

NEWS & POLITICS

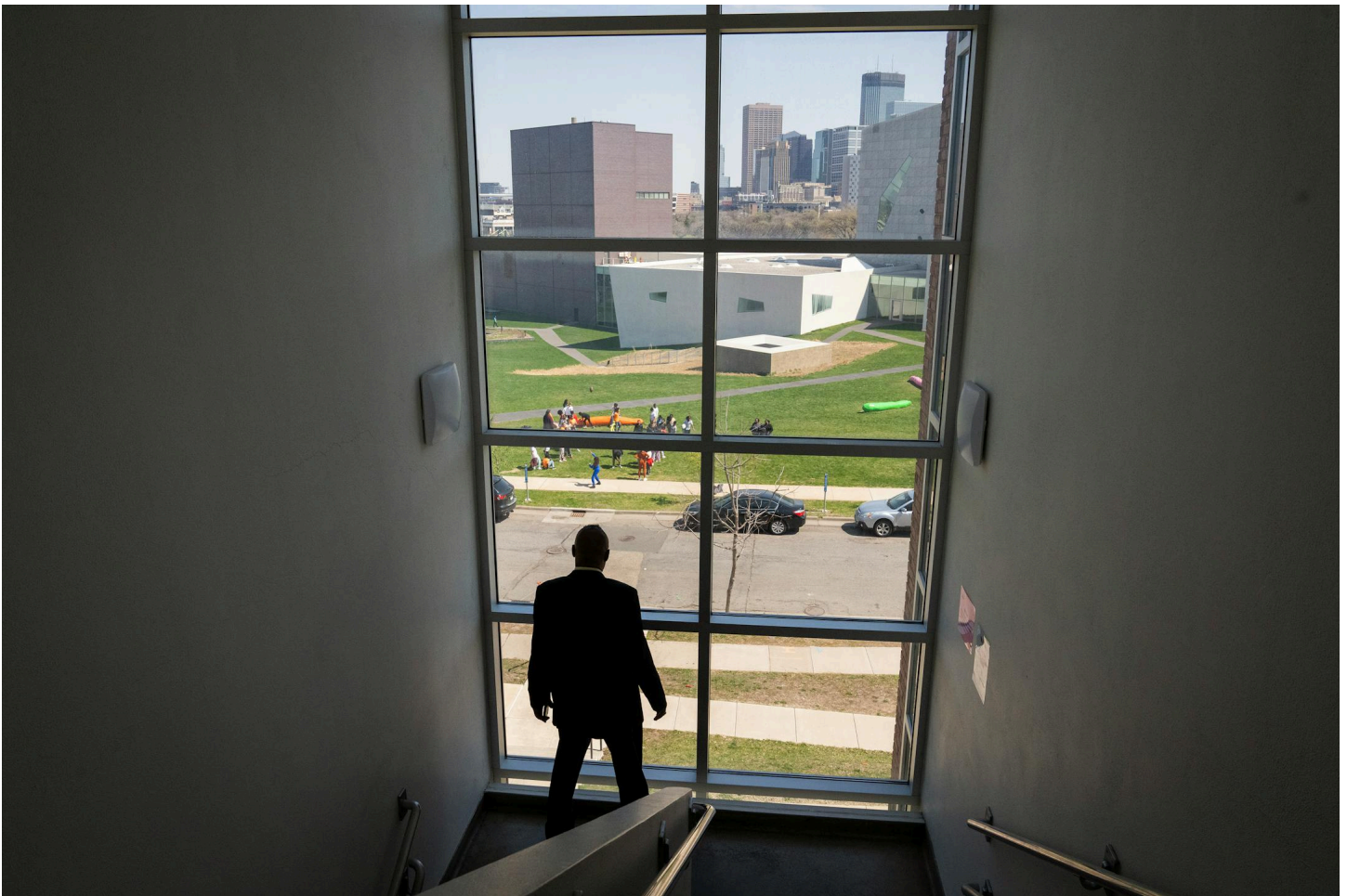
State threatens to terminate nonprofit that oversees 16 charter schools in Minnesota

Oversight failures by Pillsbury United Communities have prompted action by the state Education Department.

By Jeffrey Meitrodt

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Loveworks superintendent Don Allen looks out the window of the school to students playing outside across the street of Loveworks Academy for Visual and Performing Arts, a charter school in Minneapolis, in 2024. (Leila Navidi/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

In a rare rebuke, the Minnesota Department of Education is threatening to terminate a nonprofit's authority to regulate charter schools for the state after a series of oversight

failures showed the organization lacks the capacity to act as an authorizer, records show.

In a March 27 letter obtained by the Minnesota Star Tribune, state officials criticized Pillsbury United Communities of Minneapolis for failing to address problems at nine of the 16 schools it oversees.

Two of the schools were the subject of prior investigations by the Star Tribune as part of broader coverage of Minnesota charter school oversight problems: LoveWorks Academy for Arts, which shut down last year after Pillsbury United revoked its charter, and Minnesota Internship Center, which has been plagued by fraud, abysmal test scores and financial problems.

In the letter, the Education Department said Pillsbury United should have moved faster to deal with problems at LoveWorks, which failed to address weaknesses first identified by the authorizer in 2008, records show.

