

# Investigation Report

Hartford Transitional Learning Academy:

A School in Need of Transition



State of Connecticut

Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities

James D. McGaughey, Executive Director

Principal Investigators

Bruce Garrison, M.Ed.

Ann Majure, Ph.D.

## **Special Acknowledgments**

The Office of Protection and Advocacy would like to thank Dale B. Fink and The A.J. Pappanikou Center for Disabilities for their assistance in writing the investigation report. OPA would also like to thank Dr. Romain Dallemand, Deputy Superintendent for Hartford Public Schools, Dwight Fleming, Principal at HTLA, HTLA staff, students, families and others who without their cooperation this report could not be completed.

## **Introduction**

The investigation that generated this report began as an inquiry into allegations of abuse, neglect and other violations of student rights within the Washington Street campus of the Hartford Transitional Learning Academy (HTLA)<sup>1</sup>. Completion of the investigation was delayed by many months as the authority of the Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Developmental Disabilities (OPA) to access parent and guardian contact information, and to visit the school while students were present, was litigated in Federal District Court. After the OPA's authority had been established by the Court's order, it was learned that the "hands on" disciplinary practices that had led to most of the original allegations of abuse had been administratively discontinued. It also became apparent that HTLA's administrators were attempting to pursue a plan to transfer many of the school's students, teachers and other resources back into neighborhood schools. This investigation's findings support this plan, and the report concludes by recommending that HTLA's middle school and high school programs ultimately be phased out.

The HTLA is operated by the Hartford Public Schools and is charged with providing a therapeutic environment for students who have exhibited physical aggression, harassment of peers, self-abuse, social withdrawal and other challenging behaviors in their previous educational settings. Despite the generally low expectations for success that often surround these students, OPA investigators found that many of them (and their parents) maintain hopeful visions for future successes. So, too, did at least some of the current cohort of teachers, counselors, and administrators on the Washington St. campus, many of whom exhibit very considerable talent, knowledge, and dedication.

However, while some students may be hopeful, and dedicated individuals on the staff are undoubtedly contributing to their social development and academic progress, actual benefit from the program is clearly limited by inadequate resources and, more fundamentally, by an incoherent program model. The Hartford Public Schools has historically claimed that HTLA exists to meet the unique needs of its students. However, this investigation found little effort being made to identify and understand individual students' needs and learning styles. In fact, the absence of diagnostic

evaluations for students transferred to HTLA from other schools, coupled with the limited range of program options traditionally offered, belie its officially stated mission as a “therapeutic” learning environment. The social, emotional, and academic costs that are being exacted from these students by placing them in a separate, segregated campus outweighs any benefits being delivered.

### **Historical perspective: From 1978 to 2005**

The ideas that gave birth to the HTLA in the late 1970s are no longer current in 2005. In 1975, children became entitled for the first time in our nation’s history to a “free, appropriate public education” regardless of disabilities<sup>2</sup>. Most parents at that time were grateful that youngsters presenting a high level of behavioral difficulty could be offered instruction in any public school at all. Most educators believed that if students were in need of more intensive services and supports than their peers, they were best served in separate, segregated settings. However, in the intervening years, educators in Connecticut and across the country have come to see the benefits of including students in the neighborhood schools they would attend if they had no disabilities—even when they have significant needs for ancillary services, supports, and curriculum modifications. While it is sometimes warranted and feasible to remove a student from the typical classroom, doing so does not require full-time isolation of the student from more typically developing peers who can model appropriate behaviors and an interest in learning.

The current Principal and Vice Principal of the HTLA’s middle school and high school programs appear to recognize the validity of the point just made. In the spring of 2005, within a few weeks of receiving their appointments to act in these positions, they laid plans to transition a large number of HTLA students to other middle schools and high schools in the district. As is required by law, they initiated these plans through the annual review of Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs), which is conducted for every participant in special education. The end result of the Planning and Placement Team (PPT) meetings that conducted these reviews was that out of a spring 2005 population of 169 students at Washington St., 70 made the transition to other Hartford public schools at the outset of the 2005-6 school year.<sup>3</sup>

Moving 41% of a segregated school's population to the schools they would attend if they had no disabilities was a decisive act of educational leadership which deserves to be applauded. However, such an act also raises important questions: How many more HTLA students could—given the appropriate supports--make the same successful transition?<sup>4</sup> Could the “home” campuses of these students have provided curricular modifications and social and mental health supports that would have made it unnecessary to send students to a segregated facility in the first place? Could the staff and supports that are concentrated at HTLA be better deployed throughout the district's middle and high schools? In addition to asking these questions, we must note that as of October 2005, the HTLA administrators who led this initiative held acting rather than permanent appointments. The actions they have taken thus far can be traced to their own priorities and understandings, but not to any district policy that would assure the continued reduction of the HTLA population, or the commitment of resources adequate to ensure the long term success of students who have been transitioned.

