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Troubled court reporting school says it's closing

By Emily Heffter

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A local court-reporting school that state investigators say cheated students out of thousands of dollars in tuition announced Monday it would close within days.

In its abrupt announcement, the Court Reporting Institute also said it was dropping its appeal of the state's attempt to shut it down.

The school's announcement that it will close Wednesday could be good news for students, said Assistant Attorney General Terry Ryan, because it frees up money in a state trust fund to refund some tuition.

"There's definitely going to be a strong effort to give financial benefits to the students who didn't obviously get what they bargained for," he said.

The Court Reporting Institute, which has campuses in North Seattle, Tacoma, San Diego and Boise, Idaho, has operated in Washington since 1988. In Seattle, state investigators found that only 6 percent of its students graduate, and 1 percent become court reporters.

Court reporters rapidly transcribe depositions or courtroom testimony, using a machine with 24 keys that spell words phonetically.

In more than a dozen complaints to the state Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board, students said the school lacked up-to-date equipment and qualified instructors, making it impossible for students to complete the program in the promised 30 months. Many attended classes for five or six years, borrowing tens of thousands of dollars for tuition.

The school was forced to refund some students' tuition in 1999 and 2003 after the state found that it used deceptive practices. After a fourth investigation by the state last summer, the state tried to shut down the school. The institute appealed, and a hearing was set for mid-September.

That hearing is now canceled, and the nine students who were named in the case will be eligible to receive about \$20,000 each out of a \$4 million state trust fund supported by private vocational schools.

About 80 students who have paid tuition for this term also can apply for refunds from the trust fund.

A receptionist who answered the phone at the Seattle campus said administrators had no comment.

School officials called a meeting with students Monday morning and passed out a letter that read, in part: "It is with extreme sadness that we must close this school. CRI has been in business for 19 years and has helped hundreds of students move into gainful employment."

Evelyn Craycraft, a student in CRI's night program, said she has paid about \$9,000 in cash and borrowed \$14,000 for her two years of school. She said attendance has fallen in the past several months, and there were rumors that the

school was in trouble. "I'm really not surprised," she said of the closure. "It's a horrible school. I still felt optimistic that I could still achieve my goal."

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