been haunted by dubious transcripts and eligibility concerns. Bahamian native Brian Delancy ended up playing for Krop High under Shakey Rodriguez. The team — according to a July 2010 article, they now live with a youth basketball coach named Darien Knox.

He’s a member of the University of North Texas Mean Green, which plays in a more lenient conference. Mitchell, who ignored an interview request, has made his feelings clear on Facebook: “CLA messed all us up for real.”

African big men Willy Kouassi and Bernard Morena ended up at Central Park Christian High in Birmingham, Alabama, and both plan to play for Auburn University next year. According to a July 2010 Birmingham News article, they now live with a youth basketball coach named Darien Knox.

A News reporter attempted to reach Wright for that story. Wright, via text message, claimed he was in Afghanistan with the National Guard and declined to comment. But if Wright was in the Middle East, he bought his own plane ticket. According to his Army personnel file, he received an honorable discharge in July 2009, a full year earlier.

On a recent visit to Center of Life Academy, New Times is greeted by Rushae Sweeting, who giggles vacantly when asked about Bernard Wright. “You’ve done your research!” she says several times and deflects questions to current athletic director Caryl Buchanan.

“The school’s changed a lot,” Buchanan says. “They are now students first and athletes second.”

Christopher Sweeting, who is now listed on the school’s website as executive director, ignored emails and calls to his cell phone for comment. He also didn’t respond to a note left on the door of the Sweetings’ Miami Gardens home.

In December 2010, Wright and a Goulds pastor, Mark Coats, filed papers incorporating Grace Christian Preparatory Inc. The address given — 11000 SW 216th St. — is that of Coats’s church, Grace of God Baptist Church. One of the few pages set up on the school’s website (“Home of the Lions,” one banner announces) tells parents how to apply for a McKay Scholarship.

On a recent weekday, small children wearing loose-fitting neckties mill about the tiny church building with little supervision while munching sandwiches. In a back office, Sophia Roberts — formerly of CLA — says Wright isn’t there and she doesn’t know when he’ll be back. Wide-eyed and narrow-faced, she seems miserably eager to return to her microwaved lunch.

Pastor Coats later explains Grace Christian has 50 kids in grades one through 12, but he hopes that number will expand. He’s unconcerned with Wright’s past. “I find him to be a reputable young man,” the 48-year-old Coats says. “He’s a product of the inner city who went off to college and made something of himself.”

The school doesn’t have sports yet, says Coats. “I’m sure we’ll get to that down the line.”

But basketball hoop posts stand in the church parking lot, with backboards stashed near the door for quick access. It appears Wright has been getting his games in.

Email gus.garcia-roberts@miaminewtimes.com

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Choice Preparatory School, Football "Diploma Mill", Gets More Taxpayer Dollars

By Gus Garcia-Roberts
published: Fri., Oct. 14 2011 @ 8:00AM

Choice Preparatory School was banned from sports competition last year after an investigator for the state athletic association found no evidence of classes taking place there.

Its director has been involved in two schools found to have defrauded the Department of Education of funds earmarked for kids with disabilities. Hell, even South Florida Prep's former principal called it a "diploma mill".

There has been every indication that this school is not making good use of state education funds. Yet last month, the Department of Education dutifully sent it a check for almost $40,000 from the McKay Scholarships for Students With Disabilities Program for the new school year.

Since 2007, the department has blindly thrown $1.66 million in taxpayer-funded McKay money at the troubled school, while never paying it a single site visit.

Last week, House Democrats grilled Department of Education honcho Michael Kooi on the woeful lack of oversight in the McKay program he's in charge of. Part of a growing movement to reform McKay rules in the upcoming legislation, the representatives cited a July *New Times* feature which exposed disastrous flaws in the management of a fund that doled out $150 million last year.

"I read the article in the *New Times*, and I was frankly furious [that] the state paid these fraudsters," said Rep. Marty Kiar, a Democrat from Davie. "That means that money given to these fraudsters is now not able to be used for children who really need it."

Change can't come fast enough. *New Times* exposed Choice Preparatory School in July. The academy, run out of a tiny Goulds park building by notorious football recruiter Antron Wright, was barred from sports competition after a Florida High School Athletic Association investigator paid a visit and in lieu of classes, found students milling around and watching television in a gymnasium.

Choice Prep spawned another school, Choice Learning Academy. In 2007 and 2008, both schools were busted defrauding the McKay program through identical schemes involving apparent forgery. They both repaid the money and were allowed to stay in business. (Choice Learning Academy has changed its name to Center of Life Academy.)

Choice Prep ended last school year amid furore over diplomas which students claimed weren't accepted by local community colleges. It administrators had allegedly bounced checks all around town, and it was no longer welcome at its park location.

