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Special-needs school rapped by state plans to close

The Boston

By David Abel, Globe Staff, 4/13/2004

Amid state allegations that it did not create a safe environment for its students, the DeSisto School for emotionally troubled children yesterday announced that it would close its 26-year-old program in Stockbridge at the end of this academic year and send many of its students to a program it runs in Mexico.

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Last month, officials from the state Office of Child Care Services told DeSisto administrators to suspend their admissions process. In a letter, state officials charged the school had "an environment that endangers the life, health, and safety of children enrolled."

Frank McNear, Desisto's executive director, said in a telephone interview yesterday that the school could not run properly without its customary admissions process.

"They did us grave financial damage when they closed our admissions," McNear said. "We can no longer fight this. They've been saying they want to close us, and they succeeded."

Blaming state officials, McNear said the school's enrollment has dropped in the past two years by more than half, to 30 students, 18 of whom are being sent to the school's program in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. The rest will remain in Stockbridge until graduation on June 6.

State officials, however, said they did their best to keep the school running.

"We wanted the school to succeed," said Dick Powers, a spokesman for the Office of Child Care Services. "But rather than making the school safe, they're presumably packing their bags and going to Mexico. It's disappointing -- it's really a shame."

In a letter to DeSisto officials dated March 12, the Office of Child Care Services had chastised the Stockbridge school as having failed to protect residents with self-injurious behavior. State officials later said the school had failed to follow through on changes it promised in February. Last month, state officials said they were reviewing seven complaints against the school, including one regarding a student whose hand was injured when she was placed in restraints and another regarding a student who swallowed razor blades and was not immediately provided with hospital care.

McNear said the school, which costs students $71,000 a year in tuition and therapy expenses, plans to reopen a campus elsewhere in New England. "I promise you our program will reopen in another state -- without out-of-control bureaucrats," said McNear.

Some parents of former students applauded news that the school is closing.

"I'm glad it's finally over," said Amanda Rhael, who withdrew her son, Karl, from the school several years ago after she complained the staff was improperly trained. "There were people working there who weren't qualified to work with emotional children. A lot of problems ensued."

Other families, however, lamented the loss of a school that served such needy children.

"Any time a program closes, it could never be a good thing," said Andrea Watson, coordinator for Parents for Residential Reform, a project of the Federation for Children with Special Needs. "We always hope for the best. I'm not sure they have the same standards in Mexico as they have here, and that's concerning."

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