

# Schools Without Rules: An Orlando Sentinel Investigation

Orlando private school with troubled history took millions of dollars in state scholarships.

Part 2 of 3 Parts

By Annie Martin, Leslie Postal and Beth Kassab  
Staff Writers



Agape Christian Academy is a long-troubled Pine Hills school that has received millions of dollars through state-backed scholarships. (Red Huber / Orlando Sentinel)

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gape Christian Academy took \$5.6 million in state-backed scholarships during the past five years as the private school repeatedly violated the few rules that govern Florida's growing scholarship programs.

Former employees, parents, students and public records tell the story of a school that submitted falsified fire safety inspections, hired people with criminal records and didn't pay some of its teachers — all while relying on state scholarships that pay private school tuition for children from low-income families and those with special needs.

Michélangé Bertrand, who started working at Agape in 2003 as a math teacher and later became principal, said students used hand-me-down textbooks — some dating to the Bill Clinton presidency — after public schools moved on to new versions. And owners Ingrid and Richard Bishop, he said, rebuffed his requests to buy laptops or tablets for classrooms.

“In any business, you have to invest back into the organization,” said Bertrand, who left the Pine Hills school in 2013 and now is principal of another private school in Orange County. “I felt like there was no investment back into improving the school.”

State education department officials, who for years forgave a series of scholarship violations, pulled the plug on Agape's funding this summer and banned the school from receiving scholarships for at least 10 years.

Agape, which in Greek means self-sacrificing love, remains open and, according to one parent, is allowing at least some of its students to attend without paying tuition. About 115 children attended the school last year and nearly all of them used a scholarship — paid for out of the state budget or through donations from businesses that receive a dollar-for-dollar credit on their state tax bills.

The number of children using the scholarship programs has tripled in the past decade to 140,000 students at nearly 2,000 private schools. Many of those schools, which are subject to little state oversight, are heavily reliant on the state scholarship programs to keep their doors open.

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The Bishops, who founded Agape 15 years ago in one of Orange County's poorest neighborhoods, declined to be interviewed for this story or allow reporters to tour the school. Blair Jackson, Agape's attorney, said the school is fighting the department's decision to remove it from the scholarship program.

Before the suspension in August, the state had found reasons to revoke Agape’s eligibility three times since 2014. But each time, the school was allowed back in the scholarship business.

## Years of problems

During the 2014-2015 school year, Agape was twice suspended from the program — once for submitting test scores months past the state’s deadline and then because the school ignored requests before returning money for a student who wasn’t attending class, according to state records.

In February 2016, an inspector from Orange County Fire Rescue asked the state education department to urge the school to fix its broken alarm systems and keep exits from being blocked. Chief Fire Marshal Bruce Faust said the school had failed inspections since early 2014, calling the problems “life safety critical.”

## 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.

# HOW FLORIDA IS SENDING MORE KIDS TO PRIVATE SCHOOLS

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

But just two weeks earlier, Agape had submitted a letter on Orange County government letterhead, with a signature from an inspector, saying the school had

passed the fire inspection. The school submitted a similar letter — identical, except for the dates — almost exactly a year earlier.

When education department staff showed the letters to Faust, records show, he was clear: His department did not produce the letters, and the inspector who supposedly signed them had never seen them before.

As a result, the education department suspended Agape's scholarships in March 2016. But just four months later, the school was again receiving scholarships after agreeing to a settlement: It had to pay back \$227,094 it received while in violation of the fire code and terminate a woman who had been leading the school's operations. Court records show she had a prior conviction of Medicaid fraud in 2006.

About the same time, the department told Agape to terminate a teacher who had drug-related convictions during the 1970s and 1980s. State scholarship laws require employees at private schools to pass criminal background checks.

As part of the settlement, the school also said it would use a program to measure student learning.

Step Up for Students, a nonprofit that administers most of the scholarships for the state, discovered Agape didn't have enough computers to conduct the student-learning assessments and helped the school obtain some last year.

"The principal was very engaged ... and there was a group of very caring teachers there," said Ron Matus, Step Up's director of policy and public affairs. "We did our best to work with them and make it work for the kids." The principal left the school this summer.

