

Ads urging parents to keep children in Hartford schools anger Sheff lawyer

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Hartford educators say an ad campaign discouraging parents from sending their children to suburban schools reflects success of the city's education reforms, but a lawyer for plaintiffs in the Sheff vs. O'Neill desegregation case says it threatens to undermine a court-ordered plan to reduce the racial isolation of city students.

Hartford Public School officials launched the campaign with television, radio and print advertisements urging parents not to gamble on a lottery for seats in suburban or regional magnet schools that are key elements of the desegregation effort.

Instead, the ads advise families to choose among several career-oriented high schools and various restructured elementary and middle schools that are part of the city school system's school reform program.

The ads drew the ire of Martha Stone, a lawyer for plaintiffs in the long-running Sheff vs. O'Neill school desegregation case.

"It's really, from our perspective, just outrageous," she said.

The ads are airing as parents receive letters this month announcing results of the annual lottery for seats in suburban or magnet schools. Although many children were placed on waiting lists for those schools, Hartford can guarantee parents a spot at one of their top four choices of city schools, the ad campaign said.

"Why risk [your children's] future on a lottery and then a waiting list?...They don't need to go anywhere else," the ads say.

Regional magnet schools and suburban schools are the central elements of the state's effort to comply with a 1996 state Supreme Court order in the Sheff case seeking to reduce racial segregation among Hartford's mostly black and Hispanic student population. Since then, the state has spent hundreds of millions of dollars building and operating racially integrated magnet schools in the greater Hartford region. In addition, state officials are encouraging predominantly white suburban schools to accept more Hartford minority students under a transfer program known as Open Choice.

In a press release this week, Hartford school officials cited the city's own school reform efforts, including the redesign of previously struggling schools to emphasize specialized themes and college-bound curriculum.

"All of these schools are staffed with dedicated teachers who will prepare their children for college studies," said Christina M. Kishimoto, who was recently named to succeed Superintendent Steven J. Adamowski, when he retires in July. "There is no need to travel outside of Hartford to get a superior education."

The Sheff plaintiffs take a different view, Stone said.

"It's really disturbing to see the Hartford school system try to discourage parents and kids from exercising their constitutional right to an equal educational opportunity," said Stone. "This is about having parents be able to

choose the best possible schools for their children."

Under Adamowski's reform program, Hartford schools have shown improvement, but the school system still ranks among the state's lowest-performing districts on statewide achievement tests. Last year, for example, just 43 percent of the city's elementary and middle school students reached the proficiency level in reading on the Connecticut Mastery Test, and 57 percent met the proficiency standard in mathematics.

Nevertheless, Adamowski said Thursday that parents can find high quality choices within the system.

"Five years ago, we had 28 schools that were low-performing. Today we're down to five," he said. "Our Hartford parents will choose for quality. What they really want is what every parent in America wants, which is a good school in their own neighborhood."

Adamowski also said that the district's effort to keep families in city schools is not in conflict with the Sheff goals.

"We support Sheff, but we see a different path to meeting the goals than the plaintiffs do," he said.

About 28 percent of Hartford's minority schoolchildren now attend integrated magnet schools, charter schools, regional technical and agricultural high schools or suburban schools. However, under terms of a court-approved agreement with the Sheff plaintiffs, the state must increase that number to 41 percent by the 2012-2013 school year or meet at least 80 percent of the demand for seats.

As more parents choose city schools, the level of demand for seats in magnet and suburban schools will decline, making it easier to meet the state's 80 percent threshold, Adamowski said. He predicted that the goal could be met as early as next year.

George Coleman, acting state commissioner of education, said he does not view Hartford's ad campaign as a competition with other districts. "It's ultimately controlled by the families. The evidence of performance is available to parents to assess and make decisions for themselves," he said.

Meanwhile, the level of demand for magnet schools remains high. "We had over 8,000 applications for seats," said Bruce Douglas, executive director of the Capitol Region Education Council (CREC), which runs 15 magnet schools in the Greater Hartford region.

Douglas said he is not surprised by Hartford's advertising campaign. "It's a sign of the times because of the proliferation of school choice," he said.

He said CREC doesn't market its schools against other schools but added that the agency has not felt the impact of Hartford's pitch to attract more students.

"My attitude is education is so important, I don't care what school they go to," he said. "If it's a good school, go there."

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