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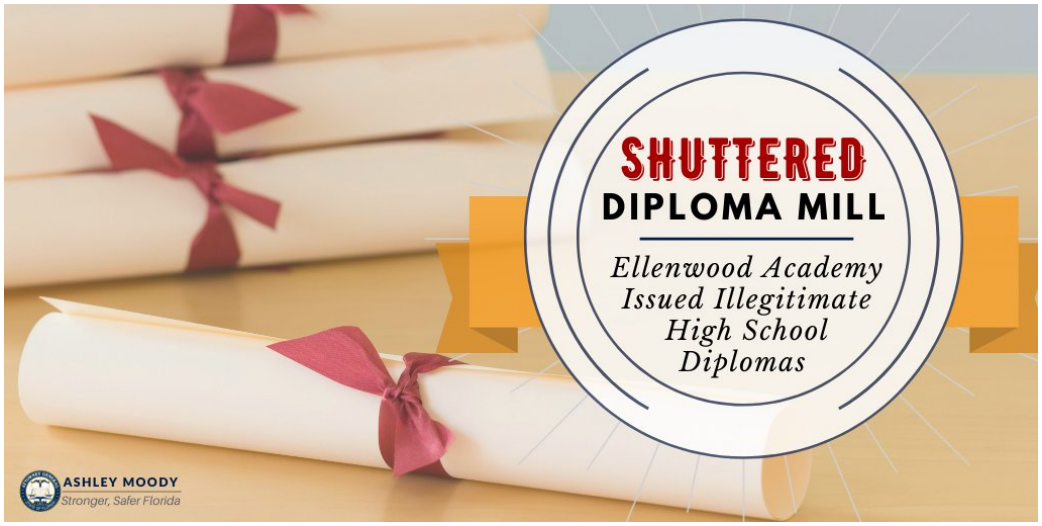
OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL STATE OF FLORIDA

Florida Attorney General's Office News Release

AG Moody Shuts Down Florida Diploma Mill



TALLAHASSEE, Fla.—Attorney General Ashley Moody is recovering funds for students of a Florida diploma mill after the Attorney General's Office successfully litigated and obtained the shutdown of the sham academy. Earlier this week, Attorney General Moody secured the court's approval of a consent judgment providing restitution for students and permanent injunction against Riverview-based Ellenwood Academy, LLC and the diploma mill's owner Joseph Williams.

The Hillsborough County Circuit Court awarded the stipulated relief that includes a permanent ban against Ellenwood Academy and Williams on operating, managing, owning, directing or maintaining any financial interest in a business that markets high school or equivalency diplomas. Following an investigation by Attorney General Moody's Consumer Protection Division, the court also awarded monetary relief, including restitution to consumers, civil penalties and fees.

Attorney General Ashley Moody said, "For many, obtaining a high school education or equivalent diploma is a steppingstone to a better career and more prosperous life. It is deeply discouraging that the defendants in this case took advantage of those aspirations to rip off students attempting to work towards a better life. On top of taking fees from consumers for spurious diplomas, Ellenwood Academy also cost some graduates their jobs once employers discovered their diplomas were not meaningfully accredited.

"I am proud we shut down this sham operation and secured monetary relief for consumers harmed by these deceptive practices."

The court action stemmed from complaints against Ellenwood Academy for marketing illegitimate high school diplomas to consumers in Florida and nationwide. The organization charged students $195 to enroll in a purported high school program and take an exam but did not employ any faculty or provide any instruction for students.

Ellenwood Academy's website falsely claimed to produce accredited high school diplomas that gave students the credentials required for most jobs. According to the investigation by Attorney General Moody's Consumer Protection Division, the academy issued sham diplomas when students obtained a passing score on an online exam that could be retaken as many times as needed to pass.

Restitution will be distributed to eligible consumers as funds are received. If you were enrolled in Ellenwood Academy and believe you may be entitled to restitution, contact the Florida Attorney General's Office by visiting MyFloridaLegal.com or via phone at 1(866) 9NO-SCAM.

Assistant Attorney General Ellen Annaliese Bullock and Senior Assistant Attorney General Patrick Crotty handled this litigation.

To view the Attorney General's complaint, click here. To view the final consent judgment, click here.

Attorney General Moody encourages anyone considering an online education course to review the following tips:

- Be cautious of online programs that offer diplomas for a flat fee without coursework and attendance requirements;
- Visit the Florida Department of Education website to learn more about earning high school diplomas at an accredited institution;
- Obtain information on how to determine the legitimacy of an online educational institution here; and
- Click here for tips from the Better Business Bureau.

Anyone suspecting deceptive or unfair business practices can file a complaint with the Attorney General's Office by visiting MyFloridaLegal.com or calling 1(866) 9NO-SCAM.