

**Stories About Bishop Sycamore “School ” In The Columbus Dispatch And The New York Times Point To Ohio’s Neglect To Regulate “Schools” That Are Not A Part Of The Constitutionally-Required Public Common School.**

The so-called Bishop Sycamore “School” has been headlined in various newspapers, including the Columbus Dispatch and New York Times in recent weeks. The organizers/operators of the school have come under intense scrutiny, including being investigated by the Ohio Department of Education (ODE).

ODE investigators, according to the Dispatch article, found that: “Ohio kids can attend a variety of different K12 schools and each of them comes with a different level of oversight and Bishop Sycamore’s families chose the one with the lowest level of requirements, a private, non-charter academy.”

During the 19<sup>th</sup> and most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, lawmakers and governors worked together to establish and slowly enhance the public common school system for the benefit of all children. Along the way, some accommodations were made to allow some folks who chose a private alternative at the expense of the parents.

During the 1960’s, Ohio started to fund transportation for private school students. Thereafter, auxiliary services and administrative cost reimbursement were initiated for private schools.

Accommodations were made for folks who wanted no state regulations, thus the non-tax, non-chartered schools.

Beginning in the 1990’s, tax-funded vouchers and charters came on the Ohio education landscape with only scant regulations to follow. This amounted to state gifts with few or no strings attached.

The common school system is highly regulated for good reasons. Alternatives to the common system encounter various levels of standards and regulations, or no regulations and standards. It is little wonder that the ECOT’s and Bishop Sycamore’s crop up. The blame for the fraud, corruption and low achievement, etc. lies at the doorsteps of the Statehouse.

All schools that receive tax support should be subject to the same regulations and be monitored like the public common school is. Those entities that are not tax-supported should be subject to some regulations and should be monitored.

It would be absurd to have a variety of standards and regulations for the training of doctors, nurses, pilots, etc. Is not K12 education important enough for the state to have a uniform set of standards and regulations applied to all school entities that receive tax funds?

**Unfulfilled Promise**

A start-up football school called Christians of Faith, later known as Bishop Sycamore, recruited players from tough neighborhoods with talk of academic help and a path to glory. But the path only led them back to where they started.

By [David W. Chen](#), [Billy Witz](#), [Alanis Thames](#) and [Kevin Draper](#)

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Isiah Miller sat in his Bronx apartment, staring into his iPhone at what looked like a new world. On the video call, two fellow football players from his high school beckoned him to join them in Ohio on their powerhouse prep team.

Check out our hotel room, they told him. Look at our Xenith helmets and Adidas gear. Oh, and say hello to our roommates — maybe your future teammates? — who are also on the fast track to big-time college football.

“They said, ‘You want to come to your dream school, come here,’” recalled Miller, 22, who had just graduated from high school and needed to boost his grades if he hoped to play college football. “They said, ‘Come out here to Ohio, we play IMG,’” he recalled, referring to IMG Academy, the Florida prep school where some young athletes play on national TV and go on to win championships.

Miller, 19 back in summer 2018, stuffed his belongings into a half-dozen bags and bought a \$56 bus ticket to Columbus, in a state he had never visited, to suit up for a school he had never heard of, all in pursuit of the glory he was sure he would never find in the Bronx.

“Football,” he said, “was my way out.”

But his new prep school, Christians of Faith Academy, didn’t prioritize education, though students went on a paintball outing the coach insisted would count for credit. And it lacked stable accommodations: The team got kicked out of at least two hotels, and for a while the players were wedged into a coach’s girlfriend’s house, with one shower for 40 boys, most of them in their late teens.

The school didn’t get much attention until this August, when it played a televised game against IMG Academy and made a splash on ESPN for all the wrong reasons.

By then it was known as Bishop Sycamore, and the team, which had played a game only two days before, was pummeled, 58-0. ESPN commentators, describing the game as “[not a fair fight](#),” said, “There’s got to be a point where you’re worried about health and safety.” [Reporters later highlighted](#) myriad legal, financial and governance problems involving Bishop Sycamore and its founders.

Almost overnight, Bishop Sycamore became shorthand for sports factories that cynically masquerade as schools to produce elite, made-for-TV athletes. This case happened to be more egregious because of the lopsided score and because Christians of Faith’s dubious academics had been exposed before it resurfaced under a new name and showed up on ESPN.

