

Parents left in lurch as voucher-aided private school closes amid conflict



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Rachael Henderson (left), with other moms at the War Hill Christian Academy Christmas store. Henderson is among those who say the money they raised was stolen. (Courtesy photo)

A Christian school in North Georgia that took taxpayer dollars to educate students with learning disabilities has closed amid criticism from parents over the quality of education and claims of theft from a fundraiser.

The uproar at War Hill Christian Academy started after a handful of moms suspected someone had pilfered a cash box where they'd deposited proceeds from a Christmas sale. This started a chain of events that led to an accreditation downgrade, an ongoing review by the Georgia Department of Education of the school's use of taxpayer-funded vouchers and even an investigation by the sheriff in Dawson County.

Cindy Martin, a mom with a son who attended War Hill, played a pivotal role. She and several others pushed for a criminal investigation after they said money they raised at the sale — it was for a Valentine's Day dance — went missing.

Martin said Don Allen, the pastor of the church that controlled the school, threatened to expel her son and the kids of other moms who wanted police involved. She said he confronted them in the school parking lot and accused them of having a "rebellious" spirit after they called the sheriff's office about the money.

The meltdown could serve as a cautionary tale ahead of a major expansion of state-funded subsidies for private education. Critics at War Hill echo some voucher opponents who say private schools are less accountable than public schools and that Georgia is handing over taxpayer dollars to them with minimal oversight.

The Georgia Department of Education has limited purview over the type of vouchers used at War Hill, which are for students with certain learning disabilities or medical conditions. When lawmakers established the program in 2007, they made it clear that it “shall not be construed to expand the regulatory authority of the state” over private schools beyond what’s “reasonably necessary” to enforce the voucher requirements.

A key requirement: that a school earns and maintains accreditation from one of a half dozen “entities,” including the Georgia Accrediting Commission.

Georgia taxpayers will soon be spending considerably more on vouchers through a program to be overseen by the Georgia Student Finance Commission. Last spring, lawmakers and Gov. Brian Kemp [pushed Senate Bill 233](#) into law. Starting in the fall of 2025, it will give any student at a lower-performing public school access to \$6,500 a year in state funds if they go to private school or choose homeschooling. It could cost taxpayers \$140 million annually.

Allen, who [leads a ministry called RLN Global and the FM radio station Victory 91.5](#), said in a brief telephone exchange that his lawyer told him not to give interviews. Then he hung up. Allen did not respond to a follow-up voicemail message seeking his lawyer’s identity and contact information.

Allen’s tempestuous relationship with some parents led to open warfare on social media, with a Facebook page [dedicated to “Exposing War Hill.”](#)

Allen announced in a March letter that the school would be closing its doors “as a traditional school model” on May 23. He attributed it to competition from less expensive online programs, adding that the school would relaunch to support both them and homeschooling parents. He also wrote that the preschool would close sooner, at the end of March, giving parents little time to find new child care.

Accreditation at risk

Around that time, the school’s accreditation was put at risk due to parent reports to the Georgia Accrediting Commission.

“During an investigation, we found that the parents had valid complaints,” Phillip Murphy, executive director of the commission, told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

War Hill was operating as a traditional, full-time K-12 school, but lacked enough teachers with proper educational backgrounds and credentials to do so, he said. “This school was not following our standards for a traditional education.” It’s unclear how many students were enrolled at War Hill, which also offered preschool.

Martin has an April 26 letter from Murphy that said War Hill’s middle and high school accreditation was “revoked” by his board of directors effective April 22 while the elementary school’s accreditation was downgraded to provisional status.

Murphy said in the interview that while the middle and high school levels did lose “traditional” school accreditation, they were then given “NTEC” accreditation, which is for part-time schools.

Murphy said his board granted the “[Non-Traditional Educational Center](#)” accreditation because the commission wanted graduating students to have a diploma from an accredited school. He added that he would revisit the school’s accreditation were it to reopen in the fall.



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Children shop at the War Hill Christian Academy Christmas fundraiser. (Courtesy photo)

Concern about student supports

Patty Martin, who is not related to Cindy Martin, said her granddaughter, who was 6 at the time, received inadequate support for a disability.

Patty Martin, who has custody of her granddaughter, said the girl is a straight-A student but has post-traumatic stress disorder from her early childhood and had an education plan from her prior public school that included emotional support.

But when she had meltdowns during first grade at War Hill, Patty Martin said, an administrator would take her to her office and use “taunting” language “instead of her trying to talk her off the ledge, you

know, calming her down.”

Rachael Henderson, another mom, said she visited the school weekly, and noticed that her son and his classmates were often left to themselves as teachers attempted to deal with one boy’s emotional outbursts. Henderson, who did not have voucher funding, said her son did not get the gifted services she said she was promised. Instead, she said, he read ahead on his own and was asked to tutor older students.

State and local investigations

Patty Martin said she reported to the state that she thinks War Hill was overbilling. She said the school told her tuition for 2022-23 was \$6,000, yet she said she endorsed more than \$13,000 in state checks for the school that year.

It wasn’t until the next school year, at a different private school, that she realized something: The new school charged \$10,000 tuition, and she was asked to endorse only that much in state payments, she said. When she asked the school and then someone at the state Department of Education about it, she said she was told both times that the state only paid the tuition amount.

The Georgia Department of Education said it is reviewing such complaints. A spokeswoman said the agency continued giving War Hill voucher funding after the accreditation downgrade, paying the school for the entire school year, because it still retained accreditation. But in early June, the agency sent the school formal notice of parent complaints and gave it until month’s end to respond, according to the spokeswoman.

Meanwhile, Cindy Martin and Henderson said the sheriff’s office initially refused to investigate what happened with their Christmas fundraiser. They said Allen told them in the school parking lot that he’d called in a favor to the Dawson sheriff and that no officer would be arriving to take their report.

The two moms said the sheriff’s office ultimately did open an investigation, but both said they were told it was closed by early February.

In early June, the AJC filed an open records request for the case file. A week later, the sheriff’s office responded that it had reopened the case and would not release the records. Georgia’s open records law exempts documents from release if they are part of an ongoing law enforcement investigation.

Sheriff Jeff Johnson declined to comment.

The local newspaper, The Dawson County News, reported that two of his deputies assigned to the case of the allegedly missing funds [wound up losing their jobs](#). The news outlet reported that the deputies entered the War Hill building in early January with neither consent nor a warrant and that Allen objected.

Hopes for more oversight

Cindy Martin is no crusader against vouchers. She’s well known in Forsyth County as a critic of books in school libraries that she believes contain pornographic material. She and another mom there [filed a federal lawsuit](#) after the school board restrained them from reading passages from the books into the public record during meetings. [They won](#) the suit.

She said she supports the pending expansion of state funding for private schools and that she had an outstanding experience at a different Christian school where she’d sent her children previously. She

said she hopes events at War Hill result in more oversight of the taxpayer dollars that pay for vouchers. She wants parents to have more of a voice — an avenue for complaints — at each school that gets vouchers than she felt she and the other moms had at War Hill.

“I just want the voucher system to be accountable and ethical,” she said, adding that she was astonished by what unfolded at the school and at the sheriff’s department. “It’s amazing what God revealed through a little Christmas shop.”