### **Why this investigation?**

The Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities (OPA) took initial steps toward an investigation of the HTLA in the early weeks of 2004, after parents of some students attending the Washington St. campus expressed a variety of concerns about their children's education. Some complained to the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA), others to the DCF Hotline, which is regularly monitored by OCA, and still others directly to our Office. The callers had a variety of concerns about the lack of appropriate academic and mental health supports for their children. Some of them alleged that physical abuse was taking place under the guise of restraining and secluding students engaged in inappropriate behavior. As with other Protection and Advocacy systems across the country, investigating allegations of the abuse or neglect of persons with disabilities is central to OPA's mission. Students at HTLA have all been found eligible for special education and thus are considered as persons with disabilities. Therefore, even beyond the alarms that were sounded when parents described a

program that they felt was failing to address students' needs, the allegations of physical mistreatment heightened the urgency of investigating.

We hoped through an investigation to either substantiate or dispel the allegations regarding inappropriate use of restraints. However, OPA has learned through long experience in safeguarding civil rights that questions of abuse and neglect in environments serving people with disabilities are inevitably tied to issues of program quality and coherence. To determine whether practices in the school placed student safety and rights at risk, we needed to know whether the school was, in fact, creating a therapeutic milieu that responded to their social, emotional, and behavioral health needs. Were youth who had failed in other settings being offered innovative or alternative approaches to academic instruction that might increase their chances of success?

On February 10, 2004, a representative of our Office and one from the OCA went to HTLA, one week after notifying the Superintendent of the Hartford Public Schools that we were planning to do so. The two agency representatives were denied access that day to the school and to student records. In blocking our efforts at information gathering, the school authorities cited (among other grounds) federal law protecting students' privacy and confidentiality. In August 2004, after discussions and exchanges of correspondence, OPA filed suit in federal District Court for the District of Connecticut seeking injunctive relief. On February 7, 2005, we received a court order authorizing us to pursue the investigation. Although the Hartford Public School system initiated an appeal of the Court's decision, it acted in accordance with the order, and HTLA has subsequently cooperated fully with OPA's investigation.

### **How did we gather the evidence?**

The facts that are compiled in this report were gathered from March through September of 2005. Two investigators gathered the data on behalf of the OPA. This report is based on their observations, interviews, and reviews of documents furnished by HTLA and the Hartford School District, including individual student records, as authorized by parents or guardians.”<sup>5</sup>

Bruce Garrison, one of those who carried out the investigation, is an advocate working full-time with the OPA. Mr. Garrison holds both Bachelors and a Masters Degrees from the University of Connecticut's Neag School of Education, and has spent nearly twenty years securing appropriate services for special education students in Connecticut. Several of his earlier investigations into segregated educational facilities have led to litigation against the Connecticut State Department of Education and individual school districts. In addition to educational advocacy, he has experience examining conditions and services at state-run and privately-operated residential and day treatment institutions.

Ann Majure, the second member of our investigative team, is an educational consultant in private practice who holds a Ph. D. in special education from University of Wisconsin-Madison. She has been an investigator and expert witness for the Wisconsin Coalition for Advocacy, Inc. (Wisconsin's P&A system) and for Wyoming's Protection and Advocacy System. She is also the former director of Developmental Disabilities Services for the state of Arkansas.

The two investigators interviewed a total of 15 HTLA staff, including 3 principals<sup>6</sup> or vice principals, 6 classroom teachers, 3 counseling or mental health professionals (social worker, guidance counselor, clinical psychologist consultant), a library facilitator, a Transition/Career Specialist, and a paraprofessional. They also interviewed two students and had informal conversations with others. They interviewed the Assistant Superintendent for the Hartford School District, the special education coordinator for HTLA (who worked out of the central district headquarters), two parents of students who were attending HTLA, an advocate from our own office (Protection and Advocacy) who has frequently represented HTLA students, and an advocate from OCA.

