

State Orders Hartford Schools To Stop Using Flawed New Visions Program

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HARTFORD — After investigating a complaint from legal advocates, the state Department of Education has ordered the Hartford school system to stop placing expelled special education students in the district's flawed New Visions program.

The state said in a report released Friday that students who have landed at New Visions, including those with learning disabilities and emotional and behavioral disorders, get scant support and infrequent assignments that are "essentially busy work" during the make-or-break expulsion period that "can be the district's last chance to make a difference in the students' life."

"New Visions has resulted in the provision of little education to some of the district's most educationally needy students," investigators wrote. The state's corrective action order gave Hartford until Thursday — a rapid turnaround — to present a new alternative education plan for expelled students who receive special education services.

And while focusing on the treatment of students with special needs, the state concluded in its report that New Visions, the district's de facto program for middle school- and high school-aged students during their expulsion, also "fails to provide an adequate education to general education students." The state urged Hartford to scrap the New Visions program entirely.

Even the physical space, in a former vocational training building next to Bulkeley High School, is "dark and in disrepair" and unsuitable for learning, the state said.

"We work with so many students from Hartford, so we really get a sense of what's going on," said Marisa Halm, an attorney with the Center for Children's Advocacy and director of the TeamChild Juvenile Justice Project. "To see their rights being violated and nothing being done about it has been frustrating. This decision is very powerful and we hope the recommendations will be followed."

Hartford schools spokesman Pedro Zayas said Friday that Superintendent Beth Schiavino-Narvaez has made special education a priority and that the district had already been planning improvements to New Visions. He did not get into details.

"We take this matter very seriously," Zayas said in a statement. "We will review the report carefully and its recommendations to make the appropriate changes at New Visions."

The state began investigating after lawyers with Greater Hartford Legal Aid and the Center for Children's Advocacy filed a complaint in March alleging that the city schools had "completely failed" the students with disabilities who are sent to the program after being expelled. The advocates summed up one high school student's recent year at New Visions as "a complete waste of everyone's time and energy, because he gained nothing" — no grades, credits or required progress reports, they said.

Hartford's 2014 description of New Visions says its expectation is that expelled students are "well prepared to return to their home school, graduate from high school, and are ready for college." Instead, to the frustration of New Visions' educators, the state said, the program operates as a catchall that routinely fails to provide federally mandated services to students with the deepest needs.



Hartford's New Visions Special Ed Program Sounds Like 'A Complete Waste'

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Students spend 2.5 hours a day at New Visions, sometimes with their heads resting on a desk, the investigators observed. A dysfunctional system for giving students classwork results in sporadic assignments that rarely count for credit.

When state investigators visited New Visions in May, 57 students were enrolled, including 10 in special education.

"New Visions has a principal, classrooms and teachers but it is not a school," the state said in its report dated Wednesday. "New Visions is, in essence, a 2-hour guided study hall with too many students of different ages and grade levels The teachers are not qualified to provide instruction in classes other than math and English and have neither the autonomy nor the authority to provide the students with the meaningful instruction they require to meet their individualized needs."

The state also noted that New Visions' special education resource room had not been renovated since its former days as a garage bay. It still had garage doors and a noisy air handling unit.

Linda Burrell, the parent of a former New Visions student, said in a statement Friday that special education students were "left behind."

Burrell's attorney, Lynn Cochrane of Greater Hartford Legal Aid, said she was hopeful that the school system could turn it around and "rescue some students from a not-very-good outcome." Hartford doesn't need to "reinvent the wheel," Cochrane said, and cited competent, all-day alternative education programs in nearby districts such as East Hartford, West Hartford and Manchester.

"There might be people who would say, 'Well, these are expelled students and maybe they are getting the treatment they deserve,'" she said. "Nothing can be further from the truth. These are students that really have struggled and maybe they've made mistakes for which they're being punished But they are absolutely still entitled to a decent and appropriate education that has not been given to them for years."

The state said it would monitor the academic plans for the next 10 special education students that Hartford expels to ensure the district is complying with its order.

Complaint: Hartford schools fail to give basic education to expelled students with special needs, March 2016