## This Hartford Public High School grad can't read. Here's how it happened.

How I did the story;

## Summary

In case you missed it;

- Aleysha Ortiz is a 19 year old graduate from a public high school in Hartford, CT.
- She alleges that the school district never taught her skills, including reading, writing or basic math.
- Because of her inability to write, she was recording all of her lessons to get through school. She also recorded her meetings with district officials who had admitted she wasn't taught these skills.
- Ortiz has since filed multiple lawsuits against the city, board of education and school district.



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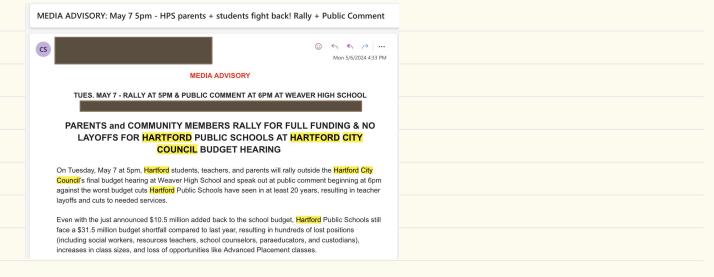






Aleysha Ortiz graduated from Hartford Public High School without being able to read or write. CREDIT: SHAHRZAD RASEKH / CT MIRROR

## How I found Aleysha



I was at a local city council meeting in May 2024 for a school budget story I was working on when a student spoke during the public hearing. She had the whole auditorium in tears by the end of her speech.

Aleysha Ortiz spoke about the school system failing, abandoning and leaving her behind. For a teenager to speak so strongly about her education, I knew there was more to her story.

Description Grading Assignments Materials Absences Contents

## The reporting process

I chased after Aleysha when she left the auditorium, and afterward we met more than a handful of times in the following months.

In our first sit-down she told me she was never taught how to read or write, despite begging to learn these basic skills. In these conversations, we also talked about systemic racism, the opportunity gap in Connecticut education and the shortfalls of special education.

Aleysha provided a binder full of education records and documents from her PPT meetings, but amazingly enough also had hours of district officials admitting in recent months that her IEP was never followed and wasn't drafted correctly and that they didn't understand how she had gotten so far without any intervention.

During my reporting, I learned her story is one of possibly many in the state. Aleysha hopes to become a lawyer, superintendent or journalist one day, but her journey forward will be a long and difficult one.

## Follow ups from the initial story

■ EDUCATION

CT lawmakers raise education funding concerns following story of high school grad who can't read

Lawmakers cited concerns about how money is being spent by school districts





Doug McCrory, D-Hartford, the Senate co-chair of the committee and a former Hartford educator, said he had heard about students being "pushed through the system many of times," but never to the point that a student had graduated high school without literacy skills.

"It's a complete breakdown of the system, period," McCrory said.
"There is a bigger issue of how we prepare educators to go in and work with kids, how we change policies, how we credential individuals to go on to work with these populations because this was a complete failure all the way around. It wasn't just a teacher or two teachers, it was a complete failure of the entire system."

- Second lawsuit filed
- Immediate response from state legislature calling for several education reforms, particularly when it comes to oversight of public school funding and teacher training
- Ongoing investigation from state Department of Education



### STATE OF CONNECTICUT STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION



October 15, 2024

Sent Via Email

Eric.Berthel@cga.ct.gov Stephen.Harding@cga.ct.gov Lisa.Seminara@cga.ct.gov

Dear Senators Berthel, Harding, and Seminara:

Thank you for taking the time to contact me regarding the recent CT Mirror article related to Aleysha Ortiz; I share your concerns. First, I want to state very clearly that no child should ever graduate high school without learning to read or write, which is precisely why the Department is so relentlessly focused on supporting Kindergarten through Grade Three (K-3) literacy, and we will continue to advocate strongly for the full implementation of scientifically research based structured K-3 literacy programs. We know that instruction aligned to the research works and Hartford was one of the first districts to be approved in December 2023 to use an entirely new Department authorized curriculum.



STATE CAPITOL 300 CAPITOL AVENUE HARTFORD, CT 06106-1591 SENATE REPUBLICAN OFFICES

The Honorable Charlene Russell-Tucker Commissioner State Department of Education 450 Columbus Boulevard Hartford, CT 06106

Dear Commissioner Russell-Tucker,

December 18, 2024

We thank you for your October 15 reply to our October 2 letter in which you noted that you share our serious concerns regarding a <u>CT Mirror investigation</u> which detailed how a student at Hartford High School graduated without being able to read or write.

Hartford's Superintendent of Schools has publicly stated her deep concerns and that the district is assessing any and all gaps and failures in the system. The student was allegedly denied services - over 12 years - due to lack of funding and roadblocks to learning at many levels.

On December 13, the student filed a lawsuit against the City of Hartford, local board of education and a special education case manager in the district.

We would like your reaction to this situation, the questions it raises about the lack of state funding, as well as the allegations about education roadblocks.

Has your office discussed this with Hartford officials?

Can you provide a summary of state education funding for Hartford for the past 12 years?

We continue to seek accountability as to how this student was illiterate when she graduated and how the system failed her year after year. We know you do too.

Thank you for your continued attention to this shocking story and this vital ongoing dialogue on how to address this problem.

Sincerely,

Senator Stephen G. Harding Serving the 30th District Senator Eric Berthel Serving the 32nd District

Description **Assignments** Grading Materials **Absences** Contents 5 tips & tricks

## Gaining trust with young sources

- Biggest thing from this story; the importance of representation and diversity in our newsrooms
- Explain the process and let them ask questions
  - Remind them it's OK if they don't want something printed
- Speak to a young source how you'd want someone to approach one of your loved ones
- Not every meeting has to go into the story
  - o The annoying advice to make interviews feel like a conversation

Description **Assignments** Grading **Materials** Contents **Absences** Be on the ground somewhere, anywhere

## Trust your gut

- I wasn't the only reporter in that room, but I was the only one to chase after Aleysha
- If something feels weird or wrong, ask around. If it's off to you, it's probably off to someone else.
- Sometimes there's nothing there, but most of the time you'll find something useful; whether it's an experience to ground and humanize a story, a source for the future, a connection to someone else who may help or a future story idea

Description **Assignments** Grading Contents **Materials Absences** If it's happening one place... it's pretty likely that it's also happening somewhere else

## Lawyers can be your best friend

- Develop relationships with education lawyers who:
  - Can flag when something interesting comes through
  - Can also provide broader context to how common the issue is



# Thank you!

- Questions, thoughts or let's connect;
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