Our investigators made observations in nine learning settings, in blocks of two to four hours. These included content area classrooms such as seventh grade science, which students attend for one period at a time, "self-contained" classrooms that are designed for youth who are taught several of their subjects in one space rather than moving extensively about the school, and specialized classrooms such as the Computer Room and "Miracles Café", the setting for the Culinary Arts program. In addition, the investigators spent blocks of time observing in the corridors and the school office, and

attending an awards ceremony for Honor Roll students. Serendipitously, they also observed an incident in which a student was placed in “time-out.”

## **The physical environment of the school**

The HTLA came into being in 1978 at a different location, and moved in 1983 into its current Washington St. facility-- a three-story brick building built in the 1930s and occupied for many years by Hartford High School. Currently the HTLA middle school (beginning with grade 7) and high school programs are housed in this building<sup>7</sup>. The building has a fortress-style architecture, very sturdy but indistinguishable from the outside as a school. Nearly all the windows in the building were replaced in the summer of 2005; the new steel and glass offer a high-tech and attractive contrast to the older edifice. The administration has eliminated the use of classrooms in the basement and on the third floor; only the first and second floors of the building are used for program operations.

On the inside, the building appears well maintained. The linoleum floors are colorful, clean, and of recent vintage. Some classrooms and offices have carpeting that is in good condition. The cinderblock walls are painted in bland shades of blue and gray; they are not especially attractive but neither are they chipped, cracked, or otherwise deteriorating. Banks of gray student lockers that stand in some of the hallways appear to have been used for at least a generation but are still in serviceable condition. Artistic or decorative touches appear intermittently along the hallways: student art work, photographs of students cooking at Miracles Café, posters and bulletin boards. Large sections of the hallways are devoid of such décor.

Classrooms are sparingly furnished, with desks, chalkboards, and a minimal amount of books, maps, and other visual aids. Some classrooms have games and toys that are available for use after students have finished an assignment. A technology center has two rows of computers on one side and power tools for use in woodworking occupying the remainder of the space. An additional bank of computers available for use by students is located in an office space used by the Transition/Career Specialist and others. Miracles Café, the culinary arts program, includes a classroom as well as an adjoining kitchen, which is clean, roomy, and well-stocked.



There are several “time-out” or isolation rooms located throughout the building: rooms with bare walls, no furnishings, and no learning materials. The smallest of these are barely larger than closets.

### **An overview of the HTLA students and programs**

There were 221 students enrolled at the Washington St. campus in September 2004, but only about 80 in September 2005. Approximately 90% of the students were classified as having emotional disturbance (ED) with most of the remaining 10% labeled with specific learning disabilities (LD). A significant minority of the students have served time either in juvenile detention facilities or adult prisons. (Students age out of special education when they turn 22—unless they meet requirements for high school graduation at some point prior to that.) In the fall semester of 2005, administrators indicated they were anticipating approximately 20 additional students to enter (or re-enter) the school from prison.

Students were assigned to classrooms by a combination of grade level, academic proficiency, and the degree of behavioral challenge they present. Those who were viewed as the most challenging were assigned to self-contained classrooms, where they received instruction in many of their core subjects without moving around the building. (They moved around for reading instruction and for “specials,” such as health, art, music, culinary arts, and physical education.) The remaining students were clustered into different ability groupings corresponding to Greek letters (“alpha,” “omega,” “kappa”). “Alpha” students (for instance) remained with each other and with “alpha” teachers, except when they were attending “specials.” The students assigned to the clusters changed classes each period, following a schedule comparable to that of other Hartford middle or high schools. The students who transitioned out of HTLA in the fall semester of 2005 came almost without exception from among those attending class in the clusters, not from among those assigned to the self-contained classrooms.

## **FINDINGS**

### **1. The physical restraint and seclusion policies that spurred this investigation are no longer in use.**

The policy was changed after OPA had announced and attempted to initiate its investigation, but before we were actually allowed in to observe the program. As described earlier in this report, we filed suit seeking access to the school in the summer of 2004 after our initial visit was blocked in February. The federal court authorized our investigation in February 2005. It was while the judge's decision was pending that Dr. Romain Dallemand, who was then the Principal of HTLA, issued a memo explicitly changing the restraint policy. "Effective January 2005," the December 22, 2004, memo read, "HTLA will begin a no-hands-on (restraint) practice." The memo's subject line said "Restraint Policy" and it was issued under the Hartford Public Schools/HTLA letterhead.

