

State Orders City To Overhaul, Move Transitional Learning Academy

By STEVEN GOODE

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HARTFORD —

An investigation by the State Department of Education has found that the city school system failed to provide an adequate education to 70 students with emotional problems and learning disabilities, and that the program should be shut down and reconstituted elsewhere.

The school system will also be required to pay for a consultant to oversee the creation and operation of a new program.

The investigation was conducted by the Bureau of Special Education as a result of a complaint filed in January by Maria Morelli-Wolfe and Hannah Benton, attorneys acting on behalf of students enrolled in the Hartford Transitional Learning Academy at 2550 Main St.

Benton, of the Center for Children's Advocacy, said Wednesday that the investigators' findings "will help these kids, who are the most vulnerable of the vulnerable. Hartford will finally have to do what's right by these kids."

She said an important part of the decision is the requirements that the schools hire a consultant to oversee the creation of a new program and its operation, and its emphasis on transitional planning for high school students entering the job market or continuing their education.

The complaint charged that the schools failed to provide the students with a free, appropriate public education as required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and several other federal and state statutes.

Investigators, who made several classroom visits, found a chaotic environment where students entered and left classrooms at will and where shouting and noise could be heard coming from the hallways during classes.

Investigators also found that the program had not established a behavior management system. Instead, the school relied on suspensions and crisis intervention, including deployment of security guards and police, to manage student behavior. Also, students were not receiving educational instruction based on their abilities and had no timeout room where disruptive students could be taken to calm down.

The investigation report concluded that "the site is totally inappropriate for a therapeutic school," with no gymnasium, cafeteria, laboratories, athletic fields or recreational facilities. Investigators said many of the walls were bare and that maintenance and cleanliness were unsatisfactory.

The report said the program can't continue to operate as it is now or in its current location. Investigators noted that the school system acknowledged that the Transitional Learning Academy was not successful and that administrators had already taken steps to discontinue it by not enrolling any more students starting in February.

School officials, according to the investigators' report, were exploring moving the middle school students at the academy to a privately run program next year. The schools plan to continue operating the program for high school students, and according to the report, were planning to move it into a building that has services and facilities similar to other high school buildings.

David Medina, spokesman for Hartford's schools declined to comment on the report, saying the administration has "no knowledge of any findings related to 2550 Main St."

The investigation found that more than 24 other allegations outlined in the complaint were unsubstantiated, however.

Morelli-Wolfe, of Greater Hartford Legal Aid, said she was disappointed that some of the allegations were not substantiated, but added that it was important that it supported parents' claims that their children were not in a therapeutic environment.

The consultant would assist the schools in finding a suitable location, and the program will be required to provide proper training for all staff, a schoolwide behavioral management system and a curriculum that meets individual students' educational and therapeutic needs. Beginning in August the consultant will be required to submit monthly progress reports.

The Center for Children's Advocacy filed a similar complaint against the school system last year, alleging that 20 middle school special education students enrolled in a program at Hartford Magnet Middle School were denied an appropriate education for similar reasons.

In 2005, Hartford was the subject of a report from the state Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities, which found that the district's transitional program did not do an acceptable job of preparing students for career and educational opportunities after graduation.

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