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Thomas B. Scheffey

## Pre-K The New Focus In Educational Equality

Attorney says governor's initiative should build on Sheff progress

As an attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union, Martha Stone first started working on the landmark Sheff v. O'Neill case in 1989. The plaintiffs were Hartford school children, and Stone urged the courts to rule that it was unconstitutional for students to attend racially and economically segregated public schools. It wasn't until 1996 that the state Supreme Court agreed, and since then Stone, attorney Wesley W. Horton and others have worked in the courts and in the legislature to attain the Sheff objectives.

Unlike the controversial "stick" of court-enforced busing that was attempted in other states, Connecticut legislative initiatives and court settlements have focused on the "carrot" of new and attractive magnet schools, as well as seats for Hartford students in suburban schools through the Open Choice program. Hartford school children now have more than 29 magnet schools from which to choose. According to Stone, in the latest lottery, more than 10,000 suburban and rural students were eager to attend these urban magnets, and almost 6,000 Hartford students were also ready to leave neighborhood schools for a better — and integrated — education.

Now Stone says the time is ripe for bringing a Sheff-style court case in Bridgeport. In addition, she's trying to persuade the administration of Gov. Dannel P. Malloy to make greater use of pre-K education and charter school initiatives to help diversify schools. New Haven lawyer David Rosen, a lead lawyer in another pending education standards case launched in 2005, says pre-K education "is the silver bullet" in making sure kids learn to read early enough to close the achievement gap. Stone, now the founder and executive director of the nonprofit Center for Children's Advocacy, explained why in an interview with Senior Writer Thomas B. Scheffey.

LAW TRIBUNE: Do you feel there is real progress being made on Sheff?

MARTHA STONE: I think there's been tremendous progress over the years. I think thousands of Hartford kids have benefited from the lawsuit. I think there's still a ways to go. It hasn't realized its promise, as far as what our intent or vision was when we brought the lawsuit. We've gone through seven different [state] education commissioners in the process.

LAW TRIBUNE: Gov. Malloy is calling this the year of education — how does the Sheff resolution mesh with that?

STONE: We have a five-year stipulated agreement [in the Sheff settlement], and we're heading into its final year. The state has had some compliance with the stipulation. Year five is the critical year — this coming year. They are required to have 41 percent of Hartford students in a desegregated setting, or meet 80 percent of demand [of Hartford students who want to transfer to an integrated school].

LAW TRIBUNE: And, even though it is based on the state Constitution, the only place that Sheff applies is in central Connecticut, right?

STONE: It is only Hartford and the 26 surrounding communities. There needs to be another Sheff-type case brought in Bridgeport, and I would be really willing to do that. The governor's putting forth his [education] reform package and Sheff should be part of the solution.

LAW TRIBUNE: How could one do that? Malloy has advocated putting 500 new pre-K slots in the state's poorest school districts. Will that work?



Attorney Martha Stone says it make take additional court action to create economic and racial diversity in Bridgeport schools.

STONE: He should [only] put them into integrated pre-K. If any of the pre-K money was going into opening up new slots in the Hartford region, it should be done in a way that's consonant with the Sheff remedy, [with] pre-K slots put into magnet schools and into the suburban "Open Choice" program. That way Hartford students would be able to get an integrated setting from the beginning in a high-quality setting.

LAW TRIBUNE: How do you know this would work?

STONE: There are recent studies that have shown that the students who are participating in the magnets and in Open Choice have better educational outcomes than if they're in the regular Hartford school system. So if the governor just takes his money and puts some extra pre-K slots into the regular Hartford school system, not only does he perpetuate a segregated school system, but this plan doesn't really get the state the kind of trajectory of educational outcomes that we really want.

LAW TRIBUNE: Aren't the pre-K years a particularly valuable part of closing the achievement gap between rich and poor communities?

STONE: It's valuable if it's quality pre-K, if the pre-K is in a setting that is economically [and racially] diverse and if the child stays in that same setting continuously for a number of years. That's the solution. The most recent study is by the Capitol Region Education Council (CREC), which runs 12 of the magnet schools. It showed that when they were putting Hartford kids in their school [continuously] from pre-K to third grade — they had closed the achievement gap.

LAW TRIBUNE: What else are you recommending?

STONE: Malloy also wants to expand charter schools. That's fine. Then make them part of the Sheff remedy because the charters right now are segregated systems. We said, if you want to put a lot of money into new charters, you have to change the statute and allow the charters to get the same school construction money and the same transportation reimbursements as the magnets do. Right now there's a discrepancy.

LAW TRIBUNE: And what does the CREC evaluation of magnet schools show?

STONE: The Hartford kids were performing as well as the suburban kids by third grade. And third grade is the most important year because if you close the gap in reading by third grade, you can predict that there will be success for the student after that. These schools have shown that they can close the achievement gap. And that's exciting. If that's true, we should be learning from this experience. And if Malloy is going to pour money into pre-school, put it as part of the Sheff remedy and let the kids stay in these settings from pre-K through third grade.

LAW TRIBUNE: It takes a bit of commitment from a parent to get a pre-schooler to a magnet school.

STONE: It does. It involves parent choice. Not every parent will do it. They're great schools — they provide amazingly exciting educational opportunities. I think I've been to every one of them. They're still too much of a best-kept secret, however. The Sheff remedy needs to be part of the achievement gap reform. •