But this year, it moved to a new location: 17755 Homestead Avenue. On September 1, the DOE sent Choice $39,990.25 to pay tuition for 24 McKay students.

And despite being banned from competition, the school has been using the name Choice Learning Academy to play games in football, basketball, and even volleyball, as evidenced by their MaxPreps pages. Note the address: 17755 Homestead Avenue.

FHSAA executive director Roger Dearing confirmed that the schools playing Choice Prep-- including Hialeah's Horeb Christian and Miami's Northwest...
Choice Prep’s shiny new campus.

Christian-- "are in violation of the association's rules."

Yesterday, Riptide paid a visit to the school's new digs, a small, unmarked office unit in a dingy yellow complex. Derrick Williams, the school's director, refused to answer our questions about the school.

Asked about fielding sports teams despite being barred from competition, the big, round-bellied Williams shot back: "I don't know what you're talking about. You don't know what you're talking about."

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Michael Kooi, Head of Fraud-Plagued McKay Scholarship Program, Talks to Riptide About Reform

By Gus Garcia-Roberts
published: Tue., Oct. 18 2011 @ 11:15AM

What a difference three months makes. In July, after New Times published a feature exposing a disastrous lack of oversight in a $150-million-a-year taxpayer-funded voucher program for disabled kids, Florida Department of Education honcho Michael Kooi said this newspaper "should be ashamed" of its reporting.

Now, after getting grilled by House Representatives amid a growing number of high-ranking voices calling for change in the program, Kooi himself is joining the Florida Board of Education in recommending more oversight measures be added in the upcoming legislature.

The board is calling for more stringent background checks and basic audits to ensure that students are learning something. The measures don't address all of the programs flaws-- most notably the inability to pay any significant number of site visits to McKay schools-- but hey: baby steps.

Last week, Riptide was able to interview Kooi for the first time. Here's the transcript of our chat, edited for brevity.

New Times: After we first published our story on McKay, you called it "back alley journalism run amok." Your tone seems to have softened.
Michael Kooi: Yes, I think that's true. Look, we're always looking for ways to improve the program, whether that insight comes from parents or from you. That's why the state board has recommended that we make these changes. McKay is a really great program that gives an education to 22,000 kids. Sometimes in these news stories that uncover flaws, those good aspects can get lost, and I didn't want to see that happen.

In your remarks to the House reps, you said that most of the problem schools exposed in our story were closed. Were you saying that they were closed as a result of the story, or were already closed when we reported it?
Well, the DOE doesn't have the power to close any schools. What we can do is withdraw them from the McKay program. So I hope I didn't give the impression that we could close schools. But yes, my understanding is that most of the problem schools you wrote about were no longer in the McKay program. In many cases there were minor infractions--a lot of them certainly weren't minor--but in those cases, the schools might have remained in the McKay program.

In fact, a good amount of the schools we wrote about were still in operation. And in a follow-up published later, we showed that of 25 schools shown to have committed fraud, approximately 11 were still receiving McKay money. Why are school administrators who have defrauded the state allowed to continue receiving McKay funds?
First off, I don't know about the accuracy of those numbers. But I know that in some cases, when a school has made an effort and gotten rid of the administrators involved in the fraud, we have allowed them to remain in the McKay program.

Here's a very recent example. Choice Preparatory School's administrators have now been shown to have committed McKay fraud in two different schools-- Choice Prep and Center of Life Academy. They were allowed to repay the money both times. A Florida High School Athletic Association visited the school and found no evidence of classes going on, so they were barred...
from competition. Yet just last month, Choice Prep received $40,000 in McKay funds for the upcoming school year.
I certainly don’t want to see money going to a school that is fraudulent. The Choice Prep case happened in 2006, before I took my position. But my understanding was that the decision was made to allow them to continue in the program after the school cleared out the bad actors. If you or the FHSAA or anybody else has information on cases of fraud, we always welcome you sharing it with us. If there’s no education going on at this school, that's obviously something that concerns us. But one of the difficulties is that we really can’t look into the quality of education.

[Editor's note: Kooi later emailed to clarify that Choice was investigated by the DOE in 2008, when we was in fact in office. He added that the resulting report “did not state that the school was guilty of fraud”, but that Choice had "unjustly received" funding for two students who were actually incarcerated at the time.]

As head of the McKay program, what changes would you like to see in the upcoming legislation?
Well, I wouldn't want anything beyond the State Board's package of recommendations.

Tell me about the audit requirements the State Board is recommending.
They’re recommending the same sort of testing that is given in the Tax Credit Scholarship Program. The tests would only be required in schools of thirty students or more. Schools that have more than thirty kids, their aggregate test scores would be sent to an independent reviewer. You have to be very careful with testing, especially in the McKay program, because a lot of these students have learning disabilities. They left public schools for a reason. So it takes some creative thinking to figure out how to make testing work in the McKay program.

