

# Schools Without Rules: An Orlando Sentinel Investigation

After student alleges abuse, principal shuttered one  
private school, opens another.

Part 3 of 3 Parts

By Beth Kassab, Leslie Postal and Annie Martin  
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Yakol Christian School in Melbourne is located in a shopping plaza and run by a church that has a connection to Samuel Vidal Jr. and wife Alicia Fox-Vidal. (Red Huber / Orlando Sentinel)

fter Palm Bay Police began investigating principal Samuel Vidal Jr., who was accused last year of lifting the shirt of a 15-year-old student and putting his mouth on her breast, Vidal shut down his private Christian school.

**A** But the police investigation didn't stop Vidal, 41, from winning approval from the Florida Department of Education to open a new private school in Palm Bay and collect nearly \$200,000 in state-backed scholarships.



Samuel Vidal, 41, a Palm Bay pastor and principal, was arrested and charged with lewd or lascivious molestation of a child in February of 2017. (Brevard County Sheriff's Office)

And even after Vidal was charged with felony lewd or lascivious molestation, prompting the state to pull scholarships from the second school, it approved yet another school this year with ties to Vidal.

The case illustrates just how easy it can be for operators to open private schools with little scrutiny and to benefit from public scholarships in Florida, which runs one of the largest school choice programs in the country.

James Bartoszak, a former Palm Bay Police officer who helped investigate Vidal, said he was surprised to learn how little oversight the schools receive from the

education department, which oversees the scholarships, sometimes called vouchers.

“The taxpayer money is important, but the ones who are really missing out here are the students,” he said.

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State education officials declined to be interviewed for this story but said in an e-mail that the department employs 13 full-time and seven part-time staff dedicated to overseeing the state’s three scholarship programs — McKay, Gardiner and Florida Tax Credit — which this year will send nearly \$1 billion to almost 2,000 private schools.



James Bartoszak, a former Palm Bay police officer who helped investigate Samuel Vidal, said he was surprised to learn how little oversight the schools receive from the education department. (Sarah Espedido / Orlando Sentinel)

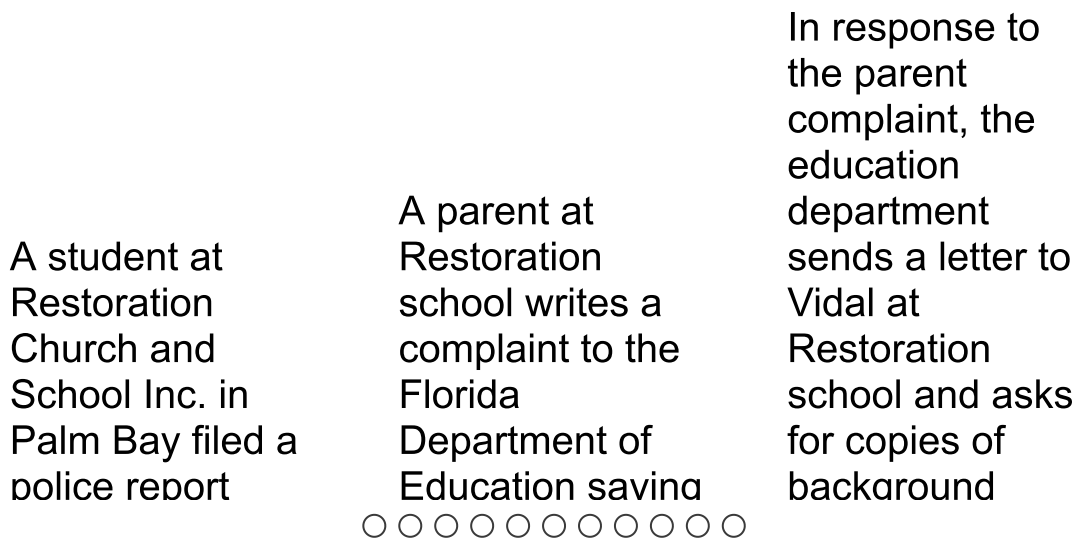
A spokeswoman said the state holds private schools accountable to the full extent of the law.

“We are proud that parents in Florida have more options than ever before when making critical education decisions,” wrote spokeswoman Meghan Collins. “We

take seriously our oversight authority for K-12 scholarship programs in private schools.”

Public records show the state failed to notice red flags about Vidal’s schools.

## Timeline: One school closes, another opens



On April 7, 2016, the 15-year-old girl at Vidal’s Restoration Church and School Inc. in Palm Bay told police that Vidal locked his office door, lifted her shirt and put his mouth on her breast.

She filed a report the same day, and authorities collected DNA evidence from her skin and bra. Vidal agreed to give Palm Bay detectives a DNA sample.

About a week after the 15-year-old girl contacted police, the state education department received a complaint from another Restoration parent that noted the allegations against Vidal.

Adam Miller, executive director of the department's Office of Independent Education & Parental Choice, then wrote a letter to Vidal, asking him to provide copies of background screenings of all school employees and other documentation. Because Vidal never responded to the letter nor to an additional one sent in June, the department revoked Restoration's eligibility to receive voucher money on Aug. 4, 2016.

But Vidal had already closed that school by the time the scholarships were revoked. And two days earlier — Aug. 2, 2016 — the state had approved scholarship money for a new Palm Bay school called Overcomers Ministry Inc. that was opened by Vidal's wife, 26-year-old Alicia Fox-Vidal.