This is the first time the department has threatened to terminate any of the nonprofits that oversee Minnesota's 173 charter schools for oversight failures, according to a Star Tribune review of prior corrective action cases. The Education Department has terminated just one authorizer, and that organization – ejected for a deficient renewal application – supervised two of the best charter schools in Minnesota.

Donald Allen, LoveWorks' most recent executive director, told the Star Tribune in 2024 that the school should have been shut down more than a decade ago. But he said Pillsbury United killed LoveWorks with kindness, lowering its standards instead of holding the board accountable for poor performance.

The Education Department said Pillsbury United will not be able to charter any additional schools, expand existing schools or accept transfers from other authorizers until it deals with dozens of deficiencies.

The nonprofit's authority to act as an authorizer could be terminated if it fails to meet deadlines this spring for addressing the problems, the Education Department said in the letter obtained by the Star Tribune through a public records request.

“The pause on these activities is intended to allow [Pillsbury United] to focus on overseeing its current portfolio of charter schools, addressing the outstanding obligations and concerns outlined in this letter, and continuing to build its authorizing capacity,” the department said in the letter.

Pillsbury United officials declined to comment Thursday.

Overlooking failures

In its most recent state review, Pillsbury United received the second-lowest score among the state's 12 authorizers, with the Education Department saying in 2020 the nonprofit "does not consistently hold charter schools accountable to academic, financial and operational performance outcomes and standards."

Pillsbury United and other authorizers are scheduled for new reviews in 2025. The reviews take place every five years.

Though charter schools were created to produce better educational outcomes, most fail to deliver on that promise. The [2024 Star Tribune investigation](#) – the result of months of examining documents, analyzing data and interviewing more than 100 people – revealed that just 13 charter schools have consistently exceeded the state average in math and reading proficiency.

State leaders largely outsourced the job of regulating charter schools to 10 nonprofits, with their public funding dependent on how many schools they oversee. Two public school districts also oversee a handful of schools.

According to the Star Tribune's review of more than 200 evaluations covering 80 charter schools, authorizers routinely overlooked academic failures and other problems in order to extend the lives of schools that collectively pay them millions of dollars in fees each year for regulatory services.

The 10 nonprofits, which oversee all but three of Minnesota's 173 charter schools, perform these evaluations each time a charter school's contract is up for renewal, usually a period of three to five years.

In 3 in 4 reviews, schools failed at least one important academic goal, often by large margins. Many of those schools also demonstrated significant weaknesses in financial management, board governance or operations, records show.

Many of the problems cited in the Education Department's corrective action letter to Pillsbury United involve the nonprofit's evaluations, including missing information, confusing goals and unclear performance benchmarks. The department also noted deficiencies in six charter school contracts executed by the nonprofit.

Pillsbury United also has failed to address complaints involving two schools it oversees, including Minnesota Internship Center, which operates two campuses in Minneapolis.

In 2021, Minnesota Internship was ordered to repay \$1.3 million after an investigation showed it fraudulently received reimbursement for 137 students who no longer attended the school.

According to complaints filed with the state and Star Tribune interviews with seven former employees in 2024, the fraud took place under the direction of Reginal Womack, who remains the school's executive director. Womack allegedly continued with questionable financial practices, including spending hundreds of dollars each month to take employees to Topgolf, that have left the school on the brink of insolvency.

Womack declined to comment. In a prior written responses to the allegations, he blamed other employees for the fraudulent activity for which the school was sanctioned.

The Education Department said Pillsbury United has yet to deal with new complaints against Minnesota Internship by a former school employee, who told state officials that just one of 60 students at the school's Rondo campus received passing grades in 2023.

The former employee said the campus was “completely out of control,” noting students could often be found “dancing in the hallways on their phones” instead of working in class. He said the school continues to cheat on attendance by marking students “present” even if they answer their cellphones from someplace else.

The former employee blamed Womack for dismissing such concerns instead of fixing the problems.

Pillsbury United responded to the complaint in 2024, acknowledging the school was not meeting key academic goals. However, the nonprofit said it was working with the school to improve educational outcomes.

“Although attaining academic goals continue to be a concern for [Minnesota Internship], the school has taken significant steps to address their academic goals by changing their approach to attendance, student evaluation ... and changing the school culture to increase academic rigor and expectations,” Pillsbury United said in a February 2024 letter to the Education Department.

Lack of accountability

However, the school's performance has not improved. No students were proficient in math at the end of the 2023-24 school year, and average attendance was just 3.7% – well

below the state average of 74% and one of the lowest attendance rates in Minnesota.

Pillsbury United also failed to hold LoveWorks accountable for low academic performance, according to the Education Department.

In a 2008 evaluation, the nonprofit documented a history of low academic achievement, dysfunctional management and a disengaged school board that often rubber-stamped “anything the director suggests.”

In 2020, when LoveWorks was below standard on 16 key performance measures, Pillsbury United put the school on probation. Nevertheless, it awarded Loveworks another three-year contract, finding that the charter “is on their way to leverage the incredibly positive school culture ... to meet the high expectations set for the next contract term.”

Pillsbury United didn’t give up on the school until 2024, when just 1.3% of its students were proficient in math and 7.1% were reading at grade level – similar to the school’s low test scores for the past 10 years.

To avoid disrupting the lives of dozens of families by closing Loveworks at the beginning of the 2024-25 school year, state officials said, Pillsbury United could have revoked its contract in the summer of 2023 due to “persistent failure to meet student outcomes, financial management and governance responsibilities.”



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