

Contents

Description

Assignments

Grading

Materials

Absences

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

How I did the story;

Start Here

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.

■ EDUCATION

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



by Jessica Harkay

September 29, 2024 @ 5:00 am



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

How I found Aleysha

MEDIA ADVISORY: May 7 5pm - HPS parents + students fight back! Rally + Public Comment

CS

Mon 5/6/2024 4:33 PM

MEDIA ADVISORY

TUES. MAY 7 - RALLY AT 5PM & PUBLIC COMMENT AT 6PM AT WEAVER HIGH SCHOOL

PARENTS and COMMUNITY MEMBERS RALLY FOR FULL FUNDING & NO
LAYOFFS FOR **HARTFORD** PUBLIC SCHOOLS AT **HARTFORD CITY**
COUNCIL BUDGET HEARING

On Tuesday, May 7 at 5pm, **Hartford** students, teachers, and parents will rally outside the **Hartford City Council**'s final budget hearing at Weaver High School and speak out at public comment beginning at 6pm against the worst budget cuts **Hartford** Public Schools have seen in at least 20 years, resulting in teacher layoffs and cuts to needed services.

Even with the just announced \$10.5 million added back to the school budget, **Hartford** Public Schools still face a \$31.5 million budget shortfall compared to last year, resulting in hundreds of lost positions (including social workers, resources teachers, school counselors, paraeducators, and custodians), increases in class sizes, and loss of opportunities like Advanced Placement classes.

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.

Contents

Description

Assignments

Grading

Materials

Absences



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



by Jessica Harkay
October 11, 2024 @ 12:30 pm



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 EmailEric.Berthel@cga.ct.govStephen.Harding@cga.ct.govLisa.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 of Connecticut
SENATE
STATE CAPITOL
300 CAPITOL AVENUE
HARTFORD, CT 06106-1591
SENATE REPUBLICAN OFFICES

December 18, 2024

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

Dear Commissioner Russell-Tucker,

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 [CT Mirror investigation](#) 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

Contents

Description

Assignments

Grading

Materials

Absences

My 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
 - The annoying advice to make interviews feel like a conversation

**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

**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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 - 970-401-1960