Why doesn't the state conduct its own background checks of potential McKay administrators?
The easy answer is because that’s not in the legislation. The legislation specifies that the administrators of the school should run their own background checks. There's reasoning behind that legislation, and I think one of the main reasons is cost. The idea is that since the schools want to be a part of the McKay program, they should take care of their own background checks.

But then it kind of boils down to the honor system.
In a way. But it should be noted that if we receive a tip about something going on at a school, we can and have demanded that they submit their background check materials.

Is three site visits to McKay schools a year--and ten overall to "Choice" schools--enough?
Expanding that number is not part of the state board's package of recommendations. Look, we do rely on tips from parents and the like, and perhaps raising that number should be something that’s discussed. Frankly, we don't have enough resources to visit each McKay school in the state.

Also in your remarks to the House, you-- and a Republican representative-- made the point that parents "vote with their feet" when it comes to bad McKay schools. But in situations when the students' guardians aren't making the right decisions, should that burden fall on the Florida taxpayer?
I think 99-percent of the time, the parent is in the best position to choose what's best for their kid in the McKay program. However, I think that you are right that there are some situations where the parents might no be sophisticated enough, and I think that's the reason the state board made the recommendations it did.

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The Principal’s Office

A New Times exposé prompts reform of a billion-dollar educational catastrophe.

By Gus Garcia-Roberts

Five months ago, Miami New Times exposed a taxpayer-funded voucher program that, even on the overblown Floridian scale of dysfunction, is a stunning boondoggle. Students who receive the John M. McKay Scholarship for disabled students are taught in public parks or not at all, the story showed. Administrators and teachers at schools given millions by the program have rapsheets that include cocaine dealing, kidnapping, witness tampering, and burglary. Kids in these schools are even sometimes paddled, a tactic outlawed in most Florida counties. Fraud is rampant.

Yet over the past 12-plus school years, the state has tossed more than a billion dollars — including $50 million in the past year — at the McKay program. Now, finally, Tallahassee is taking up reform. Last week, Florida Rep. Rick Kriseman, a St. Petersburg Democrat, recommended measures — including regular site visits to schools and verified background checks of faculty — that would address the McKay program’s most egregious flaws. “The Department of Education (DOE) seemed to think that this isn’t a very big deal, but I think it’s a huge deal,” Kriseman says. “When I read [New Times’ investigation], I was aghast.”

The story — “Rotten to the Core,” published June 23 — gained the attention of prominent educators and politicians throughout the state. Miami-Dade Public Schools Superintendent Alberto Carvalho called the McKay mess “heartbreaking.” Sen. Stephen Wise, a Jacksonville Republican who originally co-sponsored the program, declared our findings “appalling. I’m amazed this wasn’t more scrutiny about where the money is going.” The program’s progenitor, former Florida Senate President McKay, a Republican from Bradenton, concluded: “Somebody better get off their ass and fix those problems.”

McKay was inspired to create his namesake program in 1999 after struggling to find an appropriate school for his learning-disabled daughter. The idea: provide state-paid tuition vouchers for disabled children to receive specialized education in private schools. The proposal was attached to legislation for Gov. Jeb Bush’s polarizing A+ Plan for Education, a voucher system for students from failing public school districts.

In the next several years, limitations on the McKay scholarship’s scope — such as a requirement students be failing in public schools and a cap on the number of eligible kids per county — were gradually removed by Republican legislators. In 2006, the state Supreme Court declared Bush’s voucher program unconstitutional and a drain on public schools. But the McKay fund, which was left intact, boomed by nearly 40 percent. Today, more than 20,000 students attend just under 1,000 McKay-eligible schools, two-thirds of which are religious. Miami-Dade County leads the state in McKay spending, with 151 private schools here receiving $31.8 million — more than 20 percent of the entire fund — in the fiscal year ending last June. Since inception, the program has cost Floridians more than $1.133 billion.

In a two-month investigation, New Times uncovered a McKay-funded cottage industry of fly-by-night schools operating in storefronts, churches, and dingy homes. Students spent entire school days filling out workbooks or hanging out in a gymnasium watching television. One class — which an Oakland Park principal had the gall to call “business management” — consisted of shaking cans on street corners.

Because the schools are private — although accepting publicly funded vouchers — the DOE is not allowed to monitor curriculum. For the same reason, the department claims it can’t bar corporal punishment, despite parents’ complaints that children are being paddled.

State law allows the DOE only three routine site visits total each year, ensuring that roughly 99.7 percent of McKay schools aren’t checked by the agency sending them checks.

The results have been predictably catastrophic, including “schools” that don’t actually exist receiving tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars, or being held in

Luke’s Gospel

FAMU is no Penn State. Save the Marching 100.