We find that the policy change has been taken seriously. Teachers and other staff are not physically restraining HTLA students. A Hartford Police officer and security guards are in the building at all times in the event teachers believe a situation is beyond their control.

### **2. HTLA has not created a "therapeutic environment" in their middle and high school programs.**

The school district touts HTLA as having "a therapeutic component that addresses each student's learning, emotional, and behavioral needs." (One-page flyer, "Hartford Public Schools: HTLA.") However, we found no evidence of either group-oriented or individualized mental health supports, or of systematic efforts to create linkages with community-based mental health services.

We did find evidence that, prior to our investigation, the Hartford Public Schools had attempted to review the HTLA program. A March, 2003, report prepared by a consultant affiliated with Boys and Girls Town (BGT) described witnessing teachers at HTLA who "yell down the hallways at students or other staff, address behaviors by yelling at or 'fronting' students, and have inappropriate conversations with students about the students' outside activities." In another passage, they referred to "yelling at

students, and making sarcastic comments to students.” However, the BGT report seemed to have little impact on these dynamics. During Spring, 2005 visits to HTLA, our investigators also witnessed these kinds of behaviors by teachers and found an overall atmosphere that was more chaotic than therapeutic.

The BGT consultants recommended that to make the environment more therapeutic, students should participate daily in a 15-minute “morning meeting” as well as periodic “team meetings” and an end-of-day “community meeting” or “class meeting.” But the school did not institute these components.

The school seems to rest much of its claim for promoting a therapeutic milieu on a campus-wide behavioral reinforcement plan based on the rewarding of points and levels (with accumulated points cashed in for goods). Such a plan, even if well designed and carefully implemented, cannot substitute for individualized mental health supports and does not constitute the “individualized educational program” tailored for each student that the law requires. At the time of the BGT consultants’ visit, it was far from well implemented. They observed that:

Students lack true ownership of their point cards and the motivation system.

When students are not involved in the use of motivation system, it ceases to have meaning for them. (p. 19)

There are discrepancies between how students earn and lose points, the number of points students earn and lose, and the number of points earned on the card and the overall feelings about student behavior in the building. (p. 20)

There was no discussion with the student about the earning or losing of points for their positive or negative behaviors. If students questioned the number of points they earned, they received responses such as, “You should have done your work,” or “Next time you’ll think before you talk back.” (p. 20)

Consultants did not observe any behavioral teaching taking place as students earned or lost points on the cards. (p. 21)

The consultants concluded that the point-and-level system as implemented at HTLA “does not serve as the treatment tool for which it was designed” (p. 21). They made a series of recommendations as to how to improve the system, but we found no evidence that these steps had been taken in the past two years. In fact, our investigators found the same inconsistencies in implementation that the BGT consultants had found. Some teachers told our investigators that they were digging into their own pockets to purchase items to use to reinforce the points students earned, because they did not believe the reward system as it was implemented was offering enough of a motivation.

Since the start of the current school year, the sharp reduction in the number of students and the accession of new leadership to the Washington St. campus have ameliorated many of the most egregious problems noted during our first visits to HTLA. The current climate is much more orderly, and yelling at students no longer seemed to be commonplace. The desire to remake the school as a more therapeutic environment was symbolized by the conversion that was in progress of one of the larger isolation rooms, about half the size of a small classroom, into a different kind of space, with desks, dividers, and materials. The hope was to create a comfortable place that students might choose to go to voluntarily for a self-imposed time-out, when they found themselves getting into conflicts or losing control. But the fact that some therapeutic elements were finally being reintroduced into HTLA only underscores the reality that in its totality, this campus is not a place where students who are considered to have already failed in other settings can be assured of having their mental health needs more successfully addressed.

### **3. HTLA has not created an exemplary model of alternative or innovative educational programming.**

The school provides detailed handouts instructing all teachers on how to properly administer punishments, from closed-door timeouts, to open-door timeouts, to seclusion in the Isolation Room. Funds and time have been invested and outside expertise has been brought in to train staff on the management of difficult behavior. But there do not appear to be handouts or plans or outside expertise brought in to instruct teachers on how to capture the students’ intellectual curiosity, how to

transform the self-images of youth who have learned to view themselves as academic failures, or how to recognize the assets that even the most combative of these youngsters bring with them into the classroom.