When Step Up and the education department found out the school stopped participating in the assessment program this summer, the department yanked Agape's scholarship eligibility and imposed the 10-year ban. Last week, the department said it would grant Agape an informal hearing over the suspension. No date has been set.

Meanwhile, the school has a history of employees and creditors who say Agape owes them money.

Latonya Thomas, a former preschool teacher at the school that offers pre-K through 12th grades, said she worked there for 2½ years and recalled holes in the walls and roaches. Health inspections, which the school passed, also noted live and dead roaches, stained carpets and broken toilets.

“They [weren’t] taking care of the school, with all the money they [were] making,” said Thomas, who sued Agape because she said she was owed two months of pay when the school was suspended from the scholarship program in 2016.

She quit her job at the school, and a judge last month ordered Agape to pay her \$6,250 for her unpaid wages, court costs and attorney fees.

“I have seven kids. I need my money,” said Thomas, a single mother. “Not paying me really put me in a hole.”

Victor Floyd, who taught math and coached football at Agape, said the school did not pay him for a month and a half. He left the school last year.

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## Central Florida private schools that received vouchers

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

“I just wasn’t in a situation where I could sit and wait to see,” said Floyd, who now works at nearby West Oaks Academy.

Earlier this month, another former teacher wrote to the Orange County court that she couldn’t make her September rent payment of \$828 on time because Agape had not paid her monthly salary of \$2,500 for April through June. Her Rosemont apartment complex moved to evict her late last month.

Court records detail other financial concerns. A cash advance lender, a former landlord and a contractor charged with maintaining the campus fire alarm systems allege the school owes them a combined nearly \$1 million. Some of the cases are still pending.

Despite Agape’s financial problems, the state requires schools to provide little detail about how they spend scholarship dollars.

Schools that accept more than \$250,000 in the tax-credit and Gardiner scholarships must submit financial reports to Step Up for Students, which disburses some of the money. But a review of Agape’s audits over three years

provided scant details and did not reveal any of the lawsuits or other money troubles the school experienced.

Doug Tuthill, the president of Step Up for Students, said a new policy just put into place this year requires accountants hired by the schools to look more closely at education-related expenses such as curriculum, technology or rent. Accountants, for example, must now check whether the total of education-related expenses is at least equal to the amount the school received in tax credit scholarships.

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Agape's report showed the school spent about \$45,000 a month on rent during the 2015-2016 school year, more than the school spent on wages or insurance, the only other expenses listed. Most of the school's buildings are owned by the Bishops' church, which shares the Hiawassee Road address. A nonprofit organization with ties to the school owns the high school building across the street from the main campus.

It's unclear if the Bishops are drawing an income from their school. In a 2013 bankruptcy filing, they reported monthly income of \$2,000 from the affiliated Agape Assembly Baptist Church. Ingrid Bishop filed for bankruptcy Sept. 14. Both bankruptcies were dismissed.

“

The principal was very engaged ... and there was a group of very caring teachers there.

— Ron Matus, Step Up's director of policy and public affairs

But recently, the church and the Bishops have had trouble keeping their homes.

The Bishops lived in a 4,800-square-foot house in the Dr. Phillips area, purchased for \$939,000 in 2005 under the church's name. The church lost the home in a legal dispute last year, but it is appealing the case.

The couple paid nearly \$1 million for a second home in 2012 in Longwood's Sweetwater Club with 7,400 square feet, five bedrooms and a resort-style pool.

But that home, too, appears in jeopardy. The previous owner has sued the Bishops, claiming they owe \$800,000.

Despite its troubles, Agape has maintained a devoted group of students and teachers. Sentinel reporters saw at least 30 students at the school campus one afternoon late last month.