By Luther Campbell

Luther Campbell, the man whose boot-shaking madness made up the U.S. Supreme Court stand up for free speech, gets as nasty as he wants to be for Miami New Times. This week, Campbell comes to the defense of Florida’s largest historically African-American university, which has been caught up in a deadly hazing scandal. This past weekend, the St. Petersburg Times published a lengthy article in which experts suggested Florida A&I University shut down its storied Marching 100 band in the wake of the November 19 death of Robert Champion. The drum major allegedly died after receiving blows during a hazing ritual. The story quoted Walter Kimbrough, hazing expert and president of Philander Smith College in Arkansas, this way: “Your chances of having a marching band hazing incident are zero if you don’t have a functioning marching band.” That’s absolute BS.

This all is tragic, and law enforcement should investigate and criminally charge anyone involved in the young man’s death. But let’s be real here. Hazing goes on whenever you are part of a secret society or an organization. And it’s not just fraternities and sororities. Fire and police department rookies are hazed all the time. In Major League Baseball, veterans constantly play jokes on younger players such as throwing pies in their faces or making them dress up like women.

The FAMU problems could have happened on any college campus. But because we’re talking about the storied college band from one of the nation’s best-known black colleges, the media wants to paint FAMU as an institution lacking control. It’s totally unfair. FAMU’s scandal is unlike those at Penn State and Syracuse, in which legendary coaches Joe Paterno and Jim Boeheim, along with administrators, turned a blind eye to the sexual predators in their midst. FAMU’s longtime band director, Julian White, cracked down on hazing. He did what Paterno and Boeheim wouldn’t do. White dismissed more than 100 band members who participated in hazing and many times canceled scholarships. Four others were expelled. Unfortunately, FAMU fired White, making him a scapegoat.

People want to crucify FAMU now and forget all the school’s great accomplishments, such as playing at three presidential inaugurations and five Super Bowls, as well as representing the United States in Paris for France’s 200-year Bastille Day celebration. There is no doubt Champion should not have been hazed. But White fought hard to stop that.

If the Marching 100 disappears, future generations of talented African-American musicians won’t get the chance to play. That would be a shame.
dangerous locations that are ultimately closed not by the state, but by fire marshals. Since the program’s implementation, the DOE has investigated 38 McKay schools, and in 25 of those cases “substantiated” claims of fraud. More than $50 million has been funneled to those schools. The true scope of fraud is likely exponentially larger.

Many of the administrators who had orchestrated the fraud were allowed to continue receiving McKay funds. Only three cases reviewed by New Times resulted in arrests.

Worse, this past summer, Gov. Rick Scott signed a bill approved by the Legislature for an expansion of the McKay program that circumvented the court and essentially revitalized Bush’s voucher plan. Students with minor medical problems—including allergies to peanuts and bee stings—became eligible for McKay funds. Already, 883 additional students have enrolled in the program. Another 51,000 are now eligible.

But change appears to be finally coming from many directions. In October, members of the Florida House K-20 Innovation Subcommittee demanded answers from Michael Kooi, the DOE honcho paid $110,000 annually to oversee programs including McKay and charter schools. “I read the article in the New Times, and I was frankly furious the state paid these fraudsters,” railed Rep. Marty Kiar, a Democrat from Davie. “That means that money...is now not able to be used for children who really need it.”

In September, the State Board of Education proposed, as a “legislative priority” in the upcoming session, a “school accountability bill” that would strengthen background checks for operators of McKay-eligible schools. It would also implement minimal standardized testing and auditing in the schools. Lobbying to “beef up accountability” will also be on the Miami-Dade School Board’s agenda in the legislative session, Superintendent Carvalho told New Times in October.

On November 29, Rep. Kristeman took the boldest step yet, sending a letter to the K-20 Innovation Subcommittee’s chair, Rep. Kelli Stargel, urging nine basic measures to increase oversight of the McKay program. Among Kristeman’s recommendations: Every new McKay location would receive a site visit, faculty background checks would be required, accreditation and teacher certification would be required, there would be minimal curriculum monitoring, and those who commit fraud would be subject to stricter prison sentences. “It is my hope that none of us will ever have to read stories again,” Kristeman declared, “about scammers and rip-off artists bilking precious dollars that should be spent on educating our most vulnerable children.”

The easiest way for the bill to become law is with the support of Stargel, a Lake-land Republican who’s already balking at one aspect of the recommendations. “I wouldn’t want to mandate to a private school what their curriculum is going to be,” she recently told The [Florida] Current.

“If there’s enough pressure put on the chair,” says Kristeman, “these changes will happen quickly.”

Rep. Stargel’s email address, if you happen to be wondering, is kelli.stargel@myflorida-house.gov. Her office number is 850-488-2270.