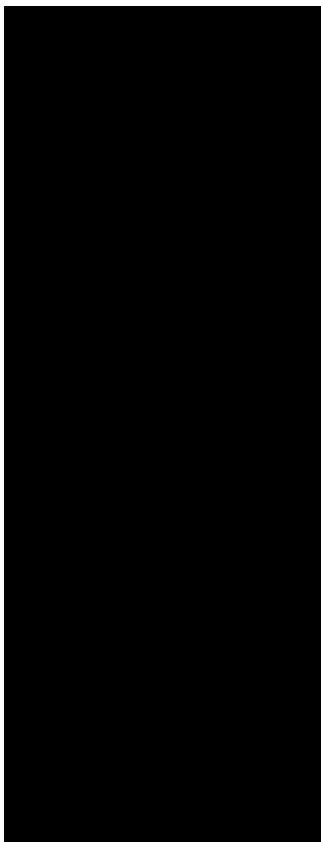
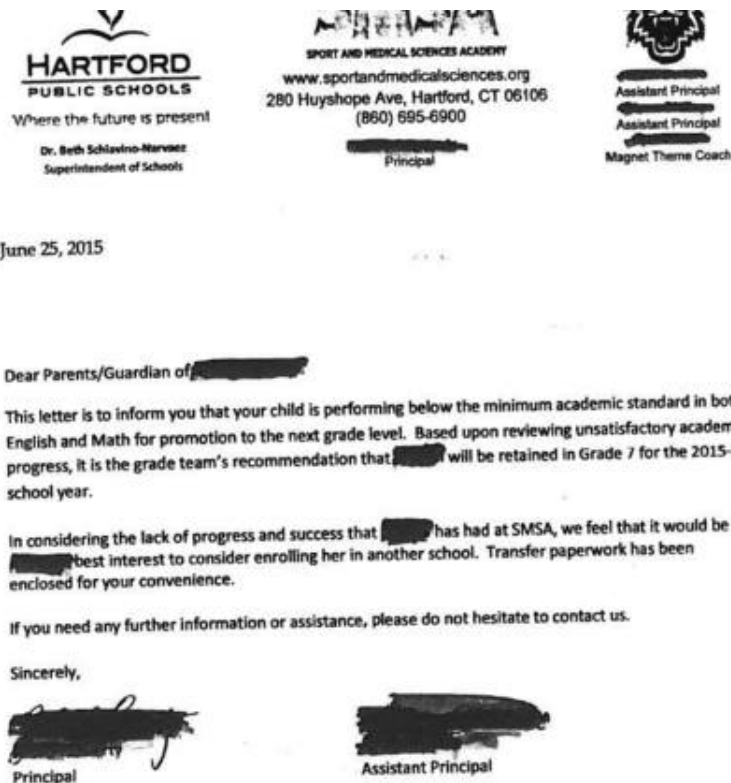
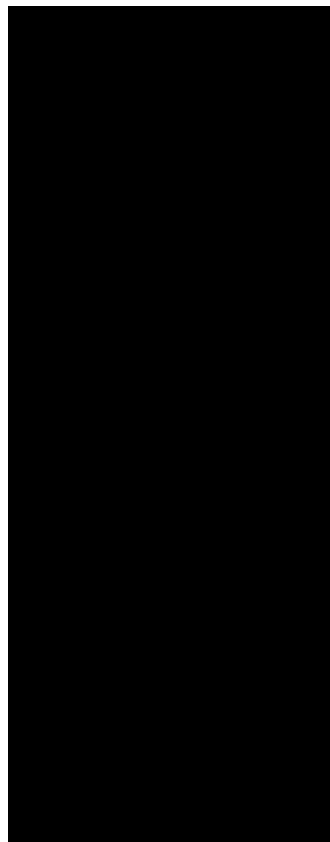


Advocates: Hartford Magnet School Pushed Underperforming Student To Withdraw



June 25 letter from Sport and Medical Sciences Academy recommending that an underperforming student withdraw from the magnet school. (Matt Conway)



By **Vanessa de la Torre** · Contact Reporter

JULY 7, 2015, 9:08 AM

HARTFORD — When education advocates talk about equity in Hartford, the perception that magnet schools do not teach their fair share of struggling students, even pushing out children who are lagging academically, is often part of the conversation.

