

Turning The Dropout Rate Around: Opportunity High School Grads Step Into The Future

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Leslie Soler, right, 19, of Hartford laughs with reading teacher Ms. Gibboney on Tuesday, June 7, the last day of school. This day is reserved for students to complete any remaining class work. (Tanner Curtis / Hartford Courant)

HARTFORD — It's not that Leslie Soler wasn't capable of doing the work.

She just didn't feel like showing up.

Soler failed all of her courses at Hartford Public High School except for civics. She would walk out of class while the teacher was speaking, usually to have lunch with friends in the cafeteria or at Taco Bell. Sometimes she slept at her desk.

"I thought I was going to get by like that," the 19-year-old said.

When the glass-paneled Opportunity High School opened at the corner of Asylum Avenue and Sigourney Street in 2009, Soler had zero graduation credits to her name and had already dropped out of school for 18 months.

On Wednesday, she will receive her high school diploma with 41 Opportunity classmates, the first to graduate from the year-round, last-chance alternative education program for city teenagers. Another 23 students are expected to graduate in January.

Opportunity High's ceremony at the Kinsella Magnet School of Performing Arts will be one of a dozen high school graduations across Hartford — part of the new legacy of Superintendent Steven Adamowski's five-year reform plan to raise achievement and lower the city's grim dropout rate.

The traditional high schools that were bleeding students have been split up. The Culinary Arts Academy at Weaver High School held its graduation Monday. On Tuesday, it was the Senior Academy at Weaver and the Upper School at Bulkeley High. The three academies — nursing, engineering, and law and government — that now encompass Hartford Public High each have their own ceremonies on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, respectively.

About 52 percent of city students now graduate, a 23 percent improvement since 2006, according to the school system.

The small-school approach includes Opportunity High, a partnership between the city schools and Our Piece of the Pie, a nonprofit agency.

Alternative high schools have typically been housed "in basements and whatever space is left," said Christina Kishimoto, the assistant superintendent of secondary schools who will take over for the retiring Adamowski next month.

“We wanted to send the message to these kids that not only do they matter, but that we want to give them a great learning environment that will be attractive for them to want to come back,” Kishimoto said.

Opportunity instructs 150 students, each with a troubled past, in the renovated former annex of West Middle Elementary School. There is little room to hide there. Teachers have 15 students or fewer in their classrooms, and the day is packed: 8:45 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Every student has a case manager — a “youth development specialist” from Our Piece of the Pie — and no one gets a D or F on their report card. It’s an “incomplete” grade if they perform below a C.

“They’ve had enough experiences with failure,” said Principal Venitia Richardson, an Air Force veteran of the 1990-91 Gulf War, who is viewed by some students as a second mother they don’t want to disappoint.

“We expect that they bring their very best, and we try to find that part of them that maybe they felt didn’t matter,” Richardson said. “Some think this is just another place where they can do more of the same. ... Not everybody is ready. The timing is not quite right. The barriers are too overwhelming.”

Among the first class of 90 students to begin the two-year program, 25 won’t graduate.

For Soler, the close attention was what she needed. One problem with the Hartford Public High School of several years ago, she said, was its size. It seemed easier to defy authority with 30 students per classroom, and, with four lunch waves, she could slip out to join her friends.

It didn’t matter that the school jotted down all the absences and kept calling her mother, who worked long hours as a home health aide and at a grocery store to support the family.

“My mom would always be on my back,” Soler said. But the teen was used to straying. At Bellizzi Middle School, Soler joined a gang called the Little Bloods — “peer pressure,” she explained. At age 14 or 15, she ran away from home to live with a boyfriend for a month. She drank and smoked.

Often, she skipped class with Xavier Cancel. Then he went away for a while.

After a few years of selling drugs “to support myself,” Cancel said, he was incarcerated on July 1, 2007, after being caught with an illegal firearm in West Hartford when he was 16. Under a plea deal, Cancel was sentenced to 45 days at Manson Youth Institution in Cheshire and was released two weeks early because of good behavior.

The original offer had called for six years in prison. “I was petrified,” Cancel said.

Cancel returned to school but dropped out after two months. He then spent nearly a year watching TV on the couch, sleeping, not finding a job, not doing anything except “being lazy,” he said. Then he heard about Opportunity High, located just a block from his home on Collins Street.

In Sept. 2009, he enrolled at the new school a few days before turning 18, the program’s cutoff age.

His son Jayden was born July 1, 2010, three years to the day after Cancel was incarcerated. About a third of Opportunity’s students are parents.

“This whole father thing is new to me, because I didn’t have one to show me the ropes,” said Cancel, now 19, who was raised by a single mother. Cancel said he realized that if he didn’t get a high school diploma, Jayden might think he won’t need one either.

Through an Opportunity program, Cancel took three courses at Capital Community College last summer, as did Soler, and completed an internship at city hall. After school, he works as a manager at Walmart on Flatbush Ave. His three years’ probation on the weapons charge will be over in August.

Cancel wants to study business at Capital, transfer to the University of Connecticut and open his own store selling clothes and sneakers.

As Opportunity's senior class president, Cancel first needs to prepare a graduation speech. Themes percolated in his mind: pride from cramming four years' worth of school into half the time, maturity, becoming a family with his classmates.

"We shed tears," Cancel said last Tuesday, the final day of classes.

The principal, Richardson, wondered if she would, too.

"I'm thinking, 'Oh no, how am I going to get through this?' It's emotional," Richardson said as Soler and Cancel sat by her side.

Students would often hang around Richardson's office till 5 or 6 in the evening, just to chat. Soler, who plans to study nursing at Capital, feels comfortable talking to her about guys.

"They're leaving you," said Richardson, "but that was the outcome. They should be leaving you and walking across that stage to say goodbye."

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Pictures: Opportunity High School



Xavier Cancel, 19, of Hartford works on his speech to the 2011 graduating class of Opportunity High School with English teacher Joe Battaglia on Tuesday, June 7, the last day of school. Cancel is the senior class president and will deliver his speech to his 41 graduating.
(Tanner Curtis / Hartford Courant)