“Unfortunately,” the Ohio Department of Education said in report released on Friday, “the facts suggest that Bishop Sycamore High School was and is, in fact, a scam.”

In an interview, Roy Johnson, the academy’s founder, said he could not discuss much because Michael Strahan, the television host and former football star, is producing [an HBO documentary](#). The film will tell the “strange saga,” according to The Hollywood Reporter.

“Everything will come out in the documentary,” Johnson said, noting that several of his former athletes now play college football. “Different people’s perspectives.”

Yet less attention has been paid to the perspectives of the players who descended upon Columbus and entrusted their futures to strangers.

They came from as far away as Georgia and California, and many came from Detroit. But few communities were better represented — or in the end, more disappointed — than two areas in the Bronx where football players, many of them Black and poor, grew up within blocks of one another.

Rodney Atkins, a quarterback from the East Bronx, was sold on Christians of Faith Academy’s grand plans, and then helped persuade at least a half-dozen people to leave the borough for Columbus.

Since then, however, Marysol Atkins, his mother, says that her son, now 22, has second-guessed everything. He returned to Columbus for a second year believing things might be different, but he was living out of his car or sleeping in a storage unit by the end of that season. He has not played football since, and he did not receive his high school diploma until this fall.

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Now Rodney, who his mother says is "broken," is in a Bronx hospital psychiatric ward.

"These boys believed in something, and they fought hard to end up with nothing," she said. "I think it's easy on the outside to say: Why didn't you think? Why didn't you put a stop to it? When you're in it, you think you're part of a team, part of something that's life-changing for the kids. It was going to be groundbreaking, something that's never been done before. Something where people of color are going to be able to achieve something this great."

She added: "Who's going to look at that opportunity and say, 'I can't handle a little bit of struggle, when all I've known is struggle?'"

### **A Charismatic Founder**

Christians of Faith Academy [was founded in 2018](#) by Johnson, a charismatic former [insurance salesman](#) and [registered health care provider](#). Other associates later included Andre Peterson, [who played for Jim Tressel at Youngstown State](#) in the 1980s, and is also an ordained minister.

Johnson compared the academy to the community colleges featured on the TV documentary "[Last Chance U](#)."

"He said we were going to be on Netflix," Isiah Miller said.

But when Marysol Atkins traveled to Columbus from her home in North Carolina in the summer of 2018 to check on her son, she was taken aback.

"I walked into chaos," she said, recalling just one adult staff member supervising two floors of a Baymont Inn full of boys, some days with barely anything to eat. She ended up staying three months, becoming an unofficial team mom.

For months, several players and Atkins said, they raised questions about housing, school, food, facilities and even money for coaches' salaries. The answer was the same: Help is on the way.

Half measures were enough to maintain the faith for a while.

The players were set up with accounts for online learning, but nobody monitored whether they were signing up for classes or doing the schoolwork. Players said they were taken to an empty lot and told that a school and workout facility would soon be built there. Once, Atkins said, they were taken to a health club in a nice part of Columbus, where they were given key cards and told they would be working with a nutritionist. They never returned.

"He kept acting like the money was supposed to come," Atkins said of Johnson. "I don't know what the holdup is. I'm trying to get a loan to cover it.' It was always, like, him seeming to feel as desperate as we were. He'd disappear and say I'm trying to figure out a way."

Peterson, the former Youngstown State player, said he and his wife, along with Johnson and the coaches, had pumped thousands of dollars of their own money into the program because they believed in "trying to help young men who need help." A handful of opposing teams gave them travel stipends, but the money did not cover hotels, buses, food and other expenses.

"If it was about the money, I'm probably the stupidest businessman in my life or anyone else's," Peterson said.

### **Through the Side Door**

The archetype of the star athlete chasing high school glory alongside his boyhood pals may seem quaint. Today, the path to greatness is blazed by parents with an insatiable desire to clear the way for their child's advancement — be it with a bassoon, ballet shoes or a basketball.

This has spawned the multibillion-dollar youth sports industrial complex, replete with private coaches, travel teams and commutes to distant high schools that have essentially created sports magnet programs

In some cases, parents with means pick up and move — across town, the state or even the country — investing in their child's athletic future as if he or she were the family breadwinner.

