

HARTFORD

Special Education Academy Accused Of Failing Its Students

By STEVEN GOODE

The Hartford Courant

February 3, 2010

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HARTFORD — A complaint filed on behalf of 70 students at the 2550 Main Street Academy paints a picture of a chaotic school where little learning takes place and conditions are unsafe.

As a result, the middle- and high school-aged special-education students are being denied their rights under the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act and several other federal and state statutes, the complaint says.

The academy is for students with emotional problems and learning disabilities.

The complaint, filed Friday with the state Department of Education, charges that the school system failed to provide special education and related services that would result in meaningful educational benefits.

It also charged that the academy, on North Main Street, failed to provide educational services in the least-restrictive environment, excluded students from participating in school programs because of their disabilities, failed to comply with required disciplinary procedures and failed to provide a safe school environment.

"This program sets students up for failure by not providing them with necessary educational services that are critical to future success," said Hannah Benton, an attorney with the Center for Children's Advocacy in Hartford. "We observed students wandering the halls and the school parking lot during class time, a lack of instructional materials and classroom equipment, and inconsistent and excessively punitive disciplinary procedures."

The complaint, filed jointly by the children's center and Greater Hartford Legal Aid, alleged other shortcomings:

- No reading material was evident in a high school reading teacher's classroom during a consultant's observation in mid-October.
- As of December, tutors who were supposed to provide reading instruction in the middle school had not been hired.
- In a high school science class, students did not have access to water or heating elements, preventing them from conducting scientific experiments.
- There was no evidence that high school English students were given any help in improving their writing skills.
- Speech and language services are available to students only one day a week.
- The school system has yet to complete or schedule a neuropsychological evaluation for a student who was rec-

ommended in the 2008-09 school year.

The complaint also alleged that:

- Medication and transportation management has been inconsistent.
- In January, someone came into the building and brandished a firearm.
- Students are not afforded the opportunity to participate in after-school activities at the school they attended before being transferred to the academy.

The complaint also said that disciplinary actions have been inconsistent or handled with excessive force, and that the school has not implemented proper policies to address bullying or sexual harassment as required by state law.

David Medina, spokesman for the city school system, said officials would not comment until they see the complaint.

Benton said the complainants are asking the state to appoint an independent monitor to ensure that the district provides students appropriate educational services.

The children's advocacy center also filed a complaint against Hartford last year alleging that the district denied 20 middle school special-education students enrolled in a transitional learning program at Hartford Magnet Middle School their rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Act. A state Department of Education investigation upheld the group's complaints and called for corrective action.

In 2005, Hartford was the subject of a report from the state Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities that found the transitional learning program did an unacceptable job of preparing students for post-educational opportunities.

Milly Arcineagas, president of the Hartford Parent Organization Council, said parents are frustrated.

"We're tired of being sick and tired that the district is still trying to get it right at the expense of our children's education," Arcineagas said.

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