



News Arts

## Voices From Opportunity High School

By Jeff Cohen - WNPR  
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#### AUDIO PLAYLIST

Opportunity High

In Hartford, a new school is about to graduate its first class -- students who are over-age, under-credited, and who may not otherwise have gotten a high school diploma. As WNPR's Jeff Cohen reports, each student gets a case manager, an accelerated curriculum, and a message -- if you

commit to graduating, the school will help get you there.

Principal Venitia Richardson sits in her office at Opportunity High School with four students getting ready for graduation. The small, year-round school is a partnership with the city's public schools and a non-profit called Our Piece of the Pie.

"Opportunity High School was developed for students who have previously attended other city high schools but found little to no success."

Hines: Kyona Hines. I'm 18.

Cohen: Do your friends, what do they say about school here?

Hines: Honestly, people used to say like, oh, people that go there is bad, they used to think bad stuff. But as I listen to them saying that, some of them end up being here. And a lot of students want to come here because they see me graduating while they're still in the grade behind me. A lot of kids thought bad stuff about this school until they see like we're getting our education, we're going somewhere. And people really, they would encourage us to go be something in life. You feel me?

Williams: My name is Randall Williams, and I am 19 years old. I just pretty much went to school just to fight. I'd go to school, go to classes, sit down, go to sleep, after school, fight, and play basketball. As I was 16, 17, I thought everything was fun until I got older, realizing that without a high school diploma I can't do all things I want to do.

Cohen: What do you want to do?

Williams: Play in the NBA. Play basketball, then if I don't make that, probably be a zoologist, or something to do with animals, help out animals in some kind of way. Because Randall at Hartford High just wanted to fight all the time, but the Randall here matured, I actually come to school every day. I'm probably one of the only kids in this school that actually come every single day.

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Lopez: Perfect attendance.

Soler: Leslie Soler.

Cohen: And how old are you?

Soler: 19.

Cohen: Why did you drop out of Hartford High?

Soler: Because I wasn't doing too good, and out of 180 days I had 242 absences.

Cohen: What were you doing when you weren't at school?

Soler: Leaving, getting high. Nothing. I felt like this was my last chance. Before I was never motivated to come to school. But I actually wake up wanting to come to school.

Cohen: You're just saying that because she's here.

Soler: Oh, she knows, I'm here before she is.

Cohen: Why? What's the difference? Why are you the student who's here before the principal here and yet in 180 days at the other school you had 242 class absences?

Soler: Because of the attention. But other than that, in other schools there's 1,300 students. Some of the teachers don't even know our names. But here, they know by name, last name, and social security.

Lopez: I'm Julio Lopez. I'm 19. I used to be a student at Hartford High. I was failing, always skipping, because it was hard for me to catch up, so I ended up giving up and I dropped out.

Cohen: What's different about here?

Lopez: The teachers, the whole staff, they treat us with respect, they treat us like adults.

Cohen: What makes you a better student here than at Hartford High?

Lopez: I'm not skipping as much, I guess. I'm not acting up, threatening to fight the teachers as much.

Cohen: If you weren't in school now what do you think you'd be doing?

Lopez: Selling drugs or locked up. I don't think I had another choice. Because without a high school you can't like really get a job.

Hines: You could come in here mad, you could be mad at the world, and then some reason, it's somebody, one person that puts a smile on your face, you don't remember why you was mad.

Cohen: Do you have friends for whom even this doesn't work?

Soler: We have people that don't even last a month here, they're so used to not coming to school that they give up. And we try to tell them, you know, you got to come to school, but it's just not in their head. Yet.

Hines: But they will grow from it. It's going to be a time when they grow up that they're going to realize that I should have finished high school. But I was too immature and had my head in the streets too much instead of that they forget about their education.

All four students say they plan to continue their training and education after they graduate. Principal Richardson says there are more than enough students to take their place.

For WNPR, I'm Jeff Cohen.

#### COMMENTS

**Jloft (not verified)** wrote:

Dec 18, 2011 - 02:55 am



**school**

Although I have to say that I don't see any of these kids getting criminal justice degrees I do think that their determination can prove me wrong. I'm very happy when such things happen like the kids you talk about here. They matured and realized that graduating high-school is an important aspect of their life. Congrats guys and hope I see some of you in college!!

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