We found scant evidence of creative instructional methods or alternate approaches to the core subjects of the curriculum. Special subjects such as Culinary Arts, Music, and Technical Arts utilized more innovative approaches to teaching and learning, and seemed to more successfully engage the interest of many students. But in the core subjects, we found that students who had already experienced persistent academic failure in other settings were generally expected to sit in traditional desks engaging in unimaginative seatwork, including worksheets. Practices such as project-based learning, socially cooperative learning, and hands-on learning were not promoted. We observed one lesson about the solar system in which there were no visual aides and no 3-D models, just a teacher lecturing 10 students while two paraprofessionals sat among them. The most common “modifications” we observed other than small class sizes were that teachers watered down the standard middle school or high school subject matter, and reduced the range of topics covered.

The priorities of the school in recent years can be gauged by reading a Student and Parent Handbook.<sup>8</sup> The vast majority of pages are taken up with such gate-keeping issues as attendance and absences, tardiness, loitering, leaving without permission, truancy, suspensions, and expulsions. There is a description of daily searches and a list of nine categories or specific items that will be seized when found. There is also a list of fifteen wearable items that are prohibited by the school dress code, unleavened by any list of what students are encouraged to wear. There are occasional references to positive aspects of the program, such as recognition, sports participation, and field trips. There is no reference to libraries or borrowing books, laboratories, science and nature activities, music (other than portable radios, a banned item), dance, theater, martial arts<sup>9</sup>, community-based learning (other than parental permission requirements for field trips), or vocational or pre-vocational opportunities. There is nothing in the handbook that tells students or their parents that the school district recognizes that other learning settings have not worked well for them either academically or socially. There is nothing that says: This school was designed with you

in mind. This is a school where you will have another chance to get excited about learning. Welcome to a different kind of learning community.

A “Tips for Successful Students” included in the handbook suggests that students use the following techniques (among others): “Enter the room quietly and go to your desk; Listen to others carefully; Keep track of your assignments and submit them on time; Focus on your future.” If students could follow these tips, does anyone believe they would have been assigned to HTLA in the first place—or be diagnosed as having serious emotional disturbance?

Ironically, the BGT consultant’s report included this comment about the misguided perspectives of some HTLA teachers: “The expectation that their students are going to walk into class, sit down, participate in all activities all of the time, and enjoy it all the while, is not realistic” (p. 20). The authors of the handbook, in other words, shared the same illusion against which the BGT report was warning.

Students at HTLA pose many challenges to educators—but not because they are “slackers” or “troublemakers.” They are special education students to whom the district has a legal and ethical obligation to provide an appropriate individualized educational program designed by each student’s multi-disciplinary team. The district has not made good on this obligation.

#### **4. Transition planning from other schools to the HTLA campus has been minimal to non-existent.**

It was difficult for our investigators even to pin down what referral process schools were expected to follow in transitioning students to HTLA. They received a document called “Student Referral/Transition Process and Procedures” in the spring of 2005 and were told it was in the process of being finalized. However, in September 2005, the Acting vice principal indicated that she did not have a copy of this document and that there was no written protocol for transition procedures. Instead, she had been working on her own, more informal processes. In any case, her perspective about what should happen prior to the referral was consistent with the draft protocol: A special meeting of the Parent-Professional Team (PPT) was supposed to take place to write a new IEP prior to the transfer to HTLA. Every student must arrive with a new IEP, a recently completed Functional Behavioral Analysis (FBA), and a Behavioral

Improvement Plan (BIP) relevant to the new setting. The sending school should also report the student's history of disciplinary referrals, including in-school and out-of-school suspensions.

During the period covered by our investigation, the transfer of a student to HTLA more often than not preceded the arrival of appropriate files. Interviewees told our investigators about students who arrived without any documentation at all, that they had no idea were coming. In these situations, they had no information about the reasons the student was sent to HTLA or the strategies that were recommended to help him or her get off to a good start. One new student arrived with his mother while our investigators were on site, telling school administrators that this was supposed to be his first day. But the school hadn't received any documentation at all and hadn't expected him. In many cases, the full complement of required documents was never forthcoming from the referring school. In particular, our investigators were told that Functional Behavior Assessments seldom had been carried out, and that the files never included information about what types of interventions had already been attempted prior to the referral to HTLA.

Neither the acting administrator's informal procedures nor the draft protocol we examined included the concept of a faculty member or counselor from HTLA attending a PPT meeting with the student, the family, and the referring school staff in order to write an IEP designed for the new setting. Yet this would certainly be a hallmark of good practice.