"The big change is the amount of parents shopping for opportunities at private schools," said Josh Henderson, who has coached football at private schools in California for more than 20 years. "I think the mind-set is everywhere. Getting your kid to a particular school could be a game-changer — that's a pathway to the next level."

Inevitably, with rapidly expanding limits on parents' desire to fund their children's athletic pursuits, some see a business opportunity.

IMG Academy, established in Bradenton, Fla., as a boarding school for elite tennis players, branched out into football a decade ago. It is now owned by Endeavor, the Hollywood sports and entertainment company. Similar prep schools, essentially basketball teams looking for classroom space, popped up from Nevada to North Carolina. Some were little more than diploma mills.

When Rick Singer, a private admissions counselor and the mastermind of the [Operation Varsity Blues college admissions scheme](#), needed someone to doctor test scores to help his clients' children get into college, he turned to an administrator at IMG, where he once served as a consultant. IMG was not implicated in the scandal and the administrator was fired.

As different as they were, Singer's operation, which made him more than \$20 million, shared a trait with Bishop Sycamore and Christians of Faith: They capitalized on the ambitions of those who didn't have the prerequisites — be it test scores or 40-yard dash times — to get into college through the front door.

Mario Agyen, a running back from the Bronx and a friend of Isiah Miller, wanted to continue playing when he graduated from high school, but he had few options.

Agyen had grown up with the love of his mother, a Ghanaian immigrant, but little else. He once came home to an eviction notice tacked to his apartment door. He was searching online for postgraduate options when a coach in Ohio contacted him through Twitter.

Christians of Faith, the coach told Agyen, was a start-up high school football team that accepted postgraduates. He could go there for a year, improve his G.P.A. through online classes and have video to show college recruiters.

Agyen and a friend, who also had been contacted by the academy, drove to Pennsylvania to meet Roy Johnson and an assistant coach. Then the entire group went to Ohio. A few hours after they arrived, the coaches deposited them on a field for practice.

Others had a hastier introduction. Jaquan Baxter arrived in Columbus on a bus from New York one night. The next afternoon, he was suited up in uniform No. 31, playing defensive back against a Canadian prep school.

At the end of the day, Agyen said, the players sometimes didn't know where they would sleep. After being kicked out of two hotels, they stayed briefly in cabins at a rural retreat with no phone service and then at a complex where they slept on air mattresses in empty apartments.

In October 2019, the company that owns T-H-E Griff, an apartment complex that is popular with Ohio State football players, filed 24 eviction lawsuits related to Christians of Faith, including one that named Johnson.

According to the lawsuits, the residents of each of the 24 rooms had not paid three months' rent. They were accused of damaging common areas and "menacing" a tenant with racial slurs.

A person familiar with the case, who declined to go on the record because of other pending litigation, said the apartment complex's case was compromised because it had failed to get copies of identification and other documentation when the leases were signed. In the end, Johnson received an eviction on his record but was allowed to remove his remaining belongings.

Amid all the uncertainty at the academy, fights broke out among coaches and among teammates, and meals were irregular. A handful of players resorted to stealing food from nearby grocery stores, Agyen said, while others called their parents and teachers back home for money.

For Agyen, the end came when the team traveled to Baltimore to play St. Frances Academy. Players no longer wanted to suit up. Many coaches had left. There was no game.

“We come from a horrible background, a horrible environment,” said Agyen, 22. “The Bronx, to make it out of the Bronx, New York, it’s hard. It’s so easy to go down the wrong path. It’s so easy to drop out of school and get into the streets.”

Johnson said that while online courses were available, he should have done more.

“I should have done, myself personally, a better job of making sure that they signed online and did their stuff,” he said.

Peterson, meanwhile, disputed the suggestion that players didn’t have enough to eat, saying that his wife and niece regularly prepared food, and that a “food room” was always available.

But Peterson did not begrudge the players’ feelings.

“Maybe they didn’t like what happened to them in the program, or whatever happened after, and that’s fine — that’s their truth,” he said.

### **A New Name**

The state of Ohio revoked Christians of Faith Academy’s registration in October 2018, after criticism from church leaders and longtime scholastic sports officials in [ThisWeek Community News](#) of Columbus.

So the academy simply rebranded as Bishop Sycamore. [State records show](#) that B.S.F. Bishop Sycamore Foundation was incorporated in August 2019, with Andre Peterson still mentioned as a leader. “We are a foundation that provides education/sports to student athletes,” the foundation stated. “We help youth/young adults that want to go off to college and have no solid support.”

