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Community Alliance for the Ethical Treatment of Youth (CAFETY)

Sunday
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State should review academy allegations - (Gulf Coast Academy)

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As Yogi Berra would say: It's deja vu all over again. But we're not talking baseball. We're talking about the latest incarnation of what began in 1988 as the Bethel Home for Children.

This time it's called the Gulf Coast Academy.

Other versions of it were Bethel Boy's Academy, the Eagle Point Christian Academy and Pine View Academy.

The co-educational school for troubled teenagers is located in Lucedale. According to its Web site: "The GCA physical facilities are situated on a beautiful campus that retains the quiet farmland atmosphere of an earlier era. Locals enjoy many outdoor sports including hunting numerous whitetail deer, wild turkeys, and rabbits commonly used to make Southern 'Hash.' Water sports abound in the numerous lakes and ponds of the region. Golf and tennis are popular sports among the many country clubs found within a one-half hour drive of the school.

"As one might imagine, the youth experience a mixture of the culture of the Old South and the rural culture common in American nostalgic Art."

It sounds like a bucolic setting and a place we'd like to visit to get away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

But some students who attend the school and their parents paint a much different picture of the school.

As reported in Sunday's edition of the Hattiesburg American, parents who visited the school found poor living conditions and concerns about their children's access to their families.

Some parents said they couldn't even get a returned call from school officials. These parents say they are paying as much as $32,000 a year to send their children to the academy. They certainly deserve returned phone calls.

One parent, who is threatening legal action, said on a visit to the school she found broken glass in the school yard and broken windows patched with plastic garbage bags. She said she also discovered that her daughter was not seeing a psychologist each month as promised or having weekly counseling sessions.

Several students have reportedly run away from the campus. Some students complained to their parents of poor food, abusive discipline and student fights.

The school has a checkered past. When it was the Bethel Home for Children in 1988, it was raided by state welfare officials, who removed 72 abused and neglected students.

The school was shut down in 1990. Herman Fountain reopened it in 1994 as the Bethel Boys Academy.

Then it became Eagle Point Christian Academy, which was run by Fountain's son, John Fountain.

The state Department of Human Services needs to investigate the parents' and students' allegations. To be fair, the students were sent to the school because they had gotten in trouble. And their complaints should be viewed through that prism.

But if the complaints prove true, action needs to be taken.

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