##### **5. Transition planning from HTLA to community life or higher education has been minimal to non-existent.**

The professional primarily responsible for job development was also assigned to teach three classes<sup>10</sup>. The burden of locating community vocational opportunities and supervising students placed in these positions rested solely on her. Our investigators found that her priority was to help the students as best she could with their current needs, with little time or attention given to longer range planning. She was not invited to participate in PPT meetings—which is where longer range planning should have been taking place. Transition planning for post-school life is mandated by federal law for

students in special education beginning at the age of 14. Good practice dictates that the development of vocational interests and options is a central part of such planning.

A few prospective HTLA graduates who were interested in applying to college received no guidance from the school. In our interviews with them, it became clear that they were much in need of guidance. One prospective graduate in the spring of 2005 was confident, but not well informed. She said her plan was to go to Capitol Community Technical College after graduating, but she hadn't visited the campus, obtained information about classes or admissions, or spoken to anyone there. "I think I have to ask someone [at school] to help me, because I do not know what to do." It was clear that no one at HTLA was reaching out to help her or others who might have similar aspirations.

One student confessed to our investigators that he was afraid of graduating; his family had made it clear he would be expected to move out and support himself once he did so. As a consequence, he was deliberately "acting up" to make sure he wouldn't complete his credits and graduate. Another year at HTLA was his insurance policy.

The Hartford School District did not seem to place any priority on monitoring the outcomes of the students they sent to HTLA. To the straightforward question of how many students graduated from the school with high school diplomas in 2005, the investigators received two different answers: 17 (from a guidance counselor) and 14 (from an administrator). We wanted some more detailed numerical data from any recent year. For instance, how many of those who transitioned back from HTLA to other District schools graduated (eventually) or dropped out? As best we could determine, no one collects these kinds of data. No one knows what becomes of those who graduate from HTLA or of those who exit HTLA without a diploma: What percentage are employed, pursuing higher education, living on public assistance, incarcerated? Tracking these data would demonstrate a genuine interest in the outcomes of an HTLA education and a clear commitment to ensure that the overall program is relevant to student needs. The failure to gather this information invites speculation concerning the depth of the district's commitment to educate these students.



**6. HTLA students were not “beyond salvation” as learners, as citizens, or as future members of the workforce.**

We saw positive examples of students immersed in learning activities. In the technology center, students were quietly engaged in using software to design bridges, working with a program that allowed them to test the efficacy of their designs by driving a visual representation of a truck over the bridge. Their successfully completed papers were displayed on a bulletin board.

The culinary arts program in which students learned to prepare and serve food was a rare example of cooperative, hands-on, functionally meaningful learning in which calm reigned, rather than confrontation. Students seemed to take pride in being able to feed themselves and their peers through their own labor. However, very few students were assigned to participate in this program in the academic year 2004-5.<sup>11</sup>

When we exchanged a few words of informal conversation with students, it was not difficult to get most of them to express something positive about their own interests. Several spoke of their interest in art (and could point to their creations to illustrate that it wasn't just idle talk). One girl wanted to learn to be a mechanic in order to work in the family auto repair business. One boy expressed pride that he was the only member of his family fluent in sign language, allowing him to communicate with his brother, who was deaf.

The Transition/Career specialist, in spite of the lack of resources made available, reported several successes in placing students in community employment, with positive feedback from employers regarding their work habits and behavior. For the 2005-6 school year, she had obtained a grant that would pay students to work at various jobs within the school building, and a good number of them were pursuing those activities without incident.

**7. The continuation of the HTLA middle and high school programs cannot be justified.**

In light of all the findings reported above, the middle and high school programs of the HTLA should be dismantled. The District might need to maintain some special classrooms where they can temporarily assign students who present acute mental health or behavioral challenges, while more inclusive placements and supports are

being prepared for them. But, as presently constituted, HTLA ties up a disproportionate share of resources in a model of questionable value. The many teachers, counselors, and other professionals who are doing valuable work at HTLA could be better deployed at schools throughout the district.