That viewpoint has gained more attention in recent days after Matt Conway, head of the mentoring group RiseUP, posted a letter from the Sport and Medical Sciences Academy that he said was sent to the mother of a seventh-grader at the school who is in RiseUP's tutoring program.

A copy of the June 25 letter, circulated online with names redacted late last week, notes that the student has been "performing below the minimum academic standard in both English and Math for promotion to

the next grade level," and advises the girl's parents that it would be in their daughter's "best interest" to transfer her out of the award-winning city magnet school.

"Transfer paperwork has been enclosed for your convenience," the letter states, signed by two of the school's top administrators.

After questions from The Courant, the district released a follow-up letter from Principal John Laverty to the girl's family Monday that read, in part, "I want to clarify our previous letter regarding your child's progress, and we apologize for any misunderstandings it has caused. ... We intend to work with you so that your child receives the best education that we are known for providing."

Superintendent **Beth Schiavino-Narvaez** also said in a statement that the district is "working hard to eliminate the variability of access, opportunities and outcomes that exist within individual schools and between our magnet and neighborhood schools. I strongly believe in providing every single student under our care with a high-quality education, which includes providing them the support they need."

Conway said Monday that he had long heard anecdotal tales of magnet schools in Greater Hartford that have counseled mediocre students to leave, sending them back to city neighborhood schools that already suffer from inadequate resources to handle the poorest and most difficult student populations.

When he saw the initial letter from Sport and Medical Sciences, a grade 6 to 12 school on Huyshope Avenue, Conway said he viewed it as "actual hard evidence that this is happening."

Paul Holzer, executive director of the education reform group Achieve Hartford!, said the letter "unfortunately validated a lot of rumors that we've been hearing over the years about magnet schools counseling challenged students out of their school."

"If we can't ensure that our best schools, our highest-performing schools, can educate our neediest students, then how are we ever going to expect our most challenged schools to educate them?" Holzer said.

In the girl's case, Conway said she got involved in RiseUP, a group that guides urban youth toward college, in April and has been participating in tutoring sessions in recent months, "diligently working, bringing her math homework in ... She's putting forth effort to help her situation in school."

In early May, Conway said, he also advocated for the student during a meeting with the girl's mother, a vice principal and social worker at Sport and Medical Sciences. They discussed a few possibilities to "get her back on track," such as summer school and testing for any learning disabilities, Conway said.

But he said he didn't hear an update until the June 25 letter that he eventually shared on Facebook.

"This is wrong," Conway wrote in his July 2 post that drew a mixed reaction from online commenters, some expressing shock and outrage while others suggesting that Sport and Medical Sciences must have had good reasons to recommend the student enroll elsewhere.

"If charter and magnet schools want to keep doing this practice, they've got to stop pulling more resources away from the neighborhood schools," Conway said Monday. Taxpayer-funded magnet schools in the Hartford area were created under the Sheff v. O'Neill desegregation agreement and enroll both city and suburban students.

When the girl's mother showed him the letter, Conway said, she told him she was seriously considering filling out the transfer papers. But he assured her that the magnet school, where the girl was admitted through the state-run lottery as a sixth-grader, would be in a better position to help her daughter than the Hartford neighborhood school where she was previously enrolled, he said.

Conway said another meeting at the school is planned for Wednesday.

Laverty did not respond to a request for comment. But in his follow-up letter dated Monday, the principal said Sport and Medical Sciences is committed to offering the girl "rigorous academic supports" to better prepare her for the academic year.

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Where the future is present

Dr. Beth Schiavino-Narvaez
Superintendent of Schools



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[Redacted]
Principal



[Redacted]
Assistant Principal
[Redacted]
Assistant Principal
[Redacted]
Magnet Theme Coach

June 25, 2015

Dear Parents/Guardian of [Redacted]

This letter is to inform you that your child is performing below the minimum academic standard in both English and Math for promotion to the next grade level. Based upon reviewing unsatisfactory academic progress, it is the grade team's recommendation that [Redacted] will be retained in Grade 7 for the 2015-16 school year.

In considering the lack of progress and success that [Redacted] has had at SMSA, we feel that it would be in [Redacted] best interest to consider enrolling her in another school. Transfer paperwork has been enclosed for your convenience.

If you need any further information or assistance, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

[Redacted Signature]
Principal

[Redacted Signature]
Assistant Principal