A department spokeswoman said staff did not notice the connection because the two schools used different addresses to apply, and Restoration listed Samuel Vidal as the owner and director, while Overcomers listed Alicia Fox-Vidal as the owner and director.

**GALLERY: See pictures from our Schools Without Rules project. »**

# SEARCH

## Central Florida private schools that received vouchers

Searchable database: Find Florida private schools that received vouchers and how much. (Sentinel Graphic)

But a look at the corporate records for both schools would have revealed that the three names on the board of directors for Overcomers were also listed on the board for Restoration with one exception: Restoration lists Samuel V. Vidal Jr. and his father Samuel V. Vidal Sr. on the board, while Overcomers listed only Samuel V. Vidal without the junior or senior. Alicia Fox-Vidal and Meribeth Zayas, Vidal's sister, also are listed on both boards.

State law "does not authorize the department to take action against a school based upon the people listed on the corporate documents," the spokeswoman said.

Vidal served as an administrator of Overcomers, according to police and other people familiar with the school.

In February, lab results came back and showed a match between the DNA collected from the girl and Vidal, records show, and police arrested and charged him. No trial date has been set for Vidal, who has no previous criminal record in Florida.

His attorney, Mark Germain, said Vidal denies the allegations.

“My client maintains his innocence and is extremely upset over these false accusations,” Germain said in an e-mail. “He looks forward to his day in court.”

Shortly after Vidal’s February arrest, the education department sent a letter to Overcomers, suspending it, too, from receiving the scholarships. The school, which received more than \$184,700 for 41 students last school year, closed sometime in the spring.

“The Department has reason to believe that Restoration and Overcomers are the same school,” the March 15 letter stated, adding “it is apparent to the department that Samuel Vidal and Alicia Fox-Vidal are the directors or have equivalent decision making authority over Overcomers.”

This summer, the department gave approval for yet another school, called Yakol Christian Inc., just a mile from Overcomers’ old address.

Vidal and his wife aren’t named on the corporate records that were filed in April for Yakol, which means “to overcome” in Hebrew. But the couple are involved with a church that shares the same name and storefront space as the school.

“

**The Department has reason to believe that  
Restoration and Overcomers are the same school.**

— Florida Department of Education in letter to Overcomers school

On Aug. 9, a day before public schools started in Brevard County, Orlando Sentinel reporters visited the school tucked into a Melbourne shopping plaza behind an El Sombrero restaurant.

Alicia Fox-Vidal told reporters that she and her husband were involved with the Pentecostal church, and not the school.

## Interactive Timeline



Joe Burbank/Orlando Sentinel

President Trump and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos visit a private school that benefits from one of Florida's school voucher programs at Saint Andrew Catholic School in Orlando on Friday, March 3, 2017. From left, Governor Rick Scott, Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., and Jared and Ivanka Trump.

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A look at how school voucher use has grown in Florida over time. (Sentinel Graphic)

“We don’t have anything to do with the school,” she said.

Samuel Vidal, she said, “does the sermons every now and then” for the church. Fox-Vidal said the criminal allegations against her husband are false.

“You can accuse anybody of anything,” she said.

Yakol Christian lists a woman named Inez Honsell as president. Fox-Vidal said the couple know her from an earlier church they ran. Manuel Zayas, who, according to Brevard records, is married to Meribeth Zayas, is vice president of the school.

Attempts to reach Manuel and Meribeth Zayas were unsuccessful.

On a second visit to the school in September, Honsell declined to be interviewed. Herick Hernandez, who said he is a Pentecostal pastor who had recently come on to help run the school, said Vidal asked him to speak at last year’s graduation ceremony at Overcomers.





Read all three parts of Schools Without Rules ([1](#))

Some of the children from Overcomers are now at Yakol, which Hernandez said has 19 students, all of whom are on the state scholarship. Step Up for Students, the nonprofit that administers most of the scholarships for the state, said 11 students at Yakol are on the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship — worth at least \$69,000 to the school.

Hernandez said Vidal and his wife aren't involved in the school because of the pending criminal prosecution.

“They know their limits. They know their boundaries,” he said. “We’re talking about God-fearing people.”

Vidal and his wife started their first private church school together called TDR Academy of Palm Bay in August 2014, according to Florida corporate records. Just two months earlier, they had filed for personal bankruptcy, but the education department does not consider personal financial records when determining whether operators can receive money from the state programs.

TDR Academy closed after one year. In all, three schools run by Vidal or his wife received at least \$392,000 from the public programs since 2014.

Bartoszak, the Palm Bay officer who retired in early September, said he's seen evidence that parents don't realize how few rules govern private schools.

"I think it stays under the radar," he said. "It does not receive attention until something happens."

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## *Our Schools Without Rules series*

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## **About Schools Without Rules**

The Orlando Sentinel spent months reporting on Florida's scholarship programs, which will send nearly \$1 billion to private schools this year.

Sentinel reporters Beth Kassab, Annie Martin and Leslie Postal visited 35 private schools in Orange, Osceola, Lake, Seminole and Brevard counties. In most cases

the visits were unannounced, and the reporters identified themselves and asked to tour the school and talk with staff.

The Sentinel also reviewed thousands of pages of Florida Department of Education documents, court records and other materials in addition to interviewing dozens of people, including parents, students, school operators and policy experts.

The reporters and multimedia specialist Adelaide Chen used a state database of student enrollment and scholarship dollars for the 2016-17 school year to analyze how and where the money is spent and create an interactive search function for readers to look up their own towns and schools throughout the state.

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