

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 • MADISON, WI 53701 • (608) 256-8900 • WWW.FFRF.ORG

January 30, 2014

SENT VIA MAIL & EMAIL TO:

Commissioner@fldoe.org

Ms. Pam Stewart  
Office of the Commissioner  
Florida Department of Education  
325 West Gaines Street  
Tallahassee, FL 32399

Re: Investigate LifeSkills Academy II Participation in McKay and Florida Tax Credit  
(FTC) Scholarship Programs

Dear Commissioner Stewart:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a troubling participant in McKay and FTC scholarship programs. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization that has 20,000 members across the country, including more than 900 Florida members and a local chapter, the Central Florida Freethought Community. Our purpose is to protect the separation between state and church. FFRF opposes state funding for unaccountable religious schools through state vouchers and scholarships. We urge you to immediately investigate and suspend scholarship payments to LifeSkills Academy II, a Christian school in Daytona Beach.

Prior to opening LifeSkills Academy II in Daytona Beach, Taron and Rodney Monroe operated LifeSkills Academy in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. That school closed abruptly in 2013.<sup>1</sup> A priest in charge of the building that was rented by the school said that school operators moved out "in the dead of the night."<sup>2</sup> Families of students were left scrambling to find a new school.

On January 21, 2014, eleven Wisconsin State Representatives introduced AR 23, which would call upon the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to inform "the relevant state agency in the state of Florida" about the abrupt closure of LifeSkills Academy.<sup>3</sup> While that resolution has not yet passed and may not pass, you should be aware of the troubling history of the operators of LifeSkills Academy.

We want you to be aware of information that just came to light in the course of an FFRF request for open records concerning the Milwaukee school. LifeSkills Academy was removed from the National School Lunch Program in 2012 after the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) investigated the school's

---

<sup>1</sup> Dec. 17, 2013 DPI Letter. *See Exhibit 1*

<sup>2</sup> Richards, Erin. "Milwaukee voucher school LifeSkills Academy closes 'in the dead of the night.'" *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* 14 Jan. 2014. *See Exhibit 2*

<sup>3</sup> 2013 AR 23. *See Exhibit 3*

mismanagement of school lunches. The investigation into the lunch program began with appalling and shocking allegations in a June 28, 2011 letter from DPI that stated that it had received reports that noncompliant meals were served.<sup>4</sup> Those allegations included such claims as, “falsification of applications,” serving food from pantries that was “expired,” serving “Ramen noodles with hot sauce and a cup of water for lunch,” whole milk being “cut” with water, serving KoolAid in place of juice, and “repeated issues with bats.” *Id.* DPI officials wrote that such “concerns are unacceptable and, if validated, are out of compliance with the federal and state regulations that govern the National School Lunch Program.” *Id.* In March 2012, LifeSkills Academy was warned that “claims for reimbursement will not be paid for September 2011 through February 2012.”<sup>5</sup> In the face of questions about mismanagement, LifeSkills Academy withdrew from the program.<sup>6</sup>

News reports and public records have also documented allegations that Taron and Rodney Monroe have falsified documents.

- The DPI investigation of the National School Lunch Program stated that LifeSkills Academy provided “falsified documentation of actual meals served.”<sup>7</sup>
- A December 17, 2013 letter from DPI stated that Taron Monroe admitted to falsely sending communications to DPI under the name of the school’s administrator.<sup>8</sup>
- On January 15, 2013, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reported that Pastor Bill Vigue, of Palm Coast, Florida, said he never agreed to be on the board for LifeSkills Academy II.<sup>9</sup> Yet, Bill Vigue is listed as an officer of LifeSkills Academy II, Inc. in corporation filings with the state of Florida.<sup>10</sup>
- An emailed report to DPI in June of 2011, from a person claiming to be a former school employee, charged that the Monroes falsified records and sought to use the employee’s identity.<sup>11</sup> The former employee also alleged that convicted felons were working in the school and that the Monroes falsified school attendance records. *Id.* It is unknown whether any of those allegations were substantiated by DPI. These emails were obtained through a public records request.

Notably, students at LifeSkills Academy struggled with basic reading and math, with only one of the 56 students testing proficient in either subject on 2012 state exams.<sup>12</sup> Despite their poor operation of the Milwaukee school, Taron and Rodney Monroe opened LifeSkills Academy II in Florida last year and touted their ability to get government grants for religious schools.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> June 28, 2011 DPI Letter. *See Exhibit 4.*

<sup>5</sup> March 1, 2012 DPI Letter. *See Exhibit 5.*

<sup>6</sup> March 9, 2012 Monroe Letter. *See Exhibit 6.*

<sup>7</sup> *See Exhibit 5*

<sup>8</sup> Dec. 17 2013 DPI Letter. *See Exhibit 7.*

<sup>9</sup> Richards, Erin. “Leaders of closed Milwaukee voucher school are now in Florida.” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* 15 Jan. 2014. *See Exhibit 8.*

<sup>10</sup> Dept of State Division of Corporations Record. *See Exhibit 9.*

<sup>11</sup> June 2, 2011 Email to DPI. *See Exhibit 10.*

<sup>12</sup> 2012 State Exam Test Results. *See Exhibit 11*

<sup>13</sup> *See Exhibit 8.*

It is our understanding that you have the authority to remove participating schools from the McKay Scholarship program. This is in accordance with Fla Stat. § 1002.39(7)(a)(2), which provides that the Commissioner of Education:

May deny, suspend, or revoke a private school's participation in the scholarship program if the commissioner determines that an owner or operator of the private school is operating or has operated an educational institution in this state or in another state or jurisdiction in a manner contrary to the health, safety, or welfare of the public.

Fla. Stat. Sec. § 1002.39(7)(c) provides:

The commissioner may immediately suspend payment of scholarship funds if it is determined that there is probable cause to believe that there is:

1. An imminent threat to the health, safety, or welfare of the students; or
2. Fraudulent activity on the part of the private school.

Similar provisions apply to the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program.

We urge you to immediately begin an investigation into whether LifeSkills Academy II is compliant with McKay and FTC Scholarship program requirements. Due to the egregious record of LifeSkills Academy in Milwaukee, and serious concerns for the welfare of young students and the public in Florida, payments to LifeSkills Academy II should cease immediately. May we hear from you in writing about what actions you have taken to address these concerns?

Sincerely,



Patrick C. Elliott  
Staff Attorney

Enclosures