When Bishop Sycamore made news after the ESPN game, however, Peterson fired Johnson and hired another coach. According to Peterson, Bishop Sycamore currently offers online courses, and Peterson said his son is a student.

Education officials in Ohio have had limited tools to monitor Bishop Sycamore because it is a [nonchartered, non-tax-supported school](#). Those schools do not receive any public dollars and are subject to few regulations because they declare “truly held religious beliefs.”

Still, in August, Gov. Mike DeWine, a Republican, citing “[red flags about the school’s operations,](#)” directed the Ohio Department of Education to investigate. And on Friday, the department, citing a “pattern of misdirection,” [determined](#) that the school had not met the minimum standards, and appeared to be a scam. The department also said it would consult with the attorney general’s office regarding possible legal action.

Bishop Sycamore reported to the state that its enrollment in 2020-21 was three students. This year it said it was one.

“They were just trying to field a football team and use this non-tax, nonpublic status as a vehicle,” said Bill Phillis, executive director of the Ohio Coalition for Equity and Adequacy of School Funding. “It wouldn’t matter if they had three kids or 3,000 — nobody is going to check on them.”

### **‘I Still Think It’s a Good Opportunity’**

Most of the Bronx players who took a chance on Columbus have since returned to New York. Some, like Agyen, who is attending Louisville and hopes to walk on to the football team next season, are in college. A few are pinning their hopes on a community college. Some said they would not go back to school.

During a walk around the neighborhood where some of them grew up, Tara Tripaldi, a teacher who has stayed in touch with Agyen since middle school, said the students had bonded over a shared struggle. Tripaldi sent Agyen money for food when he called her from Columbus and told her he did not have enough to eat.

“This is a snapshot of what happens to youth sports in the inner city,” she said. “There’s a lot of money and greed. Some of these coaches are chasing the same dreams as the kids. That being said, kids in the inner city don’t have access to that training. When someone comes along and says I’m going to take you out of the Bronx, you can play at a Division I school, these kids jump at it. It can not only change their life, but their family’s life.”

Isiah Miller, a 5-foot-8 outside linebacker and defensive end, said he would go to a junior college in the spring, join the track team and shed 25 pounds to hit his ideal weight of 225 pounds. He was confident he would be noticed by colleges.

Jaquan Baxter, 22, who played in a Christians of Faith game the day after he arrived in Columbus, is done with football, done with school. He delivers for Amazon. “I’m job motivated now,” he said, outside the door of his fifth-floor walk-up apartment, with each landing cluttered with unwanted appliances — a refrigerator, a stove, a radiator. “Everything I put on the field, I want to put into work. I love money and I love fly clothes.”

Nobody is further from the big dreams shared on that FaceTime call than Rodney Atkins.

On Wednesday, as he sat on the bed in his otherwise empty room in the psychiatric ward at Jacobi Medical Center, he considered his future. He said he had taken too much of his medication and was admitted involuntarily. His hair and beard, once neatly groomed, had become unruly. His prescribed medication sometimes left him foggy and lethargic.

Atkins checked a band on his wrist to remember the date he was admitted: Nov. 28.

Until then, he had been occupied fixing up the house that belonged to his grandmother, who died just as he returned from Columbus two years ago. He is renting out two bedrooms to make money and eats most of his meals at the corner deli. “In my head, as long as I have three meals and a bed, then I’m good,” he said.

Atkins hopes to regain the trust of his former neighborhood teammates, who are wary of him for standing by Johnson after all the unfulfilled promises. A lot, Atkins said, has been on his shoulders. He has not given up on football and school.

Does he regret going to Columbus?

“I would say no,” he said. “It’s an experience. You can always take pros and cons out of everything. I still think it’s a good opportunity, a good vision. But you need money to make the dream work, and there was a lack of.”

He paused.

“It’s ironic,” Atkins said. “It’s called Christians of Faith. Everybody who was involved was working on faith.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/17/sports/ncaafootball/bishop-sycamore-football.html?smid=em-share>

## Investigation labels Bishop Sycamore school a scam

Anna Staver

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After weeks of investigating, the Ohio Department of Education released a scathing report Friday, accusing Bishop Sycamore, the Columbus high school that made national news for flopping during a football game, of being nothing more than 'a scam.'

