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State Protection and Advocacy agency releases investigation report on Hartford Transitional Learning Academy

The State Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities (OPA) today released the results of its investigation into allegations of abusive restraint and seclusion practices and other deficiencies at the Hartford Transitional Learning Academy (HTLA).

HTLA is a special education school operated by the Hartford Public Schools for middle and high school students who are identified as having emotional and/or behavioral disorders. The investigation was begun in February 2004, in response to complaints lodged with OPA and the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) by parents who alleged that HTLA students were being physically and psychologically harmed by restraint and seclusion practices employed at the school. OPA and OCA initially attempted to launch a joint investigation, but were denied access to the school while students were present, and to parental contact information. Asserting its investigative authority under federal law, OPA successfully sued in Federal District Court to obtain access. Although the Hartford school system has appealed the decision, it complied with the Court's ruling, and, ultimately, cooperated with the investigation.

Investigators from OPA reviewed records, made observational visits and conducted interviews at HTLA during the spring and early fall of 2005. Among the findings were:

- “Hands on” restraint practices were halted by administrative directive in January, 2005.
- A generally loud, chaotic atmosphere, marked by yelling at and “fronting” (publicly confronting) students was noted during visits in the spring of 2005. However, the atmosphere was notably calmer in the first months of this school year. This may have been due to the fact that a significant number of HTLA students, teachers and other resource staff were transferred to neighborhood schools in September of this year.
- Despite its stated purpose of providing a “therapeutic environment”, the behavior management program used by the school does not meet individual student needs, and is poorly implemented.
- With a few notable exceptions, instructional approaches reflect generally low expectations for student achievement. Although many of the teachers and other staff demonstrate dedication, limitations in curriculum and resources, and, in some cases, multiple assignments hamper their efforts.

- Students are frequently referred to HTLA without required advance planning, and often arrive without necessary assessments and educational records. Little follow-up is done to determine what happens to students after they leave.

The report concludes by recommending that placement of HTLA students, staff and resources to neighborhood schools continue in a planned way, and that the school ultimately be closed.

“We were pleased to find that physical restraints were no longer being routinely used and that some students have been transferred to their neighborhood schools. Sometimes external scrutiny can serve as a catalyst for change”, said James McGaughey, OPA’s Executive Director. “But, we are still very concerned. The program serves the perceived need of the school system more than the actual needs of its students. So long as it exists, it is a potential dumping ground for kids with problems that no one wants to deal with.”