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# 9 Stone Academy nursing students file federal lawsuit against Connecticut for invalidated credits

Lawyers seeking possible class action status

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Stone Academy; Yehyun Kim / CT Mirror

Nine nursing school students have filed a federal lawsuit against the state after an audit invalidated most of their earned credits following the school's abrupt closure earlier this year.

The state initiated an academic audit after the East Hartford-based Stone Academy announced that it would close its three campuses due to alleged compliance issues. That audit, attorney David Slossberg said, determined that 76 percent of the credit hours earned by the plaintiffs at Stone Academy were "invalid."

The lawsuit has been filed against Connecticut Office of Higher Education chief Timothy Larson, Division Director of Academic Affairs Sean Seepersad, Department of Public Health Commissioner Manisha Juthani and Chris Andersen, section chief for Practitioner Licensing and Investigations.

“I would go so far as to say that these agencies went rogue, and instead of helping, they multiplied the harm to our clients exponentially,” Slossberg said. “These clients are stuck. They've done this work, they've gotten these credits, and the state after the fact has declared them invalid.”

A separate lawsuit was previously filed by students against Stone Academy. Judge Barbara N. Bellis earlier this month granted a prejudgment remedy of \$5 million, with jury selection scheduled to begin September 2024, according to court records.

The state has also filed its own case against Stone Academy, with Attorney General William Tong alleging that the school's revenues more than tripled, allowing school officials to buy lavish homes while students were inadequately prepared for nursing exams.

“Our amended complaint shows how Stone's owners systematically siphoned millions of dollars from Stone, leaving the school financially incapable of living up to its promises,” Tong said in October. “Stone Academy promised an education that would position students to become Licensed Practical Nurses in less than two years, with hands-on training from industry leaders. The evidence shows otherwise.”

This latest filing, on behalf of nine Stone Academy students from various towns including East Hartford, Manchester, Meriden, Waterbury and Wolcott, alleges that the state overstepped when it declared invalid the credits students had received. One student, who had passed a necessary test known as the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) exam, was forced to take a refresher course, the suit states.

“Something like 77,000 hours of approximately 102,000 hours they declared invalid, most of which was declared invalid because the audit concluded that Stone Academy had not kept sufficient records,” Slossberg said. “The reason why that's important is because at the same time, the state said to the students, you

don't have a right to participate in this process, and you don't have a right to appeal it.”

DPH spokesman Chris Boyle declined to comment for this story. The state's Office of Higher Education did not reply to a request for comment.

"While we are reviewing this lawsuit, we will continue to hold Stone and its owners accountable for their greedy, self-serving decisions which cost Stone's students years of time and money," said Rick Funaro, spokesman for Tong's office.

When Stone Academy abruptly announced its impending closure, Larson said OHE would be working with students to find a pathway to their nursing degrees.

“For many months, our office has been working with the school to address a number of serious compliance issues that included unqualified faculty, invalid student clinical experiences and recording attendance,” Larson said at the time.

Though the latest filing was on behalf of nine Stone Academy students, Slossberg said that more than 1,200 students were affected.

“We will eventually in the case move for class certification,” Slossberg said. “Once that happens, then everybody in the class gets notice. They're part of it unless they opt out.”

Slossberg, who is working with attorneys Timothy Cowan, Erica O. Nolan and Kristen L. Zaehring on the case, said that monetary remedies would only go so far to repair the damage allegedly done by the state's invalidation of so many credits.

“The damage to their reputations, the damage to their professional standing, the damage to their credits, you can have an economist try to value that, but the horse has left the barn,” he said. “How do you get back somebody's reputation? How do you remedy some of these things? I think that's the more difficult thing, and we're going to have to, if it comes to it, work with the parties to see if there's some other remedy that can be fashioned.”