A damning 79-page report claimed investigators could not find proof Bishop Sycamore met any of the requirements for private, non-chartered schools like holding regular classes, verifying teacher credentials or maintaining academic records.

'Unfortunately, the facts suggest that Bishop Sycamore High School was and is, in fact, a scam ...,' State Superintendent Stephanie Siddens wrote in a memo attached to the report. 'Bishop Sycamore was a way for students to play football against high school teams and potentially increase students' prospects of playing football at the collegiate level.'

Attempts to reach Bishop Sycamore by phone and email were unsuccessful Friday.

Here is what investigators found. Ohio kids can attend a variety of different K-12 schools, and each of them comes with a different level of oversight. And Bishop Sycamore's founders chose the one with the lowest level of requirements, a private, non-chartered academy.

Non-chartered, non-public schools don't seek accreditation from the State Board of Education (often for religious reasons), and they don't receive state funding.

State law only requires that they meet a set of minimum education standards, including filing annual reports that detail their hours of instruction, teacher qualifications and classroom safety.

'There is no evidence that the 'school' enrolled students this year, had a physical location for classes to meet, employed teachers, nor offered any academic program meeting minimum standards,' Gov. Mike DeWine said in a statement.

In fact, investigators were only able to confirm the enrollment of a single student this year who was using a different online learning program.

Graduation Alliance, a degree program for kids and adults, told investigators it enrolled 19 Bishop Sycamore students for the 2020-2021 school year, but their attendance was intermittent at best. By January 2021, only five students remained.

'Yet in both years, the school was able to field a football team,' the report stated. 'The certifications belie the representation of (Director) Andre Peterson to USA TODAY that Bishop Sycamore had 'between 75 and 80 students.' Either the certifications were inaccurate, or Peterson's statement was untrue. Possibly both.'

Peterson and his former football coach Roy Johnson spoke with investigators Nov. 18, but there were questions about the truth of their statements.

For example, Peterson forwarded an email chain between a staff member and Graduation Alliance inquiring about their teachers' credentials dated 11 days after a call with department staff.

'The exchange casts doubt on whether Bishop Sycamore staff had been verifying qualifications,' according to the report.

The men also said the school provided religious instruction that wasn't reflected on transcripts -- leaving investigators unable to 'ascertain whether those religious beliefs are truly held.'

Investigators were able to say students didn't get enough hours in the classroom during the 2020-2021 school year, but they couldn't say for certain whether that was true for this year. The school currently lists a private residence as its address.

And the public statements about the schools 'have been consistently inconsistent,' according to the report.

The new head coach issued a statement earlier this year saying, 'we do not offer curriculum. We are not a school ... that was a mistake on paperwork.'

But the school filed for another annual certification with the education department at the end of September.

'Bishop Sycamore officials were given the opportunity to provide additional information to demonstrate the school's legitimacy and compliance,' according to the report. 'They declined to do so ... Without the clarification from the school to prove its compliance, common sense leads one to the most obvious explanation: Bishop Sycamore is not a school as it purports on paper to be.'

Despite all the concerns that officials had about Bishop Sycamore, the most that the education department could do was remove the school from its list of private, non-chartered options.

The school has no state charter to revoke and no state dollars to rescind.

That's one of the reasons DeWine asked Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost and 'other offices with jurisdiction to determine whether the alleged deception by Bishop Sycamore violated any civil or criminal laws.'

A request for comment from Yost's office was not returned.

The report also called on state lawmakers to change the oversight rules for Ohio's 401 non-chartered, non-public schools.

'This case demonstrates the systemic weaknesses that allow for the continued operation of non-chartered, non-tax supported schools that are not meeting the minimum standards,' according to the report.

For example, the department lacks legal authority to monitor and enforce those standards. And the deadline to submit paperwork is Sept. 30 -- several weeks after most kids start school.

DeWine said in a statement that he would work with lawmakers to implement these changes, and Sen. Andrew Brenner, R-Delaware, told the USA TODAY Gannett Ohio Network that he's open to the idea as well.

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Brenner, who chairs the Senate Education Committee, said most of the proposed changes looked they were common sense.

*Anna Staver is a reporter for the USA TODAY Network Ohio Bureau, which serves the Columbus Dispatch, Cincinnati Enquirer, Akron Beacon Journal and 18 other affiliated news organizations across Ohio.*

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