In calling for HTLA students to be re-integrated with their peers in district schools, we recognize that this path also has its perils. These are the same schools that weren't able to educate or manage the behavior of these students in the first place, and in many cases shipped them out on short notice, and without appropriate procedures and documentation. If they did not initiate the kinds of behavioral interventions or academic innovations that could recapture these youngsters as viable members of a learning community the first time around, what guarantee is there that they will do better now—with the current HTLA population, or with other students, presenting similar challenges in the years to come? The short answer is that there is no guarantee. However, the efforts made in the fall of 2005 offer at least the beginning of a successful strategy. HTLA students were not “dumped” into other schools. They were moved in clusters, with one teacher and one paraprofessional at each school (still reporting to the HTLA administration) assigned to float among classrooms, consult with teachers, and monitor progress and problems. Itinerant mental health resources were also deployed for these students, above and beyond what the other schools have to offer. In most of the schools, the HTLA staff also had access to a designated classroom, allowing the former HTLA students to withdraw (or be withdrawn) from the regular program activities when circumstances required.

In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the belief in the usefulness of separate, segregated education has been largely discarded. Educators might still make the case that such an institution is necessary if they can show that (1) they are creating a social and emotional milieu that is more supportive to the students; (2) they are using innovative instructional approaches and curricula that would not be available elsewhere; (3) they can show evidence of positive outcomes for the students who have completed the program. None of these three claims can be made for HTLA. We applaud the efforts of the current HTLA administration to move as many students—with mental health and educational supports—as swiftly as feasible to neighborhood schools where they can be educated alongside their peers.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> This report does not address the elementary school program on Tower Avenue that HTLA also operates.

<sup>2</sup> Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, passed in 1975, later amended as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and in 2005 amended and renamed as the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Improvement Act (and referred to as IDEA 2004).

<sup>3</sup> These numbers were provided by the HTLA's current administrators. They also explained that the students made their transitions in groups of approximately 10, with one HTLA faculty member and one paraprofessional moving with them to the new locations, and an itinerant social worker on call to all of them. Early reports after the first few weeks of school were that two students (of the 70) were going to need reassignment, but teachers and administrators were largely optimistic that the remainder would complete the transition to the inclusive environment successfully.

<sup>4</sup> Plans were underway in the fall of 2005 to move another one-third of the HTLA students to other schools at the start of the January semester. That would equal approximately 25 more.

<sup>5</sup> After OPA and OCA were prevented from observing the school in February 2004, the OCA pursued an investigative track separate from the efforts of the OPA. The OCA obtained documents by means of Freedom of Information Act requests to the state Department of Education and the Hartford Board of Education. With a subpoena, they also obtained additional records that were not forthcoming. Among the records they examined were IEPs of all students attending HTLA. In addition to examining these and other documents, the OCA received telephone calls from 52 individuals associated with the school--parents, guardians, and HTLA students. The information collected from these telephone calls by OCA was shared with OPA and helped to shape the kinds of questions and issues the OPA pursued, once their investigators finally gained access to the school.

<sup>6</sup> There was a change of principals at Washington St. campus during our investigation.

<sup>7</sup> Children from grades kindergarten through six are in a facility at Tower Avenue with its own separate administration.

<sup>8</sup> The Student and Parent Handbook to which we refer was printed in August 2003. According to Principal Dwight Fleming (personal communication, September 29, 2005), the school no longer disseminates this handbook and they have not yet drafted a new one to replace it.

<sup>9</sup> Other school districts have tried a wide variety of alternative approaches to educate students with populations similar to HTLA. See, for instance, Zivin et al. (2001). *An Effective Approach to Violence Prevention: Traditional Martial Arts in Middle School. Adolescence, Volume 36*, Boys from an urban middle school with a history of behavior difficulties were randomly selected and provided with 45 minutes of instruction in martial arts, three times a week, and their behaviors improved compared to a comparable sample that was also randomly selected from the same population.

<sup>10</sup> Her teaching workload was reduced somewhat in the fall of 2005 from what it had been in the spring of 2005.

<sup>11</sup> As part of the reconfiguration of classes and programs that took place in 2005-6, nearly all students were being exposed to culinary arts.

Information compiled by the  
State of Connecticut  
Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities  
Protection and Advocacy for Individuals with Mental Illness Program  
60B Weston Street  
Hartford, CT 06120-1551  
860.297.4300 (v) – 860.297-4380 (TTY) – 1.800.842.7303 (V/TTY)

THE PUBLICATION IS AVAILABLE IN ALTERNATE FORMAT UPON REQUEST

This publication was made possible by funding support from the Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and is solely the responsibility of the grantee.

It does not represent the official views of the Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.