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Hartford Schools, Civil Rights Officials Agree on Services for ELLs

By Lesli A. Maxwell on April 9, 2013 10:15 AM

Six years after an advocacy group first complained about inadequate services for refugee students and English-learners in Hartford's school system, civil rights officials with the U.S. Department of Education have hammered out a resolution to address those concerns with Connecticut's largest school district.

In a 15-page resolution agreement with the Education Department's office for civil rights, Hartford's education leaders have agreed to a prescribed set of actions and reporting requirements to ensure that refugee students and immigrant children who are English-language learners are properly identified, receive better language instruction, and are provided bilingual tutors and other types of language support to help them access mainstream, academic content courses.

The agreement also outlines a number of steps the district has agreed to take to recruit and train more teachers with expertise in working with ELLs, as well as students who have had their education interrupted by traumatic events such as war or government oppression. The district also agreed to provide regular communications with parents in their native languages and will prohibit the use of students as interpreters.

The civil rights office will monitor the district's compliance with the agreement through the 2014-15 school year.

The complaint was first filed with the office of civil rights in April 2006 by the Center for Children's Advocacy, a legal advocacy organization for disadvantaged children and youth in Connecticut.

Hartford has long been a refugee resettlement site with sizable communities of refugees from Liberia and Somalia, and, more recently, Karen refugees from Burma and Thailand, Bhutan, and Iraq. But children whose first language is Spanish (many of them Puerto Rican) still constitute the largest slice of Hartford's ELL population, which is 18 percent of the district's entire enrollment, said Mary Beth Russo, the lead facilitator for ELL services.

Stacey Violante Cote, a lawyer for the advocacy group, said that over the years, the district had made starts and stops to improve programs and services for English-learners, but instituting permanent solutions proved impossible with a constant churn in leadership. Nothing ever stuck, she said. Initially, the organization was concerned about a lack of services to refugee students, but eventually found that there were similar problems for a wider range of students who were immigrants or children of immigrants and were still learning English.

"That's why this agreement with OCR is so necessary," she said. "We need something that is going to outlast any administrative turnover or changes in the district's reform agenda."

Ms. Russo, however, said that the district had embarked on a number of reforms and improvements to its ELL programming after OCR officials made their first visits to Hartford six years ago.

"When they came back to us with their original findings, they had neglected to look at the new services we were

offering and to gather data that reflected the reforms we had adopted,” Ms. Russo said. Among those changes, Ms. Russo said, were offering a full slate of school choice to ELLs and their families and making the district’s process for identifying English-learners more transparent and understandable to people outside the district. A few years ago, the district began publishing an annual resource that provides detailed information about English-learners in each Hartford school, including academic performance measures and the types of staff members available to work with ELLs. More recently, the district has been able to hire about a half dozen of its Karen refugee graduates to work both as tutors and interpreters for Karen-speaking families.

Ms. Russo characterized much of the resolution with OCR as technical in nature.

In recent years, OCR has investigated a number of districts that have struggled to adjust to rapidly changing student populations to provide not only appropriate instructional services, but adequate communications with parents who do not speak English. In December, for example, the De Queen school district in Arkansas was found by OCR to be falling short in a number of those areas before devising a resolution to improve.

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/learning-the-language/2013/04/hartford_schools_civil_rights_.html