

## After Federal Probe, Hartford Schools Agree To Improve Services For 'English Language Learners'

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March 22, 2013

Facing a federal civil rights complaint, the Hartford school system has agreed to overhaul services for students whose native language is not English.

The voluntary agreement with the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights outlines the actions that Hartford must take over the next few years to resolve long-standing accusations that the city schools failed to adequately teach English language learners.

Hartford must offer more support in core classes for those students, provide at least 45 to 60 minutes of daily bilingual or English as a Second Language instruction, and consent to federal monitoring, among other steps.

"This is a very vulnerable population," said Stacey Violante Cote, a lawyer with the Center for Children's Advocacy in Hartford. "We know of no other agreements in the state that are this comprehensive and cover all the necessary areas."

The advocacy group filed the complaint in April 2007 on behalf of dozens of clients, including Spanish-speaking students, Somalian refugees and other recent immigrants who described frustrating experiences in city schools. The problems spanned several superintendents, Cote said.

Students who spoke little to no English, and who received minimal education in their native countries, were placed in classrooms where they couldn't comprehend the teacher in major subjects such as social studies and math, the center alleged.

Federal law requires school districts to provide adequate support to students with limited English proficiency so that they can meaningfully access a school's curriculum. In Hartford, where more than 70 languages are spoken, nearly one of five students is identified as English language learners.

Some immigrant parents also reported to the advocacy group that they received school notices in English, which they did not understand, and that school staff members used students as interpreters when they called their homes. City school officials said Friday that some improvements are well underway.

The problems faced by English language learners were "something that predates the reform," schools spokesman David Medina said, referring to Hartford's reform initiatives that began in late 2006 under former Superintendent Steven Adamowski. "We insisted on getting this resolved."

Federal investigators with the civil rights office visited Hartford schools in December 2007. After a delay, they returned twice in 2011 for another set of visits.

Eddie Genao, an assistant superintendent whose responsibilities include education for English language learners, said that the district began to address concerns over the interpreter issue shortly after the first visit.

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The district has implemented guidelines that emphasize "the need to avoid using students as interpreters," instead offering a list of qualified interpreters and translation services that staff can use to communicate with parents, according to the 15-page agreement that Superintendent Christina Kishimoto signed last week.

Kishimoto could not be reached for comment Friday.

Genao added that the school system has hired bilingual tutors and plans to hire more ELL coaches to assist students in core academic areas. Hartford also needs to hire a permanent director of ELL services, he said.

In addition, Hartford intends to bring in a national consultant this spring to review the ELL program, which must be evaluated at least every two years, the agreement states. The civil rights office recommended that school administrators create a clear process for identifying potential ELL students when they register for school.

The agreement also calls for more professional development. In the 2013-14 year, English as a Second Language teachers, as well as some general education teachers, will learn research-based strategies on how to instruct students who are English language learners. Those teachers will be expected to pass along the best practices to their colleagues, although more help will be given to staff members who need extra coaching.

Among the other actions: Hartford must create a handbook this year detailing its services for ELL students, and offer summer school to English language learners who are testing poorly on standardized tests.

"How could we not?" Genao said. "We offer summer services to all students who aren't performing where they should be. ... We look at students, especially the ELL students."

The Center for Children's Advocacy received a copy of the agreement from federal authorities on Thursday. Cote, director of the group's Teen Legal Advocacy Project, said the framework has statewide implications because it puts other school systems "on notice that [the civil rights office] is going to enforce these issues."

State data for the class of 2010 show that 49 percent of Hartford ELL students graduated in four years, while 37 percent dropped out. The graduation rate was 62 percent for non-ELL students.

Griselda Rojas was one of the English language learners who graduated that year. After suffering trauma in her native Guatemala, she came to Hartford as a 17-year-old in 2006, enrolled at Hartford Public High School and was placed in algebra when she knew only basic math.

"It was too hard, it was too difficult," said Rojas, now 23. Other classes were hardly better. "Sometimes I'm crying ... not understanding the language."

Rojas sought help from a social worker, who led her to Cote at the Center for Children's Advocacy. Cote said she met with school staff many times to ask for classroom support.

"We had quite a few meetings," Cote said.

Rojas, an early childhood education student at Capital Community College in Hartford, said she received more time to complete her homework and worked hard to graduate, but hopes that ELL students now "won't feel as frustrated as I did."