### Timeline: Agape's decline

An inspector from Orange County Fire Rescue phones the education department to tell them that Agape Christian Academy has been out of compliance with its fire inspections for

As part of the annual scholarship renewal process, Agape submitted a letter to the education department on

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Fire Marshal Bruce Faust wrote in an email to the education department that the inspector whose signature appears at the bottom of the

### Mixed reviews

On a recent Friday night, a small crowd gathered on an Eatonville football field to cheer on Agape's "Mighty Saints" against another small private school from Daytona Beach. About 30 students in football and cheerleading uniforms arrived on an old school bus.

The school has made a name for itself with a handful of football standouts, including Claude Pelon, who was recently cut from the New York Jets; Serge Trezy, who played for the University of Wisconsin; and Khalil Hunter, who played for the University of Louisville. All went to a junior college first after leaving Agape.



Drico Johnson went straight from Agape to the University of Central Florida and tried out for the Arizona Cardinals and Green Bay Packers.

But the school touts more than athletics. Agape sells itself on what it calls “Christian principles.” The school handbook says homosexuality is grounds for expulsion. And pregnant students are also banned from campus.

The website for Agape’s church nods to its ambitious vision to one day have a college, football stadium and “Gospel World” amusement park.

Jessica Williams remembers attending a rally when she first enrolled at Agape as a seventh-grader where the school promised an array of electives, like a cooking class. She soon realized Agape didn’t have everything it advertised.

“Once you get there, all that disappears,” said Williams, who graduated from Agape in 2016 and said she’s attending college and studying social work.

Some former students and parents say they also chose Agape because they were frustrated with public schools.



Children line up while waiting to enter the classroom at Agape Christian Academy in Orlando on August 16, 2017. (Jacob Langston / Orlando Sentinel)

Pine Hills public schools haven't always performed well on state tests. The closest elementary school to Agape, Hiawassee, improved to a C grade this year, but received an F in 2016. Robinswood Middle received C grades both of the past two years. And Evans High, within two miles of Agape, was a D-rated school this year.

Florida private schools don't receive grades. But a state report that evaluates the results of standardized tests given by private schools showed that Agape students lost ground in reading and math between the 2012-2013 and 2014-2015 school years. The next year's report looked better, showing that Agape students had made gains in math but not in reading.

Chelsea Witter said her mother transferred her to Agape because she was getting into trouble in her public school after moving from New York. The smaller environment at Agape helped Witter, the school's 2012 valedictorian, focus on her work.



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“The only thing I didn't like is I didn't have much of a challenge,” said Witter, who is enrolled at American College for Medical Careers, a for-profit school off Oak Ridge Road, where she is working toward a bachelor's degree in respiratory

therapy. “I know in public school they have advanced courses. There weren’t any advanced courses to take.”

Agape says on its website that “many of our graduates have excelled and furthered their opportunities in career schools, colleges and universities across the nation.” But not all of the school’s teachers have college degrees. Records submitted to the state by Agape list degrees for five of nine teachers.

One of those teachers, who has a bachelor’s degree from Florida State University, worked for 15 years at Lake Mary High School and was fired in 2013 after the Seminole County district discovered porn on his school computer.

Agape also allowed former athletic director James Morris back on campus after Agape’s general manager reported him to the Orange County Sheriff’s Office, alleging he pocketed more than \$1,000 from students and families for a senior cruise. The coach, who had a prior theft conviction, pleaded no contest in 2016 to grand theft and was placed on probation and ordered to complete community service hours.

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The only thing I didn’t like is I didn’t have much  
of a challenge.

— Former Agape student Chelsea Witter

The sheriff’s office is investigating Morris again, this time for taking \$2,900 in April that a parent gave him for tuition while he was completing the court-ordered community service hours at Agape, according to a report. No charges have been filed. Reached by phone, Morris said he no longer works at the school but is a member of the affiliated church and volunteers there. He said he was unaware of the most recent allegations against him and did not take tuition money from a family.

Agape’s history offers a case for why private schools that receive scholarships may need more oversight, said Phyllis Jordan, who has authored reports on school vouchers for FutureEd, a nonpartisan think tank at Georgetown University.

“There are a lot of regulations for public schools, and people complain about them,” she said. “When you go outside that system, these are the kinds of consequences you get unless you carefully regulate them.”

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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 more than 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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