

Some using fake degrees to get pay raises

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ATLANTA -- A middle-school math teacher in Georgia's Gwinnett County received a \$16,000 pay raise last fall when she submitted papers showing she had earned a doctorate from Saint Regis University. While it sounds prestigious, Saint Regis is considered a diploma mill, an institution that sells college degrees for little or no coursework.

In one of the nation's biggest scandals of its kind, 11 Georgia educators were caught holding advanced degrees from Liberia-based Saint Regis after the state checked the records of its 130,000 teachers this spring.

Around the country, the problem of diploma-mill degrees may be getting worse, since the Internet has made it easier for such businesses to operate and the federal No Child Left Behind Act has put a higher premium on advanced degrees for teachers.

"This is an area of increasing concern on the federal level," said John Barth, director of postsecondary accreditation for the U.S. Education Department.

Officials said the percentage of educators passing off bogus degrees is probably small, but hard to measure because not all schools diligently check credentials.

John Bear, a former consultant to an FBI task force on diploma mills during the 1980s, estimated the industry takes in more than \$300 million a year, and it is growing.

Diploma mills have become increasingly savvy at posing as legitimate schools, creating impressive Web sites and providing fake transcripts for their "alumni."

Teachers are in one of the few fields where salary is explicitly tied to education level. Under the No Child Left Behind Act, most teachers have until the 2005-06 school year to meet federal standards for being "highly qualified," which can include holding an advanced degree in the subject they teach.

"If you're in a smaller town and not near a major university, then you try to find options, and it doesn't surprise me that people try to find ways for an easier way out," said Terry Schwartzbeck, policy analyst for the American Association of School Administrators.

The problem has not been fully tracked since the 1980s, when the FBI's Operation Dipscam identified about 12,000 people with bogus degrees, ranging from teachers to doctors, said the operation's former lead agent, Allen Ezell.

Sen. Susan Collins of Maine is heading a congressional investigation into the problem among federal employees. The General Accounting Office later this month is expected to issue a report showing the extent of the problem. Meanwhile, federal education officials are compiling a list of accredited institutions that can be used to weed out diploma mills.

Using a bogus degree to get a job or promotion is illegal only in Oregon, New Jersey, Indiana, Illinois, North Dakota and Nevada, where it is a misdemeanor mainly punishable by fines ranging from \$350 to \$2,500. But violators rarely face prosecution.

"Our goal is not really to punish people; our goal is to get bogus degrees out of circulation," said Alan Contreras, an administrator at the Oregon Office of Degree Authorization, which maintains on its Web site one of the few lists of suspected diploma mills.

Three Oregon teachers were found using master's degrees in 2002 from Louisiana's LaSalle University. The state initially mistook that institution for the accredited LaSalle University in Pennsylvania. When the mistake was pointed out, officials revoked the teachers' credentials but allowed them to try again for legitimate degrees.

"We said, 'No harm, no foul, but we're not going to accept it,'" said Vickie Chamberlain, executive director of the state Teacher Standards and Practices Commission.

Texas school officials launched an investigation in October into a boys' basketball coach in the Dallas suburb of Coppell who held a master's degree from Crescent City Christian College of Metairie, La.

"It was basically a coach's house - no campus, no facilities, no faculty, no library that anyone could discover," said David Linkletter with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

The probe uncovered other coaches with degrees from Crescent City. No action has been taken against the coaches while the investigation continues.

The Georgia scandal began after a teacher tipped off school officials about the Saint Regis degrees. Saint Regis is not recognized by any of the major accreditation agencies in the United States. Authorities said it grants degrees almost entirely on "life experience."

The 11 teachers in Georgia maintain they earned their degrees. Six have resigned. They all face an ethics investigation that could lead to the loss of their teaching certificates.

"They feel that they did substantive work," said Michael Kramer, an attorney for seven of the teachers. "It's not as if these teachers went online, downloaded graduate degrees and printed it."

Saint Regis' director, Jallah Faciann, defended his school.

"The allegation that Saint Regis is a whatever-mill-you-want-to-call-it is not true," he said, claiming it is accredited by the Commission of Higher Education in Liberia. He refused to disclose his school's enrollment.

Officials said they hope the Georgia scandal will prompt other states to look more closely at teachers' credentials.

"You have got to screen very, very carefully who you hire," Contreras said. "It takes time, it takes money, it takes staff, but it has got to be done."

On the Net:

Georgia Professional Standards Commission: <http://www.gapsc.com>

Oregon Office of Degree Authorization: <http://www.osac.state.or.us/oda>

Saint Regis University: <http